

On the Course of a Roman Military Road through Somersetshire.

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THE roads which in the days of the occupation of Britain by the Romans traversed the south-western portion of our island, naturally form a very interesting subject for the study of Members of the Somerset Archæological Society, and therefore I need offer no apology for calling the attention of the Society to a Roman road which passed through Somerset, but which, as far as I can discover, has hitherto attracted but little notice. Whatever attention has been paid to the subject seems to have led to a very unsatisfactory result ; for the road, which in the Itinerary of Antoninus is clearly described as passing through Somerset, has been by some archæologists removed altogether from this part of the country, and transported to South Wales. This feat is due, I believe, in the first instance, to Richard of Cirencester, whose views have been accepted and perpetuated by subsequent writers. But inasmuch as no doubt now exists that the work ascribed to Richard is a forgery, little weight can be attached to the statements therein contained, especially if they are found to be at variance with authentic documents. The Itinerary of Antoninus, on the contrary, is for us a document of the greatest importance, as it is by far the best authority we possess on the geography of Roman Britain. This Itinerary or list of roads must not, however, be supposed to contain a description of all the roads which, at the

time of its compilation, existed throughout the provinces of the Roman empire. It enumerates only the consular roads; those roads which were planned for the military occupation of the country, and as such were kept in repair at the charge of the empire. Other roads there were, and roads of great importance, for the good of the provinces and the needs of commerce. The maintenance and repair of such roads were at the charge of the provinces, or the towns, or of those persons for whose use they were constructed; but they were not consular or imperial roads, and no mention of them must be sought for in the Itinerary. In Somerset we have examples of both kinds of road. The Foss road, one of the best known of the Roman roads in England, traverses the island from N.E. to S.W., and runs through Somerset from Bath to Ilchester. Another fine Roman road runs from Old Sarum to the Bristol Channel, along the Mendip Hills, through the district of the Roman lead mines. It has been carefully marked out and described by Prebendary Scarth, who has devoted much time and study to the subject of Roman antiquities in this county. Both these were commercial roads, and therefore, though undoubtedly of Roman origin, they are not mentioned in the Itinerary of Antoninus. Of consular roads there were but two in Somerset. One went through Bath; it formed part of the great military road which led from "Venta Silurum" (Caerleon, near Newport, in South Wales), the chief station of the 2nd Legion (Legio Augusta), to the central station of Caleva Atrebatum (Silchester, south of Reading). Only a few miles of this road passed through the north-east corner of Somerset. The other military road passing through this county is the one to which I wish at present more particularly to call attention. In the Itinerary it is marked 12th in order, and is described as follows: "Iter xii a Caleva per Muridunum Vericomium M.P. CCLXXXVI." It is a long and circuitous route, 286 miles in length, starting from Caleva (Silchester), and going through Venta Belgarum (Winchester), Sorbiodunum (Old Sarum), Durnoveria (Dorchester), Moridunum

(near Sidmouth?), Isca Damnoniorum (Exeter), Isca Silurum (Caerleon), till it reaches the final station of Vericomium (Wroxeter). The strategic value of this route was to connect together all the great forts on the south and west of Britain—that portion of the island which was more especially under the protection of the 2nd Legion, whose principal station was at Caerleon. At Wroxeter, the last and most northern point of this route, the 2nd Legion was relieved by the 20th Legion, whose principal station was at Deva (Chester). It is not my object at present to enter more fully into the particulars of this route; I mean to confine myself to the consideration of that portion of it which lies between Exeter and Caerleon.

