

On the Course of the Roman Road between Aquæ Solis (Bath) and Isca Silurum (Caerleon).

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ROMAN Roads form a very interesting portion of the antiquities of Somerset. Several of them traversed the county in various directions, and (as might well be supposed) they have not failed to engage the attention of archæologists. But the subject has not been exhausted, and many doubts remain to be cleared up regarding these roads and the stations along their course. One of them led from Caleva Atrebatum (Silchester) to Isca Silurum (Caerleon) passing through Bath. That portion which lies between Silchester and Bath has been carefully described, and its course may be traced to this day. It is otherwise with regard to the remaining portion from Bath to Caerleon. The direction of the road, the site of the stations, and the position of the ferry across the Severn, are points which have given rise to much controversy, but no decisive conclusion has hitherto been come to. The present paper is an attempt to settle the question by a careful examination of the evidence which may be obtained on these points.

Our chief authority in the matter is the "Itinerarium Antonini," a document which (in its main features) is considered by Professor Nibby to belong truly, as its name implies, to the time of the Antonines, and which contains a catalogue of the military roads throughout the Roman empire, with the names of the stations, and the distance in miles between them. Many other roads existed in Britain, both for commerce and for

social intercourse, but those mentioned in the Itinerary were military roads especially designed for the use of the legions by which Rome held her sway over her vast empire.

The road from Silchester to Caerleon formed the direct line of military communication between Isca Silurum and Caleva Atrebatum. Isca was the most important station of the second legion, surnamed Augusta, which was charged with the defence of the south and western portion of Britain, whilst Silchester was the central and perhaps one of the most important Roman towns in the south of Britain. It is with the portion of this road leading from Bath to Caerleon that we are at present concerned.

The stations in the Itinerary are thus enumerated. Ab Isca : Venta Silurum, M.P. viii., Abone, M.P. viii., Trajectus, M.P. viii., Aquis Solis, M.P. vi. Here then we find it stated that the distance by this road from Isca (Caerleon) to Bath was thirty-three miles, and that along the road were three stations, distant nine miles from each other, the last station being six miles from Bath.

The method hitherto adopted by those who have sought to verify these statements does not appear fair towards the writer of the Itinerary. Instead of first taking the facts as he states them and comparing them with existing localities, it has been usual to make at the outset various assumptions. First, it is *assumed* that the name of the station Trajectus (Passage) must bear reference to the passage of the Severn, and, therefore, it is further *assumed* that, by an error of transcribers, the two stations Trajectus and Abone have been transposed, so that the station six miles from Bath (the camp at Bitton) should be called Abone, and the name of Trajectus be given to the next station, at the spot where the Severn had to be crossed. Here, again, a third *assumption* is made regarding this spot. Some say it was Aust (the Old Passage), others prefer Sea Mills, near the mouth of the Avon. But Aust is fourteen miles from Bitton, whereas the distance between the two Roman stations is marked as only nine miles. Sea Mills, on the other hand, is distant about nine miles from Bitton, but it is distant full twelve miles from Caer-

went (Venta Silurum) the next station, whereas the distance according the Itinerary was only nine. In order to meet this difficulty recourse has to be made to a fourth assumption, viz., that the numerals in our copies of the Itinerary are corrupted, and so the distances are wrongly stated. A further attempt is made to overcome these difficulties by appealing to the authority of Richard of Cirencester, who introduces an additional station "Ad Sabrinam," which is not in the Itinerary of Antonine. There is now little doubt that the work ascribed to Richard of Cirencester is a forgery. But, moreover, as this author places his station, "Ad Sabrinam," only six miles from Bitton, adding, however, that "hence the passage is made across to Britannia Secunda" (Wales) to a place called Statio Trajecta, three miles from "Ad Sabrinam" and eight from Venta Silurum, or (Caerwent), and as all this is irreconcilable with the actual distances between Bitton, the Severn, and Caerleon, the intrusion of this writer adds to the confusion instead of removing the difficulty. It will be seen that when all these "assumptions" have been made, very little remains of the original statement laid down in the Itinerary. Still, for all this, the one object which alone could justify these arbitrary changes, viz., the harmonising of the account given in the Itinerary with existing localities, is not attained. A learned writer, after laying these different assumptions before his readers, sums up in these words: "Where numerals are corrupted, and the very ruins and vestiges of former roads have disappeared precise confirmation is hopeless." Now, it is this method which I say is so unfair toward the writer of the Itinerary. What right have we to begin by *assuming* that his statements are false? It *may be* that stations have been omitted or transposed, that numerals have been corrupted or names misspelt. All this may be; but it has to be proved, not to be assumed. Why should we make assumptions of any kind, at all events till we have tested the accuracy of the facts as stated in the Itinerary? The only right course to pursue in an inquiry of this sort, is to take the Old Roman's story as we find it, to follow him as our

