CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

I. BRITAIN AND ROME

When the Emperor Claudius landed a Roman army on the south coast in A.D. 43 a process was begun which was to transform the face of Britain and give a new direction to its history. For four hundred years Britain was to be a significant part of an empire that embraced most of the known world, transformed from a land of warring, primitive and almost entirely illiterate tribes into a united realm under an administration based on the rule of law, sharing however partially in the universal Greco-Roman culture. I do not wish to derogate the magnificent achievements of the pre-Roman kingdoms of south and east England in the field of art, nor to deny that they achieved a measure of political stability (which the Roman government found useful in the early stages of the conquest), but the difference is fundamental. However chaotic the state of Britain in the post-Roman Dark Ages these facts were never forgotten.

By the seventies of the first century the Roman army had broken the power of the last great tribe in England and was tentatively probing into Scotland. The early policy of employing friendly chieftains as client kings had failed—indeed it had probably never been intended to be more than a temporary expedient—and the process of absorbing the British tribes into the normal framework of Roman provincial administration was well advanced. In the next decade the energetic Governor Gnaeus Julius Agricola not only greatly encouraged the adoption of Roman ways by the Britons but also defeated the Caledonians in battle and made an ambitious attempt to complete the subjection of these islands. The Emperor Domitian, however, decreed otherwise. Probably on considerations of manpower and expense, he decided to hold that part of Britain which was reasonably easy to control and profitable,

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and to watch but not occupy the Highlands of Scotland. Ireland was left outside the empire. With a few exceptions and some changes in detail future Roman governments endorsed this decision throughout the period of their sway over Britain.

This policy created the frontier region in north Britain which is the scene for this book. The first system of control was based on the two great roads from the south, one through Carlisle, the other through Corbridge, linked by the Stanegate through the Tyne–Solway gap, and on legionary fortresses at York and Inchtuthil. Trajan, in need of troops for his campaigns in other parts of the empire, withdrew the Scottish garrisons and strengthened the Tyne–Solway line. Variations on these two themes form the basis for future policy in the region.

Hadrian and his governor in Britain, Aulus Platorius Nepos, re-planned the Tyne–Solway system. Their first scheme envisaged a continuous barrier as a screen to the Stanegate and its forts, the second transferred the whole weight of defence to the Wall itself. Twenty years later the Antonine government, pursuing a general policy of shortening and simplifying frontier lines, re-occupied the Forth–Clyde isthmus and garrisoned southern Scotland. Mounting external and internal trouble in the late second century forced the abandonment of this scheme and a return was made to the Hadrianic line. Then came the first of a number of disasters caused by over-ambitious governors and the pride of the army in Britain. In A.D. 197 Clodius Albinus, pretender to the imperial throne, drew off the frontier garrisons to fight on his behalf in Gaul. The barbarians swept through the deserted frontier posts and destroyed every Roman installation in their way.[1] The victorious claimant for the throne, Septimius Severus, was obliged to buy them off to gain time to prepare a crushing retaliation. The frontier was restored with the addition of a deep protective zone ahead of the old line. This comprised new forts constructed for the employ-ment of the spring-driven artillery coming more and more into use and a new system of patrols. A series of successful campaigns

[1] [Some doubts about the date of the late second-century destruction layers have been recently expressed.]

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launched by the emperor himself brought the northern tribes to their knees and only his death at York in A.D. 211 saved them from annexation. Peace was established for nearly a hundred years in an age notable elsewhere in the empire for invasion and internal strife.

The difference between the predominantly military north and the largely civil south in the Roman period was emphasized by the Severan division of the country into Upper and Lower Britain—London, Chester and Caerleon falling into the Upper Province, Lincoln, York and all the frontier region into the Lower. The motive was largely political—to secure the loyalty of provincial governors to the central power by making their commands too small to encourage rebellion. Nevertheless, Britain continued to play her part in the cycle of military usurpations. In the second half of the third century the country fell successively into the hands of the separatist 'Gallic Empire' and the independent realm of the renegade admiral Carausius and his lieutenant, murderer and successor Allectus. The latter repeated the action of Albinus in withdrawing the frontier garrisons with the same result, and Constantius Chlorus had both to restore the links with the central administration and to repair the frontier once more. At this period raiding by Saxon and Irish pirates became serious for the first time and a new system of coastal defence had to be evolved to deal with the threat. Yet neither this nor the basic re-organization of the Roman army under the Tetrarchy and its immediate successors greatly altered the character of the northern frontier, for the chief enemy and his tactics remained the same.