I have already remarked that the Itinerary is one of the most important documents we possess relative to the geography of Roman Britain. It is of great antiquity, dating probably from the 2nd century, and certainly not later than the 4th, and its general accuracy is confirmed by observations which have been made throughout the countries which formed portions of the Empire. That occasional errors are to be found in a document of this nature, consisting of numerals and of proper names of places, which to a Roman scribe must have appeared as strange as those of localities in India or Africa appear to most Englishmen of the present day, is a fact not to be wondered at; more especially when we reflect that all the editions of the Itinerary we now possess are derived from a single ancient copy, the only one which has been preserved. Such errors, however, are not very numerous, and their existence must not be arbitrarily assumed. Our first duty in such cases is to take the document as it stands, to compare its statements with the localities as they now exist, so far as it is possible for us to do so; to take also into account the great changes which 1500 years have made in the geology no less than in the geography of the land, and not to impute error to the document till it becomes clear that no other mode of solution is possible.

With regard to the portion of Roman road now under consideration, the Itinerary expresses itself as follows :—

Ab Isca Damnoniorum—

Leucaro	m.p. xv.
Nido	m.p. xv.
Bomio	m.p. xv.
Iscae Leg. ii. Aug.	..		m.p. xxviii.

Let us compare this statement with the present features of the country. The journey from Isca Damnoniorum to Isca Silurum is put down as 73 miles; the actual distance from Exeter to Caerleon, as the crow flies, is something over 60. So far then the words of the Itinerary derive support from actual observation, for a road extending over 73 miles, and connecting several towns together, is sure to deviate from a straight line, and 12 miles is not much to allow for such deviation. One thing is clear, if we accept the statement of the Itinerary, the route cannot (as some suppose), have gone from Exeter to the north of Devon, and then crossed over the sea to Wales, near Neath, and thence followed the coast line to Newport and Caerleon. Such a route would almost double in length the one named in the Itinerary. If the Roman road was only 73 miles in length, it could not avoid going through Somerset. The manner in which the stations were distributed along the road next demands consideration. The whole distance is divided into four stages. The first three, after leaving Exeter, are equal in length, fifteen miles each. The fourth is almost as long as two of the others put together, being not less than 28 miles. At first sight this arrangement appears strange, but, if we cast our eye on the map, a ready explanation presents itself. Between Exeter and the south coast of the Bristol Channel is a long tract of land; from that coast to Newport (which is only three miles from Caerleon) is a wide expanse of water. The first part of the journey therefore was across land: it had to be performed on foot, and, accordingly, it is divided into three stages or marches of 15 miles each. The latter part had to be performed in

transports across the Channel, and, therefore, it formed a single stage or transit of 28 miles. Thus the configuration of land and water gives further indirect support to the accuracy of the Itinerary.

We must now inquire whether any traces are to be found of the three stations themselves, the names of which are recorded as Leucus, Nidus, and Bomium. If we leave Exeter and proceed in a north-easterly direction we shall, after a journey of fifteen miles (the distance of the first stage mentioned in the Itinerary), come upon a most remarkable earthwork of great strength, with many marks of Roman occupation, situated on the brow of one of the spurs of the Blackdown Hills. It bears the name of "Hembury Fort." Between this spot and Exeter we pass more than one place bearing the name of *Street*, and the remains of a Roman causeway are marked in a map of the last century as visible in this direction. "Hembury Fort" may well indicate the locality of the Roman station Leucus. The name itself is probably not void of significance. The names given by the Romans to British towns were for the most part Latin modifications of those used by the natives. It seems easy to recognise in the second half of the form Leucus, the British word *Caer* or *Castle*. Leucus is probably nothing else but *Leon-caer* or *Caer-leon*, the *Castle of the Legion*, an appellation which we find applied by the Britons to several Roman strongholds. *Venta Silurum* was not the only place so called. *Caer-leon* was the British name, also, of *Deva* (Chester, a stronghold of the 20th Legion), as we learn from *Beda*; and *Carlisle* (a derivation from *Caerleon*) marks the site of *Luguvallium*, the station at the western extremity of *Hadrian's Wall*. *Ptolomy*, in his geographical description of Britain, places a station of the 2nd Legion in the vicinity of *Isca Damnoniorum* or Exeter. Some writers have supposed this to be an error for *Isca Silurum*, which was undoubtedly a station of that legion. But I see no sufficient reason why we should doubt the accuracy