guide, step by step, and at each spot to examine what evidence we can find either in support of, or in contradiction to, his statements. If we do this we shall, I think, not only find that he is right, but we shall also find many interesting facts in confirmation of what he says. First, then, he informs us that on leaving Isca Silurum after a march of nine miles we reach Venta Silurum. As no doubt exists about Isca being Caerleon, so neither can there be any doubt that Venta is Caer-Went. The distance is correctly stated; the origin of the name is obvious, and the remains that have been discovered there mark it as a Roman station. I will only call attention to the fact, that this station (the one at which the troops would halt prior to crossing the Severn) was more than two miles distant from the river. This is no more than what we should expect. For what Roman general with a view either to the comfort or safety of his troops, would choose the low banks of the Severn, subject as they are to the action of the tide, as a place of encampment, in preference to high ground in the neighbourhood? This observation will naturally lead us to suspect that a similar precaution was observed on the opposite side of the river, and so predispose us to look for the next station, not in the low marshes but on the adjoining heights. Our Roman guide now tells us that on leaving Caerwent in the direction of Bath we shall find the next station, Abone, at the distance of nine miles. As Caerwent is about two and a half miles from the Severn, we have to find, first, the point of embarkation on the Welsh side of the river; secondly, the landing place on the English side; and, thirdly, the site of the station itself. Now, the whole distance from Caerwent to Bath, as the crow flies, is close upon twenty-three miles, and as our guide says that the whole distance by road was only twenty-four, it follows that the road must have been a very direct one, as Roman roads usually were. In seeking, therefore, either for landing places or for stations we cannot deviate far from the straight line. Three miles distant from Caerwent, on the right bank of the Severn, may be seen the remains of a Roman entrenchment known as

Sudbrook Camp. This, I think, may well be taken to mark the site of *embarcation*, which would naturally be protected by military works, though (as I have already remarked) the Romans would not choose such a spot as a *station* for their troops. If we could but discover works of a similar character on the opposite side of the river we might be sure of our route. But the action of the tide, which is now only kept off by artificial embankments from flooding the low land on the left bank, has destroyed all such works, if they ever existed. Even on the Welsh side the tide has not been inactive. Only one half of Sudbrook camp remains, the other half has been carried away by the Severn. We must, therefore, have recourse to other means for finding the landing place and station we are in search of. Two places have been suggested for the Roman station, Aust, near Old Passage, and Sea Mills, near the mouth of the Avon. Both of these are too far out of the direct line, and therefore would lengthen the journey between Caerwent and Bath beyond the twenty-four miles allowed in the Itinerary. Moreover, Aust is too near Caerwent (six miles instead of nine), and too far from Bitton (fourteen miles instead of nine), to agree with the Itinerary. Add to this that the passage across from Aust to Sudbrook camp would be a very inconvenient one, as regards tide and rocks. And if we take the passage from Aust to Beachley, called the Old Passage, the troops after crossing the Severn would still find themselves cut off from Caerwent by the river Wye, and would have to march a long way up that river before they could ford it. Sea Mills in like manner is too far out of the direct line, and while it is at the right distance from Bitton (nine miles), it is too far from Caerwent (twelve miles by water instead of nine). Moreover, a little reflection will show that "Sea Mills," however suitable for a harbour, can never have been the starting point of a ferry to a point *up* the Severn. The tide, which would carry the boats down the Avon, would prevent their ascending the Severn. If boats went across the Severn from Sea Mills to Caerleon, they

