

## THE EARLY YEARS OF ROMAN OCCUPATION AT LANCASTER.

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It has generally been recognised that the Roman occupation of Lancaster began in the early Flavian period - that is, in the A.D. 70's. Until recently, it was assumed that Agricola was responsible for this during his second campaign in A.D. 78, which took in the territory of the Brigantes. There are, however, a number of factors which indicate that the early years of occupation in this part of the north-west was more complex than this.

Excavation on Castle Hill and the interpretation of its results have by no means been straightforward; this has been due largely to the severe restriction of areas available to study, and the fact that those areas that have become available have been largely outside that part of the fort that contained major buildings. Further, the effect of the subsequent building has been to add complications of already complex chronological sequences.

That an auxiliary fort sat on top of Castle Hill is not in doubt; initially built from turf and timber, it was, according to a surviving building-inscription,<sup>1</sup> reconstructed in stone in Trajan's reign. It is evident, too, that the original turf and timber fort had been enlarged and probably reoriented, with the main gate moving from the fort's eastern to its northern side. The Trajanic building -inscription provides our first reasonably secure date for the fort, so how can we reconstruct its history prior to the first decade of the second century? In particular, when did Roman troops first see action on the banks of the River Lune? We know very little of the political geography of the Brigantes before the Roman occupation, although it is evident that so large an area that is credited to them cannot have been organised in a homogeneous fashion. There were clearly factions within the tribe, perhaps based on such "sub-groups" as the Carvetii (around Carlisle) and the Setantii (perhaps around Morecambe Bay).<sup>2</sup> More dramatically, the factionalism is evidenced in the turbulent relationship between queen Cartimandua and her husband, Venutius, who was described by the Roman historian,

Tacitus, as the finest warrior in Britain, apart from Caratacus. Cartimandua, early in the Roman occupation of Britain, entered into a treaty with Rome, which we may assume was a means to lending security to her paramount position in return for her co-operation with the Roman authorities; she gave ample evidence of her good faith when, in A.D. 51, she handed Caratacus over to Rome when he sought sanctuary with her.

It is evident from Tacitus' account that the 50s and 60s saw occasional eruptions of tensions between the pro- and anti-Roman elements amongst the Brigantes, that is, between factions led by Cartimandua and Venutius. The solution to these outbreaks was intervention by Roman troops; whilst Tacitus provides few details of this, it is reasonable to assume that the base for these operations was the auxiliary fort at Chester, which preceded the legionary fortress on the site. Chester's chief importance lay with the guarding of North Wales and the Dee estuary.

Although Roman troops undoubtedly campaigned in the north-west during this period, there is no sign that permanent sites were established. Rather, the course of such action was probably traced by the establishment of temporary campaign-camps. Few of these are known in the area, as their ephemeral structures have proved extremely vulnerable to plough-damage. Only a few, such as Rey Cross and Troutbeck, survive in land that is of marginal agricultural value. The most likely clue to the location of such activity is provided by the evidence of coins - particularly Neroian and earlier copper and bronze issues.

Most diagnostic of such coins are contemporary copies of issues of Claudius' reign, some of which were of very poor quality indeed,<sup>3</sup> these were in the first instance minted by units of the Roman army, and reflected unpredictability in the supply of official coinage. They appear to have been in their most frequent use during the 50s and 60s; their findspots, therefore, probably point to areas where the Roman army was active during those years.<sup>4</sup> These coins have been found in many parts of the north-west, but particularly in coastal locations and in the river-valleys. This may well point to the fact that the

Roman army's method of dealing with trouble amongst the Brigantes during these years was to send troops by ship from the Dee estuary, disembarking them as required, and particularly in river-estuaries, an around Morecambe Bay, with finds at Ashton, the Lancaster-area, Cartmel and Barrow. This perhaps serves to confirm the significance of Morecambe Bay in the political geography of Brigantia-perhaps as the centre of Setantian influence-and to indicate that Lancaster probably came face to face with the Roman army during its attempts to extinguish the brush-fires of Brigantian rebellion.

It is evident, however, that these activities in the 50s and 60s did not lead directly to any kind of permanent Roman military presence in the Lancaster-area. It was not until A.D. 69 that the tensions amongst the Brigantian factions finally boiled over into a major threat to stability; Venutius evidently took advantage of the fact that Roman troops were temporarily distracted by their own civil war to remove Cartimandua-by now, his ex-wife-from power. As Tacitus says, Brigantia was transformed overnight into a hostile power. The seriousness of this situation invited immediate attention; it is clear that the governor, Vettius Bolanus (A.D. 69-71), wanted military action in the north; but the first comprehensive attack came when the emperor Vespasian- the eventual victor in the civil war- sent his son-in-law, Petillius Cerialis, to Britain as governor in A.D. 71. Already in the north-west, as commander of Legion XX, was the future governor, Gnaeus Julius Agricola.<sup>5</sup>

