

XI.

THE FORTIFICATIONS ON TRAPRAIN LAW.

BY R. W. FEACHEM, M.A., M.Sc., F.S.A., F.S.A.Scot.

Professor Gerhard Bersu stated in his interim report on excavations carried out in 1947¹ that the results of his work, together with the existence on the hill of many structural remains still untested by excavation, suggested that the defensive works on Traprain Law had a much more complicated history than had hitherto been assumed, and that without a detailed survey of the entire hill and extensive excavation little further information could be obtained about this key site for pre- and early history. Another prerequisite that might have been added to these two is that all the relics from the hill, from whatever source they were obtained,² should be reviewed in the light of modern knowledge, as the critical examination of the metal-work published above (pp. 118-226) amply demonstrates. Although no opportunity has yet occurred for large-scale excavations of the calibre required, it has been possible for the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments (Scotland) to make a plane-table survey of the entire hill. In April 1955 two teams, working from a total of 120 stations, produced a plan at a scale of 2½ ins. to 100 ft. a reduced version of which is published here by permission of the Commissioners (fig. 2).

At a place such as Traprain Law, where the ruins of successive solid structures such as walls and ramparts occasionally overlie one another, it is to a certain extent possible to establish the sequence in which at least some of them were constructed by surface observation alone. Here, however, there are also available the results of several small-scale excavations which have been carried out on the defences from time to time since the start of the Curle and Cree excavations in 1914.³ These have provided some information both on the order in which some of the defences were erected and on the dates when some of them were constructed. The task may, nevertheless, be said hardly to have been begun, while in addition some of the reports are not fully published. When the information that may be

¹ Scottish Regional Group, Council for British Archaeology, *Second Report* (1948), 5.

² Chance finds from the quarry and from casual visitors to the hill have added to the relics provided by Bersu's excavation referred to in footnote 1 and by the Curle-Cree and Cruden excavations reported in the following volumes of *P.S.A.S.*: XLIX (1914-15), 139 ff.; L (1915-16), 64 ff.; LIV (1919-20), 54 ff.; LV (1920-21), 153 ff.; LVI (1921-22), 189 ff.; LVII (1922-23), 180 ff.; LVIII (1923-24), 241 ff.; and LXXIV (1939-40), 48 ff.

³ *P.S.A.S.*, L (1915-16), 64-71; *ibid.*, LVII (1922-23), 222-26; *ibid.*, LXXIV (1939-40), 48-59.