would have gone down the river, in the direction of Newport, not up the river towards Caer-went. Therefore, the landing place on the English shore cannot have been either at Sea Mills, or at Aust. Nor can either of these places represent the station of Abone, according to the Itinerary. We must turn our attention elsewhere. If, starting from Sudbrook Camp, which is not three miles distant from Caer-went, we measure six miles in the direction of Bath, we find ourselves at Henbury, on the heights about two miles from the left bank of the Severn, nine miles from Caer-went, and nine from Bitton, the exact distance mentioned in the Itinerary. The village has a Saxon name, signifying the high camp, or the enclosure, or town on the hill. This name is applied to several ancient Roman camps in various parts of England; Henbury-fort is the name of one such encampment near Honiton, in Devonshire; and Hean-byrig (Hanbury), in Huntingdonshire, is mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle (675). At Blaise Castle close to our Henbury are the remains of an ancient entrenchment, a plan and description of which may be seen in Seyer's *History of Bristol*. Here Roman coins have been found: one bearing the date "Aurelianus Cos. III," *i.e.* A.D. 275. A straight road leads from Henbury to the Severn. The river here is wide but free from rocks, and its course (as may be seen in the Ordnance Map) is favourable to boats crossing thence to Sudbrook Camp, with the aid of the tide. The road is called in the Ordnance Map "Chittening Street;" and "Street" (via Strata, Paved way) is commonly used in Saxon to indicate a Roman road. It is also remarkable that in an old map of King's Forest near Bristol, dated 1610, in the possession of H. S. Wasborough, Esq., of Bristol, a road is indicated in the opposite direction in a line between Henbury and Bitton, and it is described "Auguste Causeway." This name is not improbably derived from the "Legio II. Augusta," whose chief station at Caerleon was approached by this road from Bath through Henbury. The Roman military roads were sometimes constructed by the legionaries themselves. As re-

gards the name of Abone given to this station, which seems to be derived from the River Abone (the Avon), I may remark (following the guidance of M. Violet-le-Duc in his interesting book *The Annals of a Fortress*) that when the Romans occupied the British fort on the hill the inhabitants would be forced to leave it, and they would naturally choose for their new residence a spot in the valley below the fort by the river, such as *Sea-Mills*. This became the town of Abone, the old fort became the Roman station and was called after the town the station of Abone. Since, therefore, by following our Roman guide we find that at the exact distance which he mentions, viz., nine miles from Caerwent, and nine from Bitton, there exist to this day the remains of an ancient encampment, that the spot is about the same distance from the left bank of the Severn as Caerwent is from the right bank, that the road leading from it in either direction bears a Roman name, that it lies in almost a direct line between Caerwent and Bath, that the passage of the Severn is here very convenient as regards the use of the tide, and that the position of the camp justly entitles it to be called "Abone," or the station at Avon-town; why should we doubt the accuracy of what our guide tells us? Henbury, or the camp at Blaize Castle, correctly answers to what he designates as the station Abone. The next station which he speaks of is Trajectus, nine miles from Abone, and six from Bath. This was doubtless Bitton, where the vestiges of a Roman camp are still visible. The only objection raised is with regard to its name. Why should it be called Trajectus, when the passage of the river Avon at that point could be effected by an ordinary bridge? In answer to this objection I would, in the first place, simply point to the two places in the immediate vicinity of Bitton, called respectively Salt-ford and Swine-ford. The Britons were not famed for bridges, but Tacitus remarks how daring they were in the use of fords, whether across marshes or rivers. Not being encumbered by superfluous clothing, they often used as fords places where only their head and shoulders reached above the

waters. Since, then, the names of Saltford and Swineford show that formerly the Avon was forded near this spot, why should we hesitate to believe that even before the occupation of the Romans, the British town or village here was known by the name of The Ford, which the Romans on occupying it translated Trajectus? But I think we have still more direct evidence to show that such was really the case. Some five miles S.W. of the Avon, up the valley of the river Chew, near Pensford, is the well-known Druidical circle of Stanton Drew. Some two miles from Bitton, north of the Avon, up the Golden Valley, are also to be found some Druidical stones. Now, whatever be the explanations of these ancient monuments, we may safely conclude that they mark localities where the Britons either resided, or assembled for religious or political purposes. They were resorted to as places of importance, and we cannot imagine that two such places existed at so short a distance from each other (only eight or nine miles) without being connected by a road, or by some path or track. Such path, track, or road, would naturally cross the river Avon at this spot; here, then, in days prior to the Roman Conquest, must have been the British ford—perhaps a boat was kept here—and a hamlet would be sure to grow up at a spot so frequently resorted to. It was called the Ford, or the Passage, and the Romans, when they occupied the spot, translated it into their own language, Trajectus.

From these remarks it will appear, that so far from the description given in the Itinerary of this Roman road through Bath being "corrupted and full of difficulties," the difficulties only commence when we begin to substitute our own assumptions for the express statements of the Roman author. If we take his facts as he states them, and simply follow his guidance, we find not only that his statements are free from all improbability and contradiction, but that their accuracy is attested, and the places he mentions may be identified even after the lapse of so many centuries, by monuments and names which still exist.