

THE ROMANS IN CORNWALL.*

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In the course of the discussion upon my paper, "The Romans at Tamar Mouth," read to this Society at the annual meeting in 1888, my friend the Rev. W. Iago referred to the ancient use of the word *street* "wherever the Romans had a road"; while my friends Mr. H. M. Jeffery and Mr. Howard Fox, with Mr. Iago, spoke of the contents of "military chests" as having been found in the county. And I seem somewhat to have been misunderstood, since while I denied the existence of Roman stations in Cornwall, and held that there was no proof of the presence in the county of Roman roads, I held also that there was ample evidence that "the Romans not only visited Cornwall, but that there was some amount of occupation by them, probably in the form of trading ports," while I went so far even as to suggest that we had a very imperfect knowledge of the vestiges of their intercourse and presence among us.

And in fact the main object of the paper was to put on record the existence of what were probably structural relics of the Romans on the Cornish border, at Stonehouse.

It can hardly be suggested, therefore, that my scepticism went beyond that of my friend Mr. N. Whitley, who, in 1875, came to the conclusion "that the occupation of Cornwall by the Romans, slight as it appears to be, was rather that of friendly intercourse for the purpose of trade than that of conquest and dominion"; or than his other deduction "the great military roads of our Roman conquerors extended no further west than Exeter."

The chief topic suggested for consideration in these few remarks is the evidence of the existence of Roman roads in Cornwall, which, of course, materially affects any conclusion we

* In view of the interest in this question re-awakened by Mr. Quiller-Couch's paper, read at the Joint Meeting at Falmouth in 1900, the Editors have printed this paper read at a meeting of R.I.C. in 1888, but not then published in the Journal.

may form as to the character of the Roman occupation. That there was some sort of association or occupation all are agreed—the points to be solved are its extent and nature.

Now, at the first blush of the question, we see what an enormous difference there is between Cornwall and such a thoroughly Romanized county as Somerset, where Roman remains have been found, according to Prebendary Scarth, in 108 places out of 488 parishes—stations, baths, villas, pottery kilns, interments, inscriptions, defences. Devon is far, very far, behind Somerset in such matters, but Devon has the relics of a Roman station at Exeter, while the only Roman stations in Cornwall are to be found in the pages of the forgery fathered on Richard of Cirencester.

And thus, when we come to sum up the evidence for the presence of the Romans in Cornwall it comes simply to this—that Roman coins have been found at some twenty localities, in some half dozen cases only taking the dimensions of hoards; that there have been very few instances of personal ornaments;* that there are earthworks which *may* be Roman (I cannot accept the idea that rectangularity of plan is conclusive); that on the estuary of the Camel the occurrence of pottery of Roman date with other relics seems noteworthy; that there was a similar association at Bosence, St. Hilary; and that there are two so-called miliary stones in the county, that at St. Hilary, and that recently discovered by the Rev. W. Iago, at Tintagel.

The full weight of this will be seen, as I have suggested, if Cornwall is compared with such counties as Somerset or Gloucester, or even, so far as Exeter and the country north and east of that city is concerned, with Devon.

It would be a great point then if Cornwall could claim the possession of Roman roads. Mr. Whitley, in 1875, held that it could not; Dr. Barham, in 1877, reasoning from the assumed miliary character of the St. Hilary stone, held that it could. Mr. Iago makes a similar deduction from the use of the word “street” as in Stratton, though I presume he would not argue that that word is applied to every so-called Roman road. Now I

* The so-called Romano-British relics from Trelan are pre-Roman. So with the so-called Roman celts.

know that the St. Hilary stone was pronounced to be miliary by no less an authority than Professor Hübner, and that the Tintagel stone must be placed in the same category, whatever that may be. But what I have never been able to understand is this—why a stone which is simply inscribed to an emperor and which has no indication whatever of serving any useful purpose, in connection with any road, should be unhesitatingly dubbed a mile stone. These stones bear nothing whatever upon them to indicate their supposed intention, and a traveller on a Roman road would have been never a whit the better for them, so far as the knowledge of distances is concerned. Such stones may very well have been erected here and there on well known and accustomed lines of communication as indications of loyalty or attachment, or as memorials. There are probably hundreds of legionary and other inscriptions in this kingdom, many on pillars, to which no one dreams of attaching a miliary significance; and it seems to me that such inscribed stones as those at St. Hilary and Tintagel cannot be prayed in aid of the Roman road theory, without some definite foundation. They cannot be called in to prove a Roman road of which no trace exists; though I grant that if they were found on a Roman road there might be a more definite show of argument for their miliary character. As it is they lack the one thing which would establish this object—the presence of a single feature which would adapt them to their assumed purpose. And yet we say the Romans were a practical people!

