The Geography of the Lower Parrett in Early Times and the position of Cruca.

BY ALBANY F. MAJOR, O.B.E.

IN trying to reconstruct the geography of the Lower Parrett in prehistoric and early historical times, the great changes in elevation which the coast-line of North Somerset is known to have undergone must be taken into account. It is well known that a submerged forest, exposed at very low tides, stretches for miles along the shores of Bridgwater Bay and that traces of Neolithic man have been found among the prostrate tree-trunks ; so that this forest was dry land and habitable by man in the late Stone Age. Sir W. Boyd Dawkins considers that the land then stood some 60 feet above its present level. It, therefore, extended into the Bristol Channel far beyond the present coast-line, though the vast quantity of silt brought down by the Parrett renders it impossible to say where the ten-fathom line, the approximate shore-line, then ran.

Further inland there have been continuous changes in the course of the Parrett, but there are two, or possibly three, points in its bed which would appear to have been fixed from time immemorial.

The first of these, taking them from the seaward side, is at Combwich. At Downend the Polden Hills sink down to the marsh-level, but a causeway runs on to where the ground rises again at Pawlett, turns westward from this point and continues over the marsh to the ford at Combwich Passage. This ford has been described as follows by the late Rev. C. W.

Whistler, who was for many years vicar of Stockland, 3 miles from Combwich :—

> This ford is very ancient and only to be passed at lowest tide. The river-banks, deep in the rich mud of the uplands, slope sharply to the channel midway between them and have long ago been paved in a rough way, no man knowing by whom. Under water in mid passage the ford seems to be paved also, but it is more likely that there is a ridge of rock which in itself makes the ford. There are like ridges all along the coast. Anywise, on either side of this underwater ridge the tide runs deeper,—shifting mud next the current and a hollow washed out down stream by the overfall. And like the other rock ridges of the coast, the line of the ford way bends.

Now the hill which rises above Combwich and slopes down sharply to the river is of Lower Lias ; the rising ground at Pawlett on the opposite side of the river is also of Lower Lias, and the same formation is met with at the end of the Poldens at Downend. It, therefore, seems highly probable that the Lias extends across the river to Pawlett and continues under the marshlands to Downend and that the theory that the ford is formed by a ledge of Lias is correct. The Rev. W. H. P. Greswell[1] says definitely that the ford is formed by a "ledge of blue lias rocks uncovered more or less at low water," and in fact, as the ford appears to have been in existence before the Roman period, any merely paved way would almost certainly have been destroyed long ago by the rapid current and tremendous tides of the Parrett. If this is so, it is also likely that the ridge of rock extends under the marsh from Combwich Passage to the higher ground at Pawlett and thence to Downend, and that its presence gave a firmer foundation for the causeway that connects those points. The ford is even now passable though with difficulty, at extreme low tides.[2]

At Bridgwater, some 4 miles from Combwich as the crow flies (though following the tortuous course of the Parrett the distance would be nearly twice as great), somewhat the same

1. "The Story of the Battle of Edington," 36.

2. It was formerly in constant use, and an ancient trackway along the Poldens, which crossed the Parrett at Combwich Passage and went on to the Quantocks, followed the causeway over the marsh.

features are repeated, though the geological formation is different. The Upper (Keuper) Marls which form the foothills of the Quantocks come down to the river-brink. From the opposite bank the marsh-level extends to the Keuper Marls at the base of the Poldens some 3 miles away, and this stretch of marsh is also traversed by an ancient causeway, which according to Mr. Greswell was for centuries always in a foundrous state.[3] It is a fair inference that the Upper (Keuper) Marls are continuous and extend from Bridgwater under the river and marsh to where they reappear at Knowle Hill at the foot of the Poldens, and that a connecting ridge gave a foundation to the causeway across the marsh.

If the deductions drawn from the geological evidence are correct, we have in the river crossings at Combwich and Bridgwater features which must have lasted since rock stood and water ran.

