

Letter to Dawson Turner, Esq. : with proofs that Norwich and not Caistor was the Venta Icenorum / [Anon].

Contributors

Gurney, Hudson, 1775-1864.

Turner, Dawson, 1775-1858.

Pettigrew, Thomas Joseph, 1791-1865

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Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
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LETTER

TO

DAWSON TURNER, ESQ.,

WITH THE PROOFS THAT

NORWICH

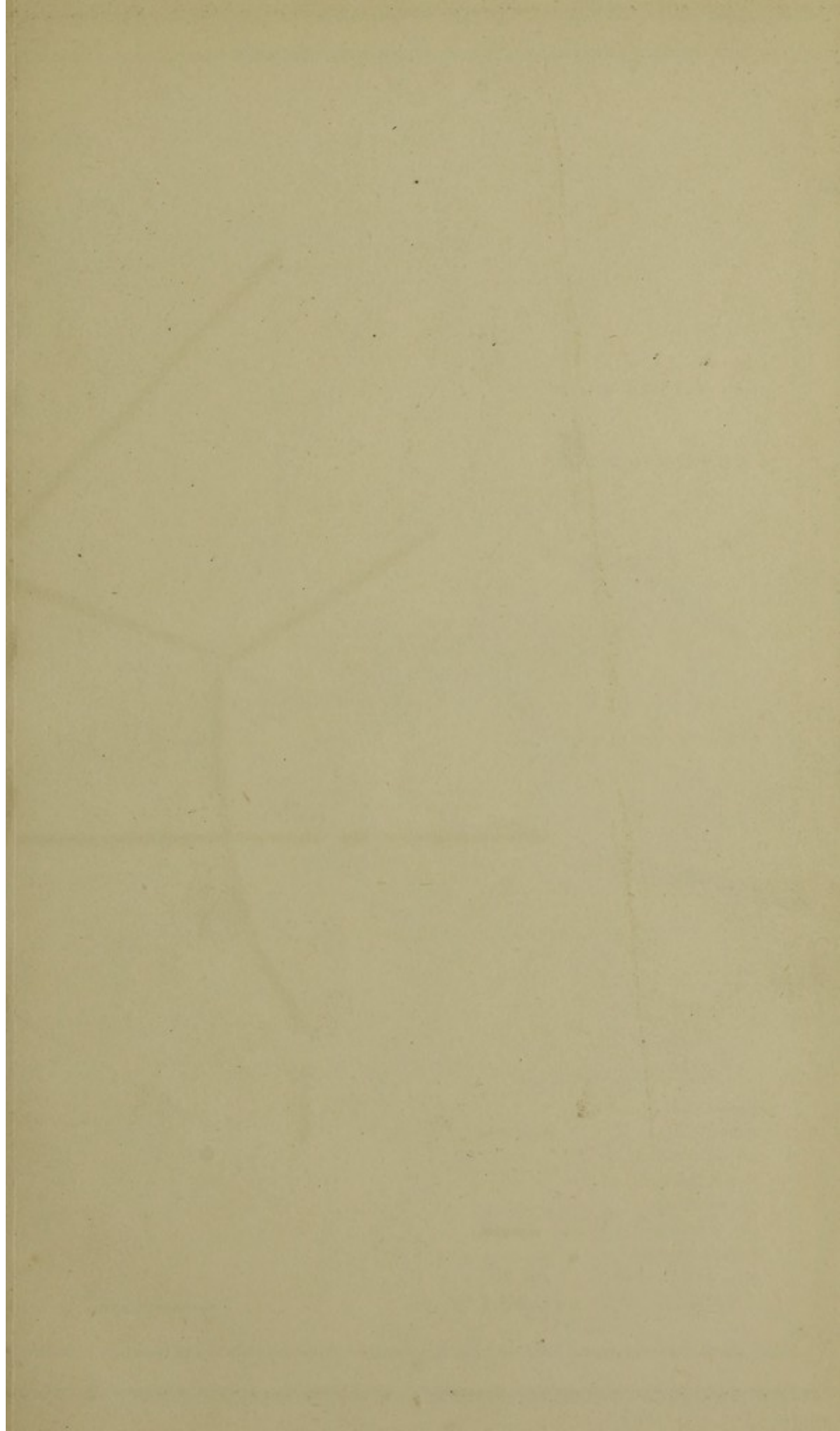
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WAS THE

VENTA ICENORUM.