of Ptolomy's statement, nor why a stronghold of the 2nd Legion may not have existed near Exeter simultaneously with, or prior to, the one at Caerleon. This was probably the case during the early period of the occupation, when Ptolomy wrote. But as the Damnonians, after their first resistance and defeat by the Romans, soon settled down peaceably under the dominion of their conquerors, the fort near Exeter probably ceased to be of much importance. The restless spirit of the Silurians and Demetae on the other hand, obliged the Romans to keep a strong garrison on their frontier, and thus Venta Silurum on the Wye became the chief residence of the 2nd Legion. Caerleon, on the south extremity of the Welch frontier, and Deva (Chester), also called Caerleon, on the northern extremity, always remained important strongholds, the former of the 2nd Legion, the latter of the 20th.

If Hembury Fort marks the position of Leucarus, where shall we place the next station *Nidus*? We must look for it some 15 miles further on, in the direction of the Bristol Channel. This brings us to the neighbourhood of Taunton. At Taunton itself Roman coins have been dug up, and the circumstance of Ine having built a castle there, would seem to indicate that the position was considered to be a strong one, and was, not improbably, fortified before his time. At Norton Fitzwarren an ancient camp exists, and in the valley below it large quantities of Romano-British pottery have been discovered. Roman coins have also been found at Holway near Taunton. These are all indications of Roman occupation, and taken in conjunction with the distance of these places from Hembury and the coast, they seem to give fair ground for believing that at one of them, or in their immediate vicinity, stood the station of *Nidus*. More than this it may not be prudent to assert in the present state of our researches, but if future explorations in the neighbourhood are rewarded with the discovery of more coins and other Roman remains, much light may be thrown on the question, and it is not unreasonable to hope that in time the site of *Nidus* may be accurately determined. Canon Jones, in some remarks which he published in

the *Wiltshire Archæological and Natural History Magazine*, on the Celtic names of places in Wiltshire, observes that *Nid* is a common Celtic appellation for places situated near water. If *Nidus* be derived from the British *Nid*, the town or station may have been so called from being situated on the Tone, or in proximity to the marshes which in those days extended for a considerable distance along the banks of the river.

We must await the result of further explorations before we can venture to determine with accuracy the line of the road between Leucarus and Nidus. Traces of a Roman road have been observed along what now is a turnpike road across the Blackdown Hills, from near Hembury Fort to a point above Otterford, and thence to Taunton; but I am inclined to think that the road mentioned in the Itinerary was rather more to the west, and that it followed the course of a road marked in an old map of Devonshire, in a direct line from Hembury Fort to Culm Bridge, crossing the downs and entering the Vale of Taunton somewhat east of the Wellington Monument. Shortly after passing this spot we come upon two places, one bearing the name of Ford Street, the other of Silver Street, a third is called Stert, a fourth Old Way, and there is a place called Little Silver not far from Ford Street. These are usually indications of an ancient road.¹ Future observations may throw much light on this point.²

(1). See an interesting paper by Dr. Pring in the present number of our Journal.

(2). It is of great importance that whenever any coins or pottery, or other marks of ancient occupation are discovered, an exact record should be kept of the precise locality where the discovery is made. Such indications are of great help in determining the course of an ancient road, especially when they occur in any frequency. They mark the sites of the habitations of men, and these usually follow the course of roads. It would be a good help towards the formation of a correct map of the Roman roads through Somerset (a work in which Prebendary Scarth has long been engaged) if every member or friend of our Society, whenever he discovers or hears of the discovery of any relics of antiquity of any kind, would ascertain the locality with as much precision as possible, and notify the same by letter to the Secretary of our Society at the Castle, Taunton, so that the site might be marked on a map kept for the purpose, and the information be put on record for the benefit of all who are engaged in these researches.