The assumption that the word “street” in reference to ancient lines of communication indicates a Roman road is one of the many debts we owe to the elder antiquaries, which have proved such hindrances to the progress of archæology. They started with the idea that before the Romans came the Britons were an utterly barbarous uncivilised people, quite incapable of making a road, and that *perforce* the ancient roads must be Roman. Well, we know better now.* We know that in some parts of the kingdom at least, and certainly in this west of England, pre-Roman civilisation reached a fairly high standard; and we recognise the fact that when the Romans came they found great lines of communication existing which to a large extent they no

* Witness the bronzes of Trehan and Staddon.

doubt improved, but which as certainly they did not originate. To reason from the use of the word "street" is to argue from the name instead of the thing; and the mere existence of such names as "Ickneild street" and "Watling street" ought to show the danger of that method of procedure. "Streets" were well known to the Saxons, as paved or formed roadways; and the cognates of the word "street" are found in all the Teutonic languages, to go no further. To say then that a place is called *Stratton* because it is on a *street* is not the same thing by any means as to say that the "street" is of Roman origin. All you can say is that the Saxons either founded or renamed a place—"a ton"—on a pre-existing duly-formed line of thoroughfare; and that helps you not one whit to the origin of the said thoroughfare. If you insist that the "street" is Roman, as history is quite silent on the point you must assume that up to the time when the particular *Stratton* in question was founded (there are of course several) no one in England had been competent to make a "street" in this ancient sense, but the Romans. That was the assumption of the elder antiquaries, but they never adduced a scintilla of evidence in its support, and all the evidence we have obtained since their time leads the other way.

And this brings me to a local consideration of great importance. In my "Notes on the ancient Topography of Cornwall," published in the *Journal* of the Institution for 1885, I expressed an opinion that the route of the ancient Fosseway had nothing to do with the modern Totnes, but that it came into Cornwall at a low, probably the lowest, ford on the Tamar, and kept the higher ground to or by Bodmin, Truro, and Marazion, along a line in which there are yet ample traces of the characteristic British "ridgeway." I suggested then that the Fosseway continued on from Exeter to Tamara, which I placed near Tavistock, across Dartmoor; and I pointed out that in the centre of Dartmoor there were the remains of an ancient road that could not have been made for merely local traffic—known as the "great central trackway"—and I identified that road with the Fosseway. When I wrote only a small portion of its course was known in the vicinity of Post Bridge. This year, (1889) however, Mr. Robert Burnard has succeeded in tracing it some seventeen miles—right into the cultivated land, heading for Tavistock in

one direction; and right away over Hameldon to the verge of the cultivated land, heading for Exeter through Chudleigh in the other. Along this deserted trackway there is therefore now no doubt that the bulk of the traffic to and from Cornwall passed. I have called it a "trackway" in the modern phrase, but it is a genuine "street" in the older sense, a causeway formed of stones, some 10 feet in width, the layer being $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in depth—a work therefore of no little magnitude but one with which there is not the smallest reason for suggesting the Romans had anything to do. Its origin is lost in the mists of antiquity. History has nothing to say to it. And there it remains, a monument of the ability of the Kelts to make a great road even over such a waste as Dartmoor.

Touching the suggestion that some of the hoards of Roman coins found in Cornwall may be the remains of military chests, I will only point out that it is after all only a suggestion; and that, whether it be bad or good, we are not entitled on the one hand to say it was not so, nor on the other hand, as some of my friends seem disposed to do, to treat it as an established fact. How do the contents of a Roman military chest differ from the capital stock of a trading settlement, when either consists only of coins?

Perhaps we shall never know to what extent Cornwall was ethnically Romanized. It is certain that we shall not unless we make our ground somewhat clearer than it seems to be at present.