Considerable trouble occurred in the region before the middle of the fourth century but it pales into insignificance before the tremendous destruction wrought by the *barbarica conspiratio* of 367 when in unnatural alliance the Picts, Scots and Saxons attacked simultaneously. For the first time the Wall fell when fully garrisoned but it was not in fair fight. The sinister feature of the affair was the treachery of the auxiliary scouts, a symptom of that fatal disaffection in the Roman imperial system which, unlike the internal dynastic struggles, struck at the heart of the empire by destroying the essential cohesive force of loyalty to the imperial idea. Never-

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theless, the Roman military machine, still surprisingly resilient, once more drove out the enemy and restored the frontier under Count Theodosius. He seems to have done his work well, for in A.D. 383 Magnus Maximus, plotting an attempt on the throne, was able to make an arrangement with the tribes beyond the frontier to ensure the peace of Britain when for the last time the frontier garrisons were withdrawn. Stripped of its regular troops the life of the region was drastically impoverished, but even so civilized life survived in some places. Further troubles in the north were checked by Stilicho and it is probable that in an attenuated form Roman civilization remained alive in the region until the final withdrawal of imperial authority from Britain at the end of the first decade of the fifth century. This closed the career of Britain as part of the Roman empire and at this point the history of the region, which was now *ipso facto* no longer an imperial frontier, passes out of the sphere of this book and into the province of the Dark-Age historian.

2. THE FRONTIER REGION

The districts with which this study is concerned are those which comprise the area of permanent frontier defence to the provinces of Britain. This is the northern area of Roman Britain (to call it the 'military zone' begs too many questions) which formed a block of territory broadly homogeneous both in the nature of its terrain and in the character of its occupation. Its limits may be defined in Roman terms by the Antonine Wall and its outliers in the north, and by the southern points in the system of communications marked by Scotch Corner, the Stainmore Pass and Overborough (Burrow-in-Lonsdale). This includes southern and central Scotland, Northumberland, County Durham, Cumberland, Westmorland and adjacent parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire. The whole area may conveniently be termed the frontier region.