The third point referred to as possibly fixed is to be found at Boroughbridge, where on the Quantock side the Keuper Marls extend into the marshes of the Tone in a long tongue at the extremity of which stand the church and village of Lyng. A quarter of a mile east of Lyng the same formation crops up again at the Isle of Athelney and it reappears again barely a mile to the north-east at Boroughbridge, once an island on the east bank of the Parrett just below its junction with the Tone, which is crowned with the terraced fort known as the "Mump." Thence the same formation is continued by a chain of former islands, Othery, Middlezoy, and the Burtle Beds of Westonzoyland and Chedzoy, which are fringed with and appear to rest on Keuper Marls,[4] to within half-a-mile of Pendon Hill, a spur at the foot of the Poldens, and of Bawdrip, where the Keuper Marls reappear. It is to be noted that, until it was diverted at a comparatively late date for the purpose of draining Sedgemoor, the river Cary entered the Parrett just above its junction with the Tone, so that the whole drainage of the three rivers and their marshes ran out by the Parrett between Athelney and Borough Mump.

3. "The Story of the Battle of Edington," 53.

4. *See* "The Geology of the Quantock Hills and of Taunton and Bridgwater," by W. A. E. Ussher. *Memoirs of the Geological Survey* (1908), 80, 82.

On the whole the geological conditions seem to point to this being a third fixed point, the course of the river drainage being determined by the extension of the Keuper Marls from Lyng to Athelney on the one side and from Boroughbridge and thence along the chain of islands to the Polden Hills on the other.

Outside these unchangeable points the course of the rivers must have shifted very often in the marsh. Even in historic times great changes are known to have occurred, and it is impossible to say with certainty where the channels ran in the ages for which there are no maps or documentary records. This was a point that was brought home to us some years ago, when we were anxious to fix the position of a manor, now no longer existing, whose name is found in early Glastonbury charters and in Domesday.

Cruca, the manor in question, is first mentioned in a charter, quoted by William of Malmesbury, under which King Kentwine (676–686) gave to the Abbey of Glastonbury '*in Crucam III hidas.*' This grant is the only evidence that the Abbey ever held land in "Cruca," but many of its possessions are known to have been alienated from various causes in early times, and some were never recovered. The same grant included "Munekatone" (West Monkton) and "Cantucdun" (Cannington), both lying west of the Parrett, as well as "Caric" (Castle Cary, Babcary, etc.) far to the east. It gives, therefore, no clue to the position of "Cruca," which is one of the problems in the topography of early Somerset. The same name and manor, however, are no doubt to be found in the "Cruce" of Domesday, which appears among the possessions of Walter de Douai. The record in the Exchequer Domesday, as quoted in the *Victoria County History, Somerset*, is as follows :—

> Walter holds one virgate of land which is called Doneham. Algar held it T. R. E. This is that part of the land which the king gave him '*inter duas aquas.*' It is worth twelve pence.
>
> Rademer holds of Walter, Cruce. Edward held it T. R. E. There is land for 1 plough which is there in demesne with half a virgate and 4 bordars who have half a virgate. There are 3 beasts and 3 swine. It is worth 10 shillings.

The Rev. R. W. Eyton in his *Domesday Studies* includes Cruce in the Hundred of North Petherton on the ground that it is entered between "Wallepille" (Walpole in Pawlett) and "Bur" (East Bower in Bridgwater). The Rev. Preb. Bates Harbin, however, suggests the "Vill of Crosse juxta Bokeland in Durston" for "Cruce," and for "Bur," West Bower in Durleigh, near Bridgwater.

The order of the names in Domesday tells us nothing definite. The possessions of Walter de Douai in this neighbourhood, though practically contiguous, are enumerated in two distinct groups. The first group contains :—Estragella (Stretcholt in Pawlett) twice, Wallepille (Walpole in Pawlett), Doneham (? Downend), Cruce and Bur (E. or W. Bower in Bridgwater). Then follow thirteen manors entirely separated geographically from the foregoing, as well as from those that follow. The last group comprises :—Brugie (Bridgwater), Wadmenduna (Wembdon), Bagatrepa (Bawdrip), Bredeneia (Bradney in Bawdrip), Hursi (Horsey in Bridgwater), and Pawlett.

Between Bridgwater and Pawlett the river Parrett bends eastward towards the Poldens. The first group of these manors appears to run north and south across this bend, while the manors of the latter group may be roughly described as lying along the causeway which runs from Bridgwater to the Poldens.

This bend of the Parrett was formerly still more pronounced and the course of the river still more crooked. Between Dunball and Downend within the river bend, there was, up to the year 1677, a small almost circular loop which ran out from the channel close under and almost up to the Polden Hills. It was destroyed in that year by the cutting of a channel straight across the neck. Doneham, which immediately precedes Cruce in the Domesday list of manors, is identified with Downend or Dunball, and the statement in Domesday that Doneham was part of the land "*inter duas aquas*" has reference evidently to this loop or to other channels of the river which can no longer be identified with certainty. Cruca, therefore, is no doubt to be looked for in the same locality.