According to Tacitus, in his biography of Agricola, Cerialis divided the troops available between himself and Agricola. In view of the fact that Legion XX was at that time based at Wroxeter, it is a reasonable assumption that Agricola's responsibilities were located west of the Pennines. It is now accepted that the broad format of this period of campaigning was that Cerialis himself operated out of Lincoln, the base of Legion IX; he probably secured the territorial integrity of the Parisi on the east coast of Yorkshire, established a new legionary base at York, and defeated Venutius, possibly in the vicinity of the large oppidum at Stanwick. From there, some of his troops probably went northwards to Corbridge, and perhaps beyond,

whilst others crossed the Pennines by way of Stainmore, leaving behind them the campaign-camps at Rey Cross and Crackenthorpe, and meeting Agricola in the neighbourhood of Brougham for a joint-assault upon Carlisle. It may have been that a line was pushed from Carlisle in the direction of Maryport, via the newly discovered large fort at Blennerhasset;<sup>6</sup> the purpose of this may have been to police the Carvetii of Solway and separate them from the Brigantes. The material from Blennerhasset appears to be dateable to the early 70s, whilst timbers from recent excavations at Carlisle<sup>7</sup> have been dated to a similar period.

Agricola's route west of the Pennines at this stage is less easy to discern; but he may have operated out of sites such as Wroxeter and Littlechester and proceeded via King Street through Middlewich, crossing the Mersey near Wilderspool where there may have been a fort,<sup>8</sup> and the Ribble near Walton-le-Dale. The obvious destination for such a route would appear to have been Lancaster. Although no timbers from Castle Hill have been dated, the coin-assemblage, with pre-Flavian issues and issues of the early years of Vespasian's reign (i.e. the early 70s) would lend weight to the argument, suggesting that the first fort was established on Castle Hill during Cerialis' governership. The primary clay-and-turf rampart belongs to this fort was found in excavations in the grounds of the Old Vicarage in 1975;<sup>9</sup> the accumulation of evidence suggests that it may have occupied some 5.5. acres, and was orientated with its main (east) gate opening onto the Lune now occupied by Church Street.

Agricola's troops probably followed the line of the river Lune, although neither Burrow-in-Lonsdale nor Low Borrow Bridge have produced dating evidence of this period. Ribchester, on the other hand, has, but it remains unclear whether at this early stage it was reached from the south or by landings made on the Ribble-estuary.<sup>10</sup> It would appear that the campaigns undertaken in Brigantia in the early 70s by Cerialis and Agricola were far more comprehensive than was once thought. Clearly, they resulted in the breaking of Brigantian resistance, leaving the area sufficiently safe to allow the resumption of campaigning in Wales in the mid-70s, and evidently making Agricola's

campaign in the area in A.D. 78 a relatively straightforward affair.

Excavation at Lancaster does not allow us to detect any change in the fort lay-out which is certainly attributable to Agricola. It is, however, clear that the fort was enlarged at some stage in the later first century A.D. - still within ramparts of clay-and-turf. The effect of this was to push the north rampart further north, whilst evidently leaving the east and west ramparts where they were. It remains unclear, of course, what happened on the southern side. It is possible that the fort was re-orientated with the north gate becoming the fort's main entrance. This would imply that a route running northwards across the river became more significant than that which ran to Burrow-in-Lonsdale on the southern bank of the river. The logic of such a route, heading towards Kendal (Watercrock) would be that Lancaster assumed a new role of importance as a "gateway to the lakes"; Roman penetration of the Lake District would appear to have been a feature of the later 80s and 90s.

Indeed, the circumstances of this change have become clearer in recent years; it has long been known that a legion was withdrawn from Britain c.A.D. 87. Until recently it was believed that this was accompanied by a withdrawal of permanent garrisons from northern Scotland, and the establishment of a frontier between the Forth and the Clyde. However, re-assessment of aerial photographs of forts on the Stanegate,<sup>11</sup> and of the coin-evidence from Roman sites in Scotland,<sup>12</sup> now suggest that the late 80s saw a virtually complete evacuation of Scotland and the inception of a northern frontier on the line of the Stanegate-road, with its pivots on Carlisle and Corbridge.

The evacuation of Scotland led to the "freeing-up" of large numbers of troops; these appear to have been deployed in the large forts on the Stanegate (up to 8 acres); and in the beginnings of occupation of the Lake District. It would appear reasonable to assume that the fort at Lancaster was enlarged at this stage to house extra troops and to take on an important role in the occupation of the Lakes. It was this new large fort - of perhaps 8 to 10 acres - that was rebuilt in stone early in Trajan's reign.

Much of this remains speculative, but it offers a revised model for the early history of the fort at Lancaster, which is consistent with the latest interpretations of evidence from northern Britain.

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