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Author(s): R. E. M. Wheeler

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THE VAULTS UNDER COLCHESTER CASTLE: A FURTHER NOTE.

By R. E. M. WHEELER, D.Lit., F.S.A.

In the course of a paper on 'Roman Colchester' in volume ix of this Journal, Mr. Philip Laver and the writer drew attention to the vaults which underlie Colchester castle, and claimed for them a Roman origin. The claim is based primarily upon constructional evidence which is readily appreciated in the presence of the actual remains, but the published summary perhaps requires some amplification for the reader who is unacquainted with these. Until its recent acquisition for the Colchester Corporation, the castle was in private possession, and was only partially known to the public; nor does the mass of literature which has gathered round the structure include any detailed study of its architectural problems. Hence the dark and comparatively barren vaults have hitherto escaped more than passing notice.

These vaults appear to have been discovered accidentally within the last few years of the seventeenth century. Dr. J. H. Round has published an agreement, dated 10th of March, 1683, by which one John Wheely, a speculative ironmonger, received authority to pull down as much of the castle as he could within a twelvemonth.¹ This license was subject to renewal, and Dr. Round shows reason to suppose that the work of spoliation was in progress within the last decade of the century. Morant, writing in 1748, describes these operations²:—'The tops of the towers and walls were forced down with screws, or blown up with gunpowder, and thrown upon the heads of the arched vaults below in such large weights, and with so great violence, as to break one of the finest of them.' Whether or no the vaults referred to are identical with the substructure now in question, Morant is doubtless correct in assigning the revelation of the latter to Wheely's gunpowder. 'These fine spacious vaults,' he adds, 'were full of sand, on which the arches were turned. The sand was taken out at considerable expense by John Wheely, who was endeavouring to pull the castle down; and to carry off the sand he cut a cartway through the foundation-wall near the north-east corner, where the wall is thirty feet thickness, but it did not answer expectation. The partition of these vaults supporting the arches is exactly in the form of a cross.' After 'great devastations' the project proved unprofitable, and was abandoned. Traces of the

¹ 'Some documents relating to Colchester Castle,'
Essex Arch. Soc. Trans. (n.s.), iii, p. 149.

² *History of Colchester*, i, p. 7.

original core of sand still remain, but the earth which now fills the main western vault was inserted in 1750 to strengthen the structure.¹

These facts are of considerable importance. It is clear that by the seventeenth century the structure had long been blocked with sand, and its existence forgotten. Morant was wrong, however, in supposing that the vaults were actually turned on the core of sand. The method of construction above the springing of the arch of the vault is readily apparent, and was described in the previous paper ; it is, indeed, self-evident in the photograph, volume ix, pl. ix, no. 3. Below the springing, the only constructional evidence is furnished by a series of socket-holes indicating the former existence of squared wooden posts at intervals of about five feet. They are not only sunk into the wall-face, but are enveloped in the material of the vault, so that they must have remained in position after the vault was constructed. The sand was unquestionably inserted at some period subsequent to the completion of the work.

The plan, volume ix, fig. 15, is slightly misleading in representing a gap between the north wall of the substructure and the main north wall of the castle. The plan shows the Norman castle correctly at ground-level, but below ground the north wall is considerably thicker, and is contiguous with the north wall of the vaults. Wheely's cartway through the two walls fortunately completes the structural evidence, and the whole problem may be summarised as follows :—

1. The vaulted substructure is independent of the castle plan because

(a) a straight-joint between the two structures is visible in Wheely's tunnel ;

(b) in this joint are traces of a cement facing, which indicates that the north wall of the substructure originally had a free face (compare the cemented exterior of the Caerwent basilica) ;

(c) the bricks visible in the tunnel and described in the previous paper are apparently those of a formerly external facing-course ;

(d) two enormous Norman walls (one now reduced to its foundations) were thrown across the shoulders of these vaults at ground-level (see plan) in a manner which shows complete indifference to all laws of building-construction, if we assume that, at the time, these vaults were standing free. It is not merely impossible that the two works were contemporary, but it is absurd to suppose that the Norman builders, generally over-cautious, built these upper walls without first securing the disused vaults beneath them. The sand filling must surely date from this period.

(e) The most cursory comparison of the building-construction of the vaults with that of the remainder of the castle makes it instantly clear that the two works are neither of the same date nor of the same

¹ *E.A.S.T.* (n.s.), iii, p. 152

epoch. The methods adopted are quite unlike those either of Norman or of Saxon builders, but Dr. T. Ashby writes that 'there are plenty of examples in the Palatine and aqueducts of such vaulting in the first and second centuries.'¹

2. The substructure is therefore an independent work, and earlier than the Norman castle. But the Norman castle, as Sir William Hope has shown,² was built before A.D. 1100, and for this reason, if for no other, can hardly have been preceded by any considerable Norman building on the same site. The vaults are therefore pre-Norman.

3. Both the plan and the scale of the work put the Saxon period out of court. Furthermore, all surviving work of the Saxon, Norman and early mediaeval periods in Colchester is built almost entirely of re-used Roman material. The absence of any trace of re-used material in the vaults therefore constitutes strong independent evidence for a Roman and even an *early* Roman date.

On these various grounds, the attribution of the vaults to the Roman period seems to be inevitable.

It is logical to suppose that the Norman builder found the site encumbered with these massive vaults, and that, faced with the alternatives, either of removing them and filling up the cavity, or of strengthening and building over them, he chose the cheaper, surer and more expeditious course. (It may be that, in so doing, he preserved for us the podium of the Temple of Claudius, to rise once more from the ashes of a dead controversy!)

In connexion with the street-plan of Roman Colchester, it may here be recorded that in July 1921 drainage trenches cut in the middle of the modern High street, at a point 400 feet west of the site of the East Gate, revealed a considerable stretch of a retaining-wall of the Roman *decumanus maximus* together with road-metal on the south side. The retaining-wall was of masonry, two feet wide, one foot six inches in height, and carefully levelled at the top. The road-metal was of gravel (including large stones) over successive layers of grouted stones and gray clay, to a total depth of about two feet. Mr. Laver is my informant.

¹In a letter kindly communicated by Mr. R. P. L. Booker.

²*Arch. Journal*, lxiv, p. 188.