It is, however, possible to try and gauge the effect of still earlier changes, which may throw more light on this question,

and with this in view I must ask you to travel back with me through the ages to the time when the land stood at an elevation of some 60 feet above its present level.

The great bend of the Parrett, which has been described in the preceding paragraphs, runs from the river-crossing at Bridgwater to Combwich Passage. Between these two points there now stretches a dead level of alluvial land through which the embanked river winds its way in a deep tidal bed, that at lowest lies some 25 feet below the top of the banks. This flat expanse is only broken by the higher ground which runs out beyond Wembdon towards the Poldens in an irregular curve with the former marsh island of Chilton Trinity at its extremity. Inland, the marsh stretches for some 15 or 20 miles, practically on a level, and the spring-tides are felt at the present day as far as Langport on the Parrett, some 14 miles from Combwich as the crow flies, and as far as Creech St. Michael on the Tone, only 3 miles from Taunton.

Now if we are correct in our supposition that there are connecting ridges under the marsh between the hills that converge at Combwich, at Bridgwater and at Boroughbridge, then in Neolithic times, when the land stood higher and the levels had not silted up, this would have resulted in the formation of three lakes, or meres, in the course of the Parrett and the Tone. The upper lakes above Boroughbridge and Bridgwater would have served as settling-grounds for the river-silt and would be the first to become marsh, and up to a comparatively late period the expanse between Bridgwater and Combwich must have continued as a lake, which extended along the line of the Bridgwater causeway to the foot of the Poldens and Pawlett, thence along the trackway to Combwich, and ran up westwards towards the Quantocks on the line of the Cannington and Combwich brooks. This lake would have had its outlet at Combwich Passage, whence a rapid stream ran down steep forest-clad slopes to the sea, then 2 or 3 miles away. It has been suggested that the name "Polden" originated in "Pool down," and the former existence of great lakes at the foot of the hills would give some support to this theory.

How long these conditions lasted cannot be determined

accurately. Dr. Robert Munro says that " the gradual submergence of the shore lands, which probably commenced towards the close of the Stone Age, continued its downward movement possibly to as late a date as the beginning of the Roman occupation of Britain " ; and Dr. C. Balfour Stewart pointed out to the writer some years ago that Roman remains have been found in Somerset under the peat moors. The late Mr. W. A. E. Ussher in " A Geological Sketch of Brean Down " has the following passage :—

> Horner quotes De Luc as to the discovery of Roman pottery, moulds, and coins on peat (evidently the bed correlated with the submerged forest in the Bason Bridge borings) under 7 feet of silt, when the channel of the Brue was deepened. He also mentions the occurrence of relics of two Roman potteries near Bason Bridge, under 12 feet of silt, and of a Roman road in the vicinity found under silt at nearly 6 feet below high-water level. If we can base anything on these discoveries they would seem to indicate a subsidence of about 10 feet during the Roman occupation and of about 6 feet since then. That is assuming that the moulds and coins on the peat bed were *in situ*, as it would then have been at the surface.[5]

On the whole, therefore, the evidence points to the subsidence being in progress during and even perhaps since the Roman occupation.

As soon as in this process the point was reached where the sea encroached upon the outfall of the river at Combwich, fresh factors would come into play. The force of the waves breaking on the ledge of rock that dammed up the lake would cause more rapid erosion, until as the rocks were worn down and the sea continued to gain, the tides at last forced their way in and the lake became a vast tidal estuary. The conditions in this estuary would then have borne a general resemblance to those to be seen nowadays at the mouths of many rivers, *e.g.* the Teign in South Devon, where a long spit of land runs from higher ground almost across the mouth of the estuary, leaving only a narrow channel for the outflowing stream and inflowing tide.

5. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, LX, ii, 37–38. *See also* " The Geology of the Quantock Hills," 76.