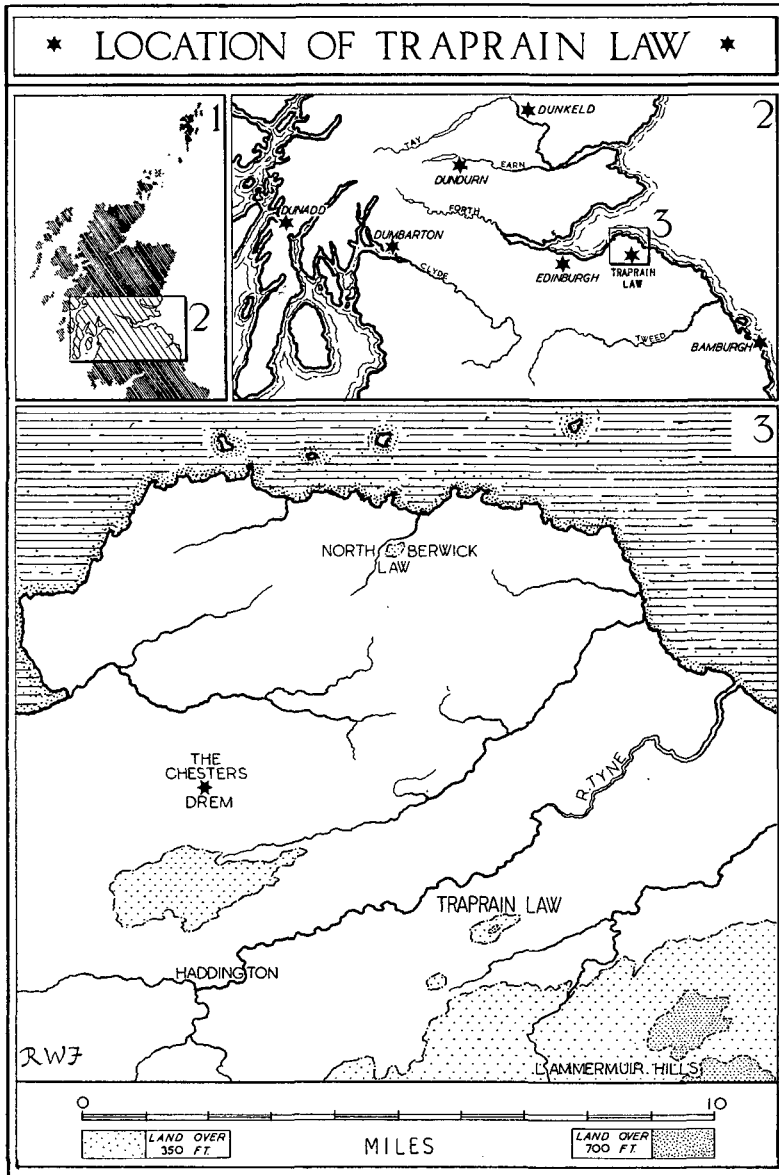


Fig. 1.

extracted from them is combined with the results of the survey, however, it is possible to produce a tentative scheme into which the major visible defences can be fitted but which must remain provisional and speculative until extensive excavations confirm, modify or extend it.

First, mention must be made of the tenuous remains which run for a distance of some 800 ft. along the main axis of the hill N. of the summit. Although this line is marked as a wall on the most recently published

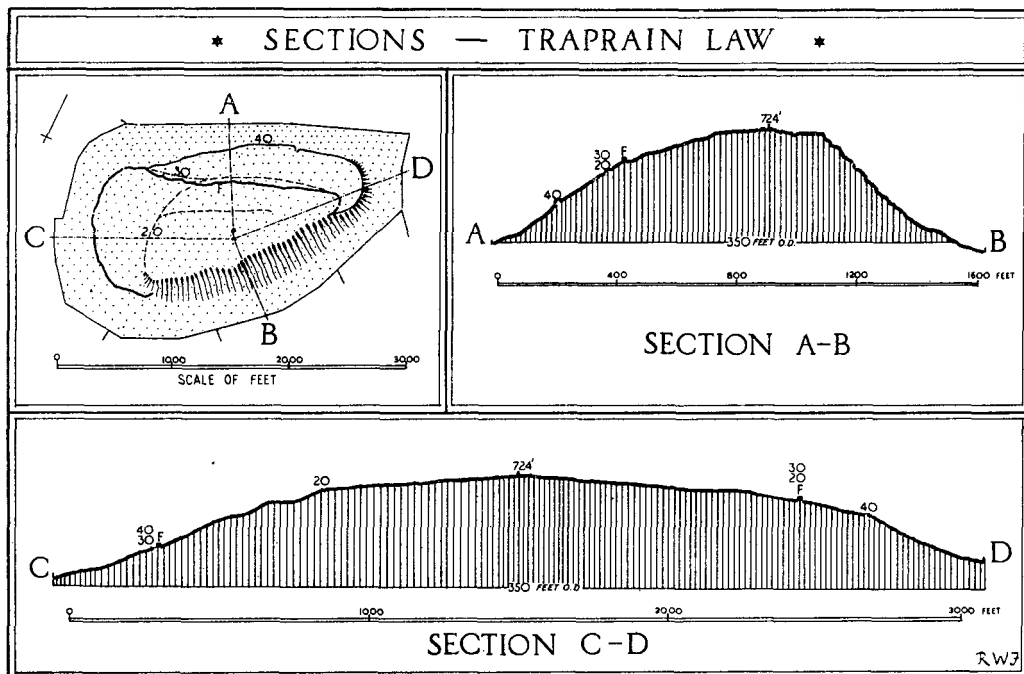


Fig. 3.

sketch-plan of the hill,¹ it is impossible to tell from surface observation whether the remains are in fact those of a wall, of a single-faced rampart or of a road. If it is supposed, however, that they originally formed part of a defensive structure, then it is probable that this was the earliest of the defences on the hill, a hill-fort of some 10 acres extent, the WSW. boundary of which ran on the course occupied by the W. arc of the rampart Cruden 2 (see below). The evidence for this phase is slight and entirely presumptive, for no excavations have taken place along the "summit rampart" or on the relevant sector of the Cruden 2 rampart, and no excavation is recorded within the area concerned except Cree's dredging in the water hole.²

¹ Hogg, A. H. A., *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and Beyond*, ed. W. F. Grimes (1951), 212.