There still remains a third station to be determined. Where was Bomium? It was, says the Itinerary, 15 miles from Nidus and 28 from Caerleon. This fixes the locality somewhere near the mouth of the Parret. The village of Combwich might be suggested. Here is a small port, and a ferry across the river. There is, moreover, an ancient camp in the immediate vicinity at Cannington Park, and at no great distance, near Cannington, there is a farm called Gurney *Street*. It has, moreover, the advantage of being situated on the left bank of the Parret, so that troops landing at this spot from Caerleon might have marched to Nidus near Taunton without having to cross the river. But Combwich is difficult of access, and the accommodation for ships is very limited. It does not therefore seem probable that this site would have been chosen for the port where transports had to assemble in order to convey troops and stores across the Bristol Channel. Moreover, the distance of Combwich from Caerleon is greater than that stated in the Itinerary to have existed between Isca and Bomium. Burnham, on the opposite shore, has from very early times been a port at the mouth of the Parret. Its name occurs in Domesday, and also in the will of King Ælfred, in the ninth century; and Mr. Bidgood, the Curator of our Museum, informs me that Roman pottery has been found at Burnham, in the brick pits, and amongst it some of the finer sort of red ware—Samian. This seems conclusive evidence that the site was occupied by the Romans, and it is probable that their port was in this vicinity. Modern Burnham is little more than 15 miles from Taunton, and about 27 from Caerleon; so that a spot a little to the south of Burnham would agree well with the distances named in the Itinerary, whereas Combwich is, by several miles, out of the reckoning. The mouth of the Parret, and all the adjoining land, is subject to constant changes,³ and during the last 1500 years the line of the coast must have been altered for miles to an enormous extent.

(3). See "Notes on the Geology of Otterhampton," by Thos. Woodhouse, M.A., in our *Proceedings* of last year.

The course of the Brue has varied also. It is difficult, in consequence, at the present day, to form an opinion as to the exact spot where the port formerly stood. It seems probable that the bed of the Parret has become gradually lengthened in a northerly direction, and that anciently it reached the sea by a much shorter course across Stert Flats, between Stert Point and Stert Island. When that was the case, the site of modern Burnham can scarcely have been accessible to ships of any size, and the port must have been more to the south, probably south of the Brue. Now that it is known that Roman pottery has been found at Burnham, it is to be hoped that further discoveries may be made in the neighbourhood from time to time ; and if care is taken to mark down the spots where pottery, coins, or other objects are found, we need not despair of ultimately obtaining some accurate information concerning the site of the ancient seaport. There are evidences of an old Roman road (not one of those mentioned in the Itinerary, but a commercial road) running along the ridge of Polden Hill, towards the sea. In all probability it led to this port. The military road between Nidus and Bomium probably followed a direct course from Nidus across the Quantocks to Combwich—where was the passage across the Parret—and then proceeded direct to Bomium, being joined by the commercial road spoken of above, shortly before reaching the port. But here again we must wait for further discoveries before we can venture to speak positively regarding the course followed by the road.

The points which I have so far endeavoured to establish are the following :—1. If we accept the evidence of the Itinerary of Antoninus (the only safe guide we have in such a matter), the route followed by the Roman soldiers, marching from Exeter to Caerleon was 73 miles in length. It follows, as a necessary consequence, that the road went through Somerset. Any line drawn between these two well known points, so as to avoid Somersetshire, must exceed by a good deal the number of miles mentioned. 2. There is nothing in the topography of Somerset,

and the rest of the country lying between Exeter and Caerleon, in any way incompatible with the statements of the Itinerary ; on the contrary, the distances named, and the division of the stages, is fully in accordance with the distribution of land and water along the route. 3. We possess already much confirmatory evidence regarding the exact course followed by the road, and the actual sites of the various stations, but further research is necessary before these and other questions of detail can be fully and satisfactorily solved.

This is a work which we may confidently hope will some day be accomplished by Members of the Somerset Archæological Society.