But this resemblance could not last. The country drained by the Parrett and its tributaries differs radically from the granite rocks of Dartmoor and the hills of South Devon, and, with the irruption of the tide into the lakes and marshes of the Parrett basin, a rapid silting up of the tidal reaches must have begun. This would take effect first in the backwaters under the Wembdon and Chilton Trinity hills, and would gradually fill up all the great bend round the main channel of the river southward of the Cannington brook. The silting up would of course proceed less rapidly where the inflow of other streams set up cross currents. But the deposit of silt by the Parrett goes on so rapidly that, assuming that the tide broke in before or shortly after the close of the Roman period, by the end of the seventh century, or earlier, the estuary may have been approaching its present condition, though still unembanked and undrained.

Until the silting up reached a point where the lands within the river bend ceased to be periodically flooded by the tide, the channel must have followed the foot of the firmer ground enclosing the bend. Deflected to the east at Bridgwater by the Wembdon and Chilton Trinity heights, it ran along the line of the causeway to the foot of the Poldens and flowed by the hills to their termination at Downend, where it received a little stream, now almost dried up, that runs down from the slopes at the back of the range. Thence it continued by Pawlett and under the long promontory down which ran the trackway to the outfall at Combwich.

But when once the tidal flats had silted up to a point where they were above the reach of ordinary high tides, the river would begin to deposit its silt to an increasing degree on the beaches fringing the causeways and the Polden Hills. The tendency of this progress, aided by the accumulation of detritus from the high ground above the river, would be to thrust the river channel out from the base of the hills and at last to force the Parrett to cut back its course into the alluvial levels of the silted up bend. But anything like a complete record of the changes in the course of the river are unattainable, and the construction of a high-road, an artificial rhine and two railways through the tract that now lies between the

Parrett and the Poldens has obliterated many traces that must once have existed. But the course of the loop, already mentioned, that ran up to the foot of the hills prior to 1677 can still be traced fairly well, and the river is known to have shifted its course even since that date.

Other evidence may be found in the concentric banks at Downend, which testify to the efforts made to keep open the little harbour of Downend Pill, formed by the streamlet that flowed in there. This harbour was probably used by the Danes in the year 878 during the campaign which ended with the battle of Ethandune (Edington-on-Polden). Mr. Greswell identifies it with a "Vikingspill," mentioned in monastic charters (*temp.* Henry IV),[6] though it may be doubtful whether the name refers to the Danes of King Alfred's day. Pottery found during excavations conducted in 1908 shows that the silting up of the harbour was still in progress in Norman times.[7] It was probably the decay of this port that led to the transfer of the head of the barony of Nether Stowey from Downend to Nether Stowey in the reign of Edward I.

There is, therefore, sufficient evidence to show that the great bend, or as we may call it "crook" of the Parrett between Bridgwater and Combwich was an even more marked feature in early times than at present, and that it was in process of silting up from probably the time of the Roman occupation till Norman times, or later. Now it is just in this bend that we find field-names that recall the name "Cruca." According to Mr. Greswell there was a holding in Bawdrip called "Crook," a grant of which, dated 1470, is on record; and "Great and Little Crook" are found as field-names in Bawdrip parish, the fields bearing those names lying close to the loop that was destroyed in 1677 and alongside the causeway from Bridgwater to the Poldens. In view of this it seems likely that the name "Cruca," whether derived from the Saxon *cruc*, or from the Welsh *crwg*, which have the same meaning, has reference to the "crook," or bend of the river. Mr. Greswell suggests that the name means "creek,"[8] but it is doubtful whether

6. "The Story of the Battle of Edington," 34.

7. H. St. George Gray, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, LV, 169–172.

8. "The Story of the Battle of Edington," 35.

"creek," Saxon *crecca*, would take the form "Cruca"; and there does not seem to have been anything by way of a creek at the required point, the inlet at Dunball only dating from the diversion of the river Cary for the draining of Sedgemoor, as already stated.

Reviewing all the evidence, it seems probable that the name "Cruca" was originally given to a large tract of land within the "crook" of the river, and that this accounts for the peculiar form of Kentwine's grant to Glastonbury, *viz.*, '*III hidas in Crucam*,' the accusative form being used to denote that it was not the grant of a self-contained manor, but of three hides of land extending into the river bend. After Kentwine's time, but before Domesday was compiled, a shift of the channel appears to have cut through the estate, and the one virgate, to which the three hides had shrunk by 1085–6, represented a part of it transferred to the right bank of the river, which for some reason retained the original name. Even when this smaller holding became merged in other estates, the memory of it was still preserved by those who worked upon it, and the fields called "Great and Little Crook" are doubtless on the actual site of the Domesday *Cruce*.