This definition requires some explanation. The Roman frontier in north Britain had more than one purpose; and its purposes changed in the course of its history; but though the line and form of
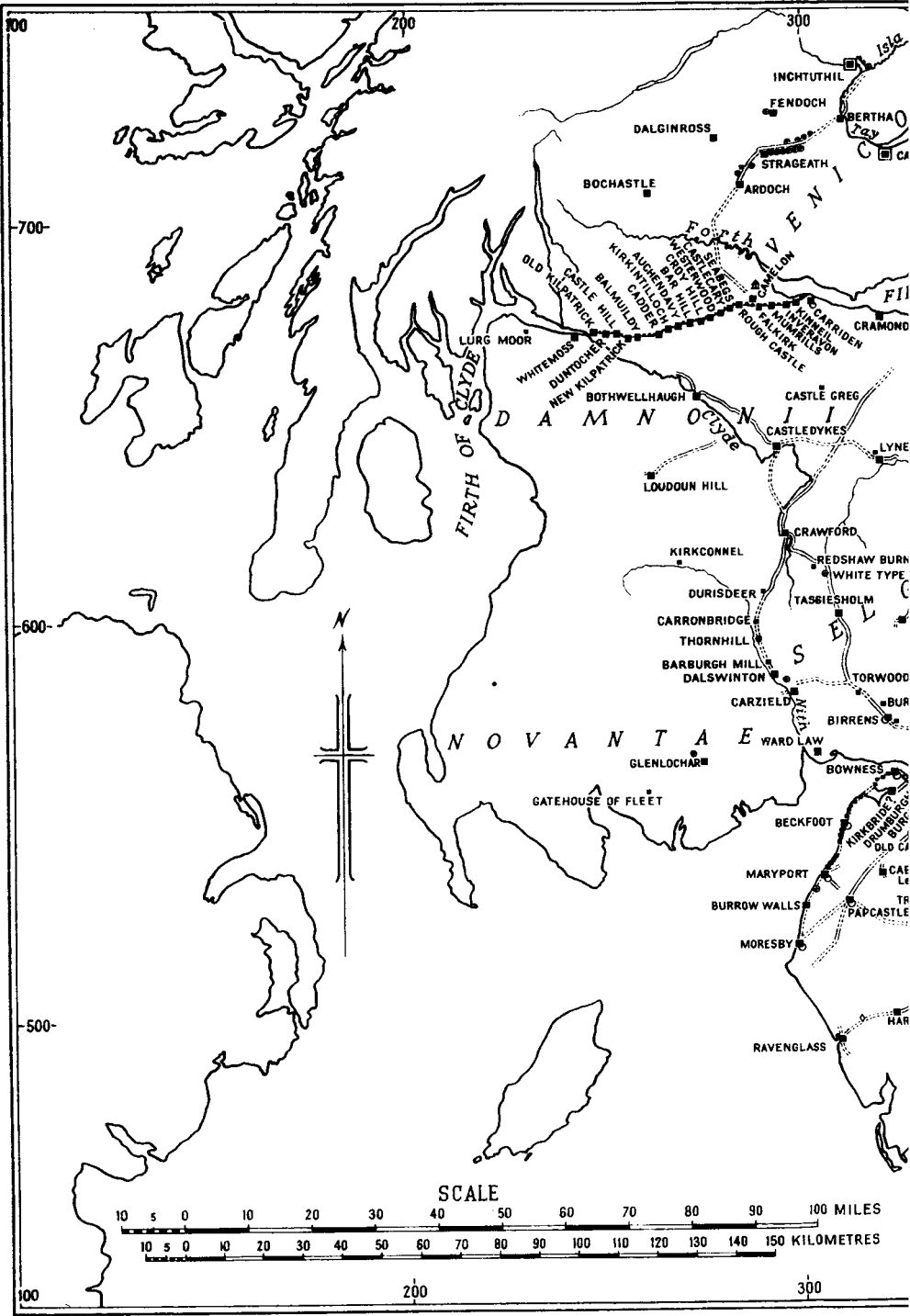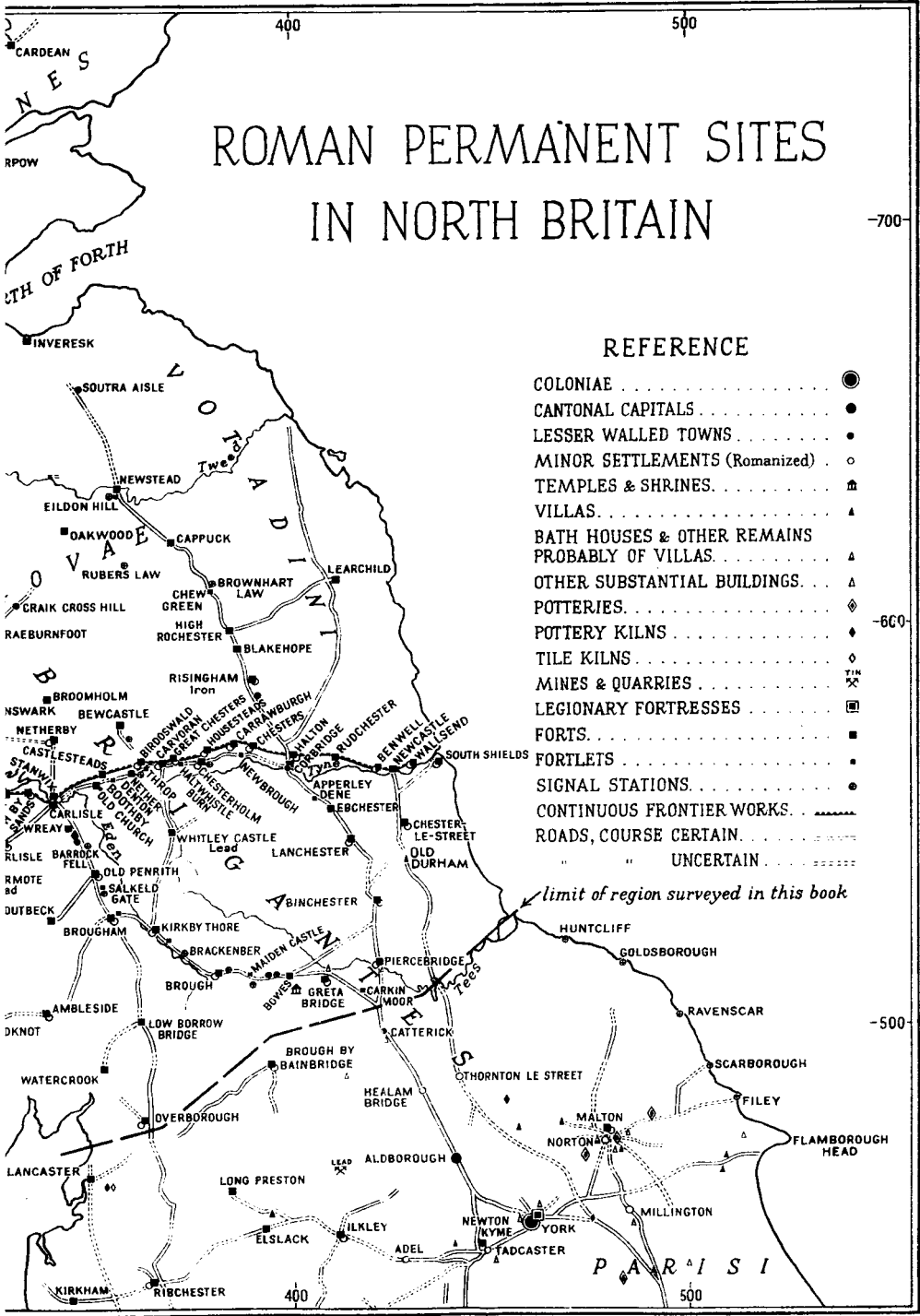
Fig 1 *(after the Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain (Third Edition), with modifications)*

