

Book Reviews

T.H. ROWLAND, *The Devil's Causeway: a Roman Road*, published by the author, [1984]. Price £1.50.

The Devil's Causeway branches off Dere Street a little to the north of Portgate on Hadrian's Wall and runs for some sixty miles to the North Sea at Berwick. The only Roman fort known on its course is at Learchild controlling the junction of the Devil's Causeway with the road to High Rochester. Mr Rowland begins his survey by describing previous work on the road by Horsley, Maclauchlan, Richmond, Wright and others and then outlines his own methods of research. Then follows an account of its route from south to north which mentions sections excavated through the road by the author. These are of considerable value and should be published separately and in detail in a journal of record with plans to show their exact locations.

The greater part of the account, however, is a ragbag of local history, folklore and anecdote often referring to villages, castles and other places several miles distant from the Devil's Causeway. The result is a mixture of detailed archaeological observation with the contents of a local guide book unlikely to satisfy either the serious student or the casual visitor.

Paul Bidwell

Lindsay ALLASON-JONES and Bruce McKAY, *Coventina's Well*, The Trustees of the Clayton Collection, Chesters Museum, 1985.

Coventina's Well when excavated in 1876 was found to contain by far the largest religious deposit of the Roman period so far known in northern Britain, one perhaps rivalled throughout the entire province only by the recent find in the reservoir at Bath. The discoveries included twenty-two altars of which half were inscribed, two incense-burners or thuribles bearing dedications to Coventina and many thousands of coins, a large proportion consisting of a single hoard. Papers by Bruce and Clayton described the excavation and many of the objects from the Well but it is only now that we have an illustrated catalogue of all the objects and coins which have survived, accompanied by a full discussion of the Well and its significance: a handsomely printed and illustrated volume which is virtually a full excavation report published more than a century after the event.

Whether Coventina was a local or imported deity is uncertain but the shrine apparently had no pre-Roman antecedent on the spot; the authors note that the wall enclosing the Well seems to be later than the south mound of the Vallum and it is worth adding that the name of the fort Carrawburgh, Brocolitia, most probably signifying a place which was 'heathery' or 'covered with heather', does not have any religious connotations. Whether the authors are correct in asserting that the Well was originally built as a cistern to drain the marshy area through which the Vallum passed and only later acquired a religious significance seems very doubtful. By the late second or early third century the Vallum no longer served any useful purpose and it was perhaps then (a period to which many of the finds from the Well belong) that the spring sacred to Coventina was enclosed. Her cult attracted dedications from all levels of society: commanding officers, NCOs, soldiers and apparently also civilians. From the nature of the offerings it seems that Coventina was believed to hold powers over healing and death. The authors connect the demolition of the shrine and the apparent concealment of altars and other objects in the Well with the rise of Christianity in the late fourth century.

A substantial appendix reproduces an unedifying archaeological curiosity: letters to Newcastle papers from W. Thompson Watkin, a capable epigraphist, and replies from John Clayton, mainly concerning the correct readings of the inscriptions on two incense-burners. The debate was pursued, more on one side than the other, with uninhibited savagery, leaden sarcasms mingling with open abuse, and it is difficult to dissent from the opinion of an anonymous correspondent that Clayton displayed 'ill-temper and bad taste'.

Paul Bidwell