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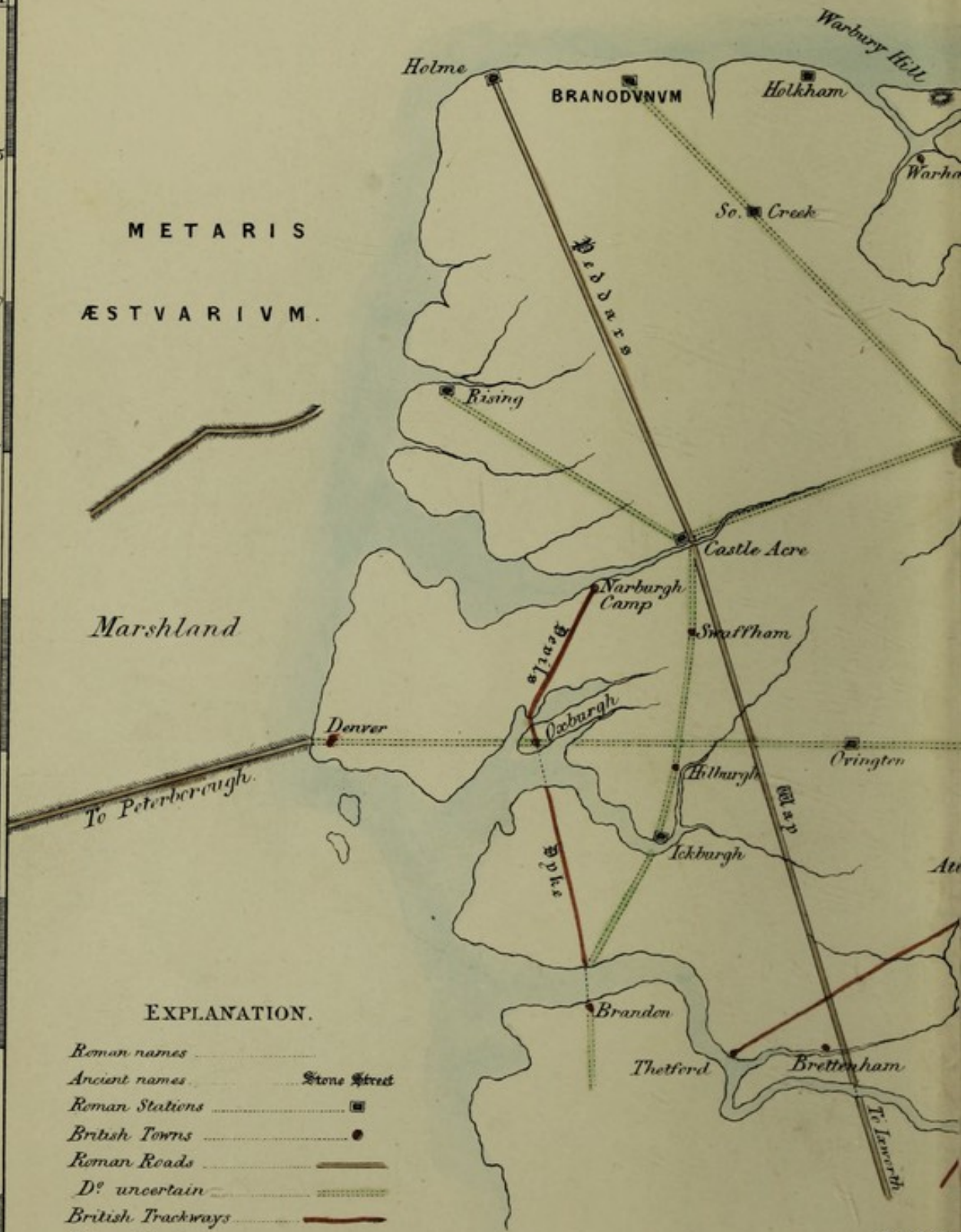
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