² *P.S.A.S.*, LVII (1922-23), 221-22.

The first recognisable line of defence is therefore the rampart known as Cruden 2 after its excavator.¹ This consists of the intermittent remains of a ruinous terrace-rampart which runs N. from a point near the crest of the rocky SE. slope of the hill some 700 ft. SW. of the summit for a distance of about 700 ft. before turning NE. and E. along the N. face of the hill. If, as is probable, this rampart is as early as is suggested, it is not surprising that its remains are slight, as during successive occupations it was ignored

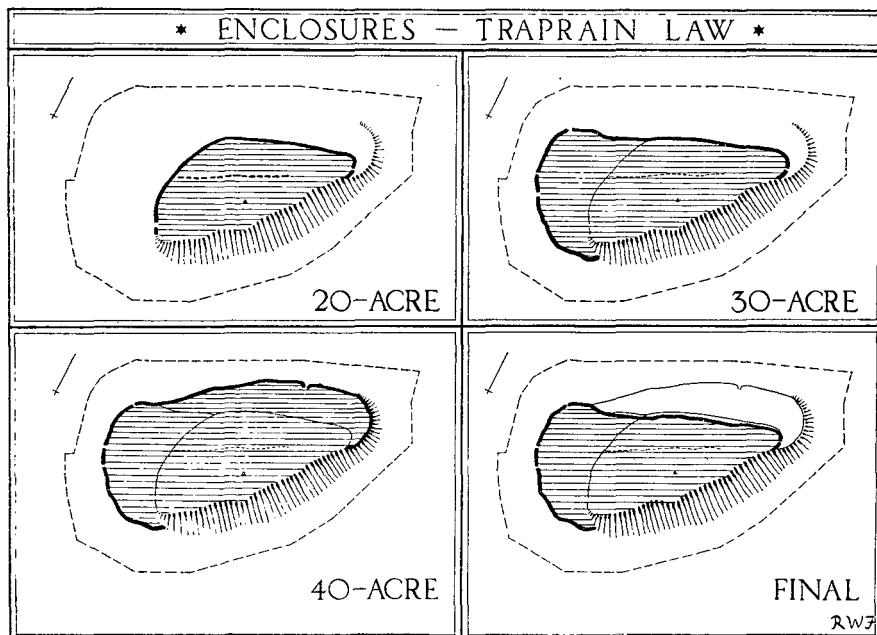


Fig. 4.

and doubtless robbed for building materials. When complete, it must have enclosed an area of about 20 acres (fig. 4).

Equally ruinous and spasmodic are the remains of the next terrace-rampart, Cruden 2a. Where this runs along the E. part of the N. face of the hill it is difficult to disentangle it all the way from the ruin of Cruden 2, but where the latter begins to turn S. the former seems to run on W., and it may well have continued to follow a course similar to that taken by the later defences described below. If so, it would have enclosed an oppidum some 30 acres in extent (fig. 4). It may be that some fragments of facing which are visible a little lower down the slope than the S. and SW. arcs of the later defences are the remains of this rampart.

The next structural phase is marked by the construction of the first version of the great terrace-rampart which, by taking in the whole of the

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, LXXIV (1939-40), 48 ff.

N. flank of the hill, encloses some 40 acres and is the largest structure of its kind in North Britain (fig. 4). How often this rampart was rebuilt during the long course of its life can only be decided by further excavations, but that the earliest version was made in the 1st century A.D. was shown by the relics found near the N. entrance in 1915.¹

The final phase of the defences is without doubt represented by the stone-faced, turf-cored rampart which overlies all the others at one place or another except the questionable "summit rampart." The area enclosed by the final rampart was abated to some 30 acres (fig. 4).