the defence altered, the essential object at all times was the protection of the lowland zone of Britain and its outliers from incursions from the north. It was considered impracticable to conquer and hold the whole of Scotland, though it is indeed a question whether an all-out attempt to defeat and absorb the Highland tribes might not in the long run have proved cheaper and more efficient—a thought which probably occurred to the perspicacious Emperor Septimius Severus. Domitian represented the regular attitude of Roman governments when he recalled Agricola from his ambitious attempt to complete the total conquest of the British Isles.

Until the late third century the main threat to Roman Britain was always from the north, and at least till the end of the fourth it remained substantial. We are therefore justified in seeing the military organization of the North as the main frontier defence of the country. The northern part of Roman Britain, which became in the third century the separate province of Britannia Inferior, falls into two regions, militarily, topographically and, as will later appear, politically. The headquarters of the army in the area and the capital of the Lower Province lay at Eburacum, at the heart of the peaceful Vale of York, a hundred miles south of the nearest point on the actual frontier line. At first sight this may seem odd, for it is unusual in Roman military practice, but the reasons are sound and in part historical. In the early days of the conquest the major problem was the control of the Brigantes who occupied most of northern England, but whose centre lay in the Vale of York. From York both the central Pennines and the hills of the East Riding could be controlled, while any large-scale movement southwards across the Humber or east into the territory of the civilized tribe of the Parisi could be checked. Moreover there were important reasons of supply. The 5,000–6,000 men of a Roman legion in themselves constituted a serious problem for the commissariat, while the auxiliaries in the outlying forts vastly complicated the problem. York was a particularly suitable centre for two reasons. In the early stages of the scheme it was possible to supply it by water via the Car Dyke canal system, the Trent and Ouse from the Fens, which were taken in hand in the second century as a vast new area

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of agricultural development. Later, the North itself became an important agricultural region, and by the third century the local surplus of produce was sufficient to support a city at York. This process went so far that eventually York itself lay at the centre of an essentially civil region, and the true frontier region lay well to the north.

A glance at the military map of Britain will immediately reveal the fact that for the Roman army Lower Britain fell into the regions I am postulating. This is clearest on the east. Here Catterick is the last town north in the predominantly civil region, and henceforth there are more important military sites than civil. South of Scotch Corner there is not a permanent fort for fifty miles; north of Scotch Corner a fort, fortlet or signal station appears every few miles. That so much military activity should occur so far from the actual line may seem strange, but is explained by the dual nature of the system. Though its primary purpose was the prevention of invasion from the north, it was also involved with a very serious problem of internal security. The Pennines and the Lake District held the defeated and discontented remnants of the Brigantes, as dangerous to the peace of Britain as the enemy outside. Nor was it even possible to hold a secure frontier against the northern barbarians without tackling the problem of these dangerous regions behind. The answer was the normal Roman method, a cordon of forts, signal stations and roads around the dangerous areas to control the inhabitants of each and prevent them combining in revolt. This system had the effects of securing the peace of the frontier region itself and of providing a defence in depth behind the forward line.

