

V.

NOTES ON A SUPPOSED MITHRAIC CAVERN AT WOULDHAM, IN
KENT. BY JAMES LANG, F.S.A. Scbr.

Of the worship of Mithras, once so general throughout the Roman world, scarcely any traces have been left in Britain. With the exception of the well-known discovery on the line of Hadrian's Wall in 1822, no authenticated remains of any temple dedicated to the Sun-god (so far as I know) are on record. And it will be borne in mind that at Borcovicus the find consisted only of altars, every trace of the building in which those altars had had a place having entirely disappeared. A discovery, therefore, of any Mithraic place of worship in these islands cannot but be hailed as one of great importance in the history of Archæology; and it is in view of this that I have ventured to present these few notes on a recently exposed cavern for your consideration. And here I may say that it was our hope and prayer that something should be done towards preserving for all time this most interesting, and I believe unique, specimen of ancient religious architecture. That the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the sister Society in London should combine to bring about this end was my fervent hope; or, if not to preserve the building *in situ*, that (as the discoverer of it suggested) means might be taken to transport it bodily to some safe asylum. Urgent indeed is the case if anything at all is to be done, for the severity of the weather and the friable nature of the soil of Kent will soon cause to disappear every trace of this last monument of a forgotten age.

Early in the spring of last year (1894) the labourers employed in clearing away a portion of the ground required for the extension of the cement works of Mr Peters at Wouldham came upon traces of masonry; but little notice was taken of the occurrence at the time, as the district is one in which Roman remains, as well as Saxon and Danish, are by no means uncommon. Beyond a short paragraph in a local newspaper, no publicity seems to have been given to the occurrence.

It was through my connection with the "Leland Club," a wandering

body of Antiquarians and Archæologists, that I first heard of the find towards the end of August; and I was then asked by Mr George R. Wright, F.S.A., the founder of the club in question (and a distant kinsman of the late Mr Thos. Wright, M.A., the well-known historian and antiquary), to accompany him on an excursion to Wouldham, in Kent, to visit the relic. Unfortunately I was unable to join him at the time, but since then I have visited the spot on my own account, and I here give the result of my observations.

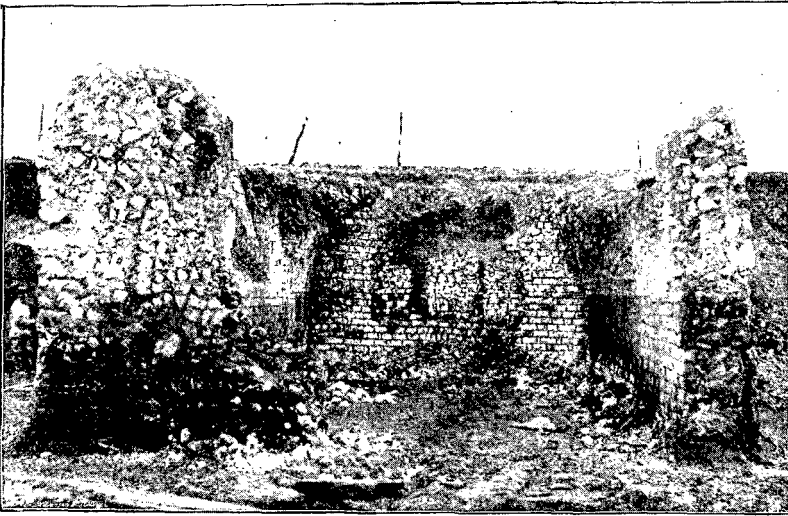


Fig. 1. View of remains of supposed Mithraic Cavern at Wouldham, Kent.

The remains (fig. 1), as I saw them early in December last, consist only of three walls and a portion of the fourth, the whole originally forming a cavern excavated in the face of the bank, or small sand-cliff, overhanging the river Medway, a short distance beyond the village of Wouldham.¹ Being a cavern, the walls have, of course, only one face

¹ The spot is on the right bank of the Medway, where the river takes a sharp bend, two or three miles above the city of Rochester, and is actually in the parish of Burham.