The evidence is at present too slight to allow of any degree of certainty about the periods during which the various phases of the oppida on Traprain Law were built and occupied. When reference is made to Miss Burley's analysis, however, it becomes evident that the admittedly few relics to which an early date can be assigned have been found on the upper W. slope of the hill outside the 20-acre enclosure. Their presence there might be due to their having been thrown out of the 20-acre enclosure in midden material; but it might also be due to the W. slope—and therefore the 30-acre enclosure—having been occupied from an early time. In this case, the enclosing of the W. slope to enlarge the 20-acre enclosure to 30 acres might have come about in consequence of a need for more room at some time quite early on in the life of the 20-acre enclosure. Such annexations are not uncommon. If so, then although the rampart Cruden 2 would predate Cruden 2a by some years, the two would be virtually contemporary. No excavation has been carried out within the 20-acre enclosure which might have shed further light on its earliest occupation; but whatever may be the exact truth about these early and now obscured phases, they must surely include the earliest Iron Age occupation, the existence of which is revealed by the study of the relics and which may have lasted from some time in the 1st century B.C. to a period quite early in the 1st century A.D.

As mentioned above, relics found near the N. entrance of the great terrace-rampart show that the 40-acre oppidum was first occupied in the second half of the 1st century A.D. It can therefore be tentatively equated with Miss Burley's second Iron Age phase starting perhaps about the year 40 A.D. and running through to the last quarter of the 2nd century. The gap, perhaps a generation in length, which then ensues in the metal-work record, suggests the general abandonment of the oppidum for a considerable number of years. When full occupation of the oppidum was resumed early in the 3rd century, perhaps about the year 220, during the Caracallan reforms,² the great terrace-rampart must have had its first major reconstruction. Thereafter occupation of the hill continued into the early years of the fifth century with but one break. Bersu's examination of that part of the great terrace-rampart which immediately underlies a point on the

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, I (1915-16), 64-71.

² Richmond, I. A., *Roman Britain* (1955), 59.

SW. arc of the final rampart provided evidence that the last reconstruction of the former took place about the year 300. This work can probably be explained as having followed a destruction of the defences at or about that time, when Britain was enduring a spasm of barbarian raids during which the northern frontier had temporarily been lost to Rome.¹ It is probable that this occasion, unlike its predecessor a century earlier, was not of the order of a major disaster, that the great terrace-rampart was soon repaired and that there was no true break in the occupation of the hill of such a length as would show in the analysis of the metal-work. Thus, the 40-acre oppidum may have been in use during at least three recognisable successive phases or periods of occupation.

The final structural phase is marked by the stone-faced, turf-cored final rampart, 3,500 ft. in length and 12 ft. in thickness, which relinquishes the N. flank of the hill to enclose only 30 acres. Bersu established that the latest version of the great terrace-rampart which immediately underlies the final rampart was built in about 300 A.D., and on this evidence alone proceeded to state that therefore the final rampart "is most probably of Dark Age date."² It is possible, however, to suggest that this deduction need not follow, and that the final rampart might as well have been built in about the year 370 when Theodosius converted the Votadini into a *foederatus* or treaty state.³ The suggestion that the final rampart is of sub-Roman origin may be supported by the fact that the relics so far acquired from the hill do not include any considerable body of Dark Ages material. The successive Iron Age occupations of this semi-urban oppidum of the Votadini, which lasted for more than half a millennium and which ceased about 1,500 years ago, have left not only the tangled ruins of tremendous defensive works but also a great many traces of occupation-floors or houses. Several of these were excavated by Curle and Cree, not only on the main upper part of the W. slope of the hill but also lower down towards the SW.⁴, and none of those examined showed signs of having been in use in the Dark Ages or Early Christian times. There were certainly some dwellers on the hill in post-Roman times,⁵ but at present the notion of a major Dark Ages or Early Christian occupation, with a rebuilding of the defences, is not proven.

Nevertheless, the remains on Traprain Law form a substantial and unique memorial to one of the major elements among the early British peoples. The information which full-scale excavations, lasting over many years, will surely be able to provide to illuminate a considerable period of Celtic history can only be conjectured, and it is of the first importance that the remains should escape ignoble destruction.

¹ Richmond, I. A., *op. cit.*, 61.

² Bersu, G., *loc. cit.*

³ Richmond, I. A., *op. cit.*, 63.

⁴ E.g. *P.S.A.S.*, XLIX (1914-15), 152-55, Area C; *ibid.*, LV (1920-21), 202-6, Area X.

⁵ *P.S.A.S.*, XLIX (1914-15), 139-40.