The dual nature of the system explains too the boundary chosen for this book in the centre and on the west. In the Stainmore area the forts both guard the trunk route and form part of the ring round the northern Pennines. This ring also protected the agricultural lowlands of the Eden valley on the west and County Durham on the east, essential to the support of the military and civilian population of the region. The functions of this ring were basic to the internal security of the frontier zone.

Further south is another set of forts—Brough-by-Bainbridge, Long Preston, Elslack, Ilkley, Ribchester and others—but their problem is the different one of control of a district difficult but not directly threatening the frontier of Britain as a whole. Their communications are with York and Chester and not with the frontier: even Brough-by-Bainbridge has not yet been proved to be linked by road with the Stainmore Pass. It seems reasonable to surmise that these forts formed a separate subdivision in the Northern Command, even as those of East Yorkshire must have done.

West of the Stainmore–Carlisle road the Lakes posed a problem similar to the northern Pennines and the answer was the same. There were complications in that the dangerous area threatened areas of lowland both in the north (the Cumberland Plain) and on the southern fringe of the region around the rim of Morecambe Bay and, in course of time, further difficulty occurred in the vulnerability of this bay to seaborne raiders from Ireland. This coast was from the first a source of worry to the Romans and, unlike the eastern seaboard, was protected by an extension of Hadrian's Wall. In the late-Roman period intensification of the threat from the sea led to strengthening of this soft underbelly of the frontier region by a new base at Lancaster. The defence of this district— Lancaster, Overborough, Low Borrow Bridge and Watercrook— hangs together as a southern outlier of the frontier system, but south of the Lune and into the Forest of Bowland we are in a region essentially concerned with the internal security of the province rather than the holding of its northern frontier.

3. THE PEOPLE AND THEIR SETTLEMENTS

This is intended to be a study of the processes and products of Romanization, of the impact of Rome on the British frontier region and the place of the civilian in the Roman system in that area. I shall therefore be chiefly concerned with those people who were recognizably Roman. The criterion must be of culture, not race, for there is neither cause to believe that the tribesmen consciously rejected Roman culture from nationalistic motives nor possibility

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of considering the civilian population in the Roman period as a
simple mass of subjected Britons. Indeed, it will appear later that
it was an amalgam of people drawn from all over the Roman
world. An awareness of the region as part of the empire must lie
behind all investigation of its problems if they are fully to be under-
stood. The local features of the region are particularly interesting,
but they are often unintelligible without reference to other pro-
vinces or the empire as a whole, or, if intelligible in their local con-
text, their full significance is nevertheless lost.

In most of the frontier provinces it is difficult or impossible to
draw clear distinctions between the various types of settlement,
for they show an infinite number of shades from the humblest
homestead or village to the *municipium* and the *colonia*. It is fortu-
nate for the present purposes that on the British frontier it is possible
to make a practical division on the basis of Romanization and pros-
perity between the native homesteads derived from pre-existing
patterns and the new and essentially urban (if sometimes miniature)
settlements which developed under Roman rule.

It is true that the influence of Roman culture is to be seen in a few
of the native settlements. In the one as yet unique instance of Old
Durham such a place acquired some of the luxuries common in the
countryside further south, and it is clear that the presence of the
army and a growing urban population stimulated the multiplica-
tion of the native settlements, permitted a very limited degree of
Romanization in the form of cheap goods and possibly stimulated
some improvements in building technique and design. The ex-
clusion of detailed examination of these sites in this study is due
partly to practical considerations. The urban settlements themselves
are a type which deserves comprehensive treatment, which can
only be given within the limits of this book by sacrificing some of
the other aspects of civil life.

The 'Roman' civil occupation of this region falls naturally
into three divisions—the official, semi-official and purely private.
Under the first heading come the non-military activities of the
imperial government and the operations of such local administra-
tions as had received a limited autonomy from Rome. The semi-