—the inner one—and these walls are of chalk, hewn in blocks of fairly uniform size, and backed with rubble. The surrounding sand has by this time been entirely cleared away except at the inner end of the building; and thus exposed to the action of the weather, the total disappearance of the whole structure cannot but be a question of a very few weeks—if, indeed, it be not already gone.

The length of the building is, inside, 40 feet 9 inches, and the width 19 feet. The height to the spring of the arch is about 3 feet 6 inches; and apparently the total height of the arch when complete was 12 feet. The southern wall (to the right on entering) is almost plain, but at the centre of the northern wall there is a very distinct shaft upwards, probably to admit light, and traces of what may have been a groined arch. This apparent arch is exactly central to the length of the building and measures 19 feet across—the same as the total width of the cavern. The shaft is beautifully executed, and is one of the best preserved parts of the building. It measures 10 feet 2 inches wide at base, and slants upwards at a slope of about $\frac{3}{4}$. Whether there was a corresponding shaft and arch starting from the opposite wall is matter of conjecture. Certainly the traces of such are scant. At the inner end of the cavern are three niches, of equal dimensions,—each about 4 feet high, having a depth of 2 feet and a width of 2 feet 9 inches,—the total space occupied by the three being 10 feet 10 inches. These, it is conjectured, were for the statues of the god and his two assessors; but no traces of altars have come to light.

In the outer wall, when first discovered, there was a doorway, somewhat to the right (*i.e.*, to the south) of the central line; and, so far as I could learn from an old man present (who has been employed there continuously, and who saw the cavern opened up), this doorway must have been of such a height as to necessitate one stooping slightly when entering. There is but one course of masonry, about 8 inches thick, and it is built with great care and no little skill.

A notable feature is the interior decoration of the cavern. On each stone throughout the building are grooves or flutings distinctly and artistically cut, the whole forming a rude ornamentation, very striking in its effect. The lines vary their direction on different stones, being

perpendicular, diagonal, or horizontal according to the fancy of the artist. The most frequent is undoubtedly the "herring-bone" pattern so well known to the Romans, formed by the meeting horizontally of diagonal lines drawn in opposite directions from the top and bottom edges of the stone. Another form is that of the "chevron," where parallel lines, being drawn from the right and left edges, meet vertically; and this occurs most frequently where the stone is built into the wall end-ways (technically called a "header"). In other places the lines are vertical or horizontal, by way of variety, or diagonal in one direction only.¹ Unfortunately these markings are rapidly disappearing, owing to the weathering of the chalk, which cannot long withstand the rains and frosts of our climate, and already they have disappeared over the greater part of the structure.

I am indebted for my measurements and photographs to the kindness of Major G. K. Scott-Moncrieff, of the Royal Engineers, who very kindly assented to my appeal, and, at considerable personal inconvenience, himself visited the structure and took them with his own hand. My own measurements had been done very hurriedly, and I did not deem them accurate enough to present to the Society without verification.

When the cavern was first seen by Mr Wright there was still an arched roof upon it, but this fell in during the excavation, on removing the debris which filled it up. It is now, therefore, open to the heavens, and presents the appearance shown in the photographs which I exhibit. The bank and surrounding soil is all of sand.

Orientation.—The cavern is, as I have said, situated on the left bank of the Medway, some sixty paces or so from the water's edge, and facing about 5° S. of W.—in direct prolongation of a stretch of the Medway. This stretch would be illumined by the reflection of the sun's rays at sunset for a great part of the year, and certainly at the winter solstice; and the reflection would shine straight into the cavern.

One coin only has as yet been found in this cavern,—a small brass, beautifully preserved, of the time of Constantine or soon after. It bears the legend "CONSTANTINOPOLIS" very freshly impressed on it,

¹ The photographs will show this better than any description I can give.

with a female head in a helmet, laureated, and carrying a sceptre. On the *reverse* is the figure of Victory standing on the prow of a ship, a sceptre in her right hand, and her left resting on a shield. In the *exergue* is the contraction "CCONST." How far this coin can be taken as establishing the date of the cavern I leave others to judge. It seems to belong to a series of whose exact dates there is some uncertainty, but evidently struck in honour of Constantinople, the then newly adopted capital of the empire. See *Eckhel*, vol. viii. p. 96 (*Vindobone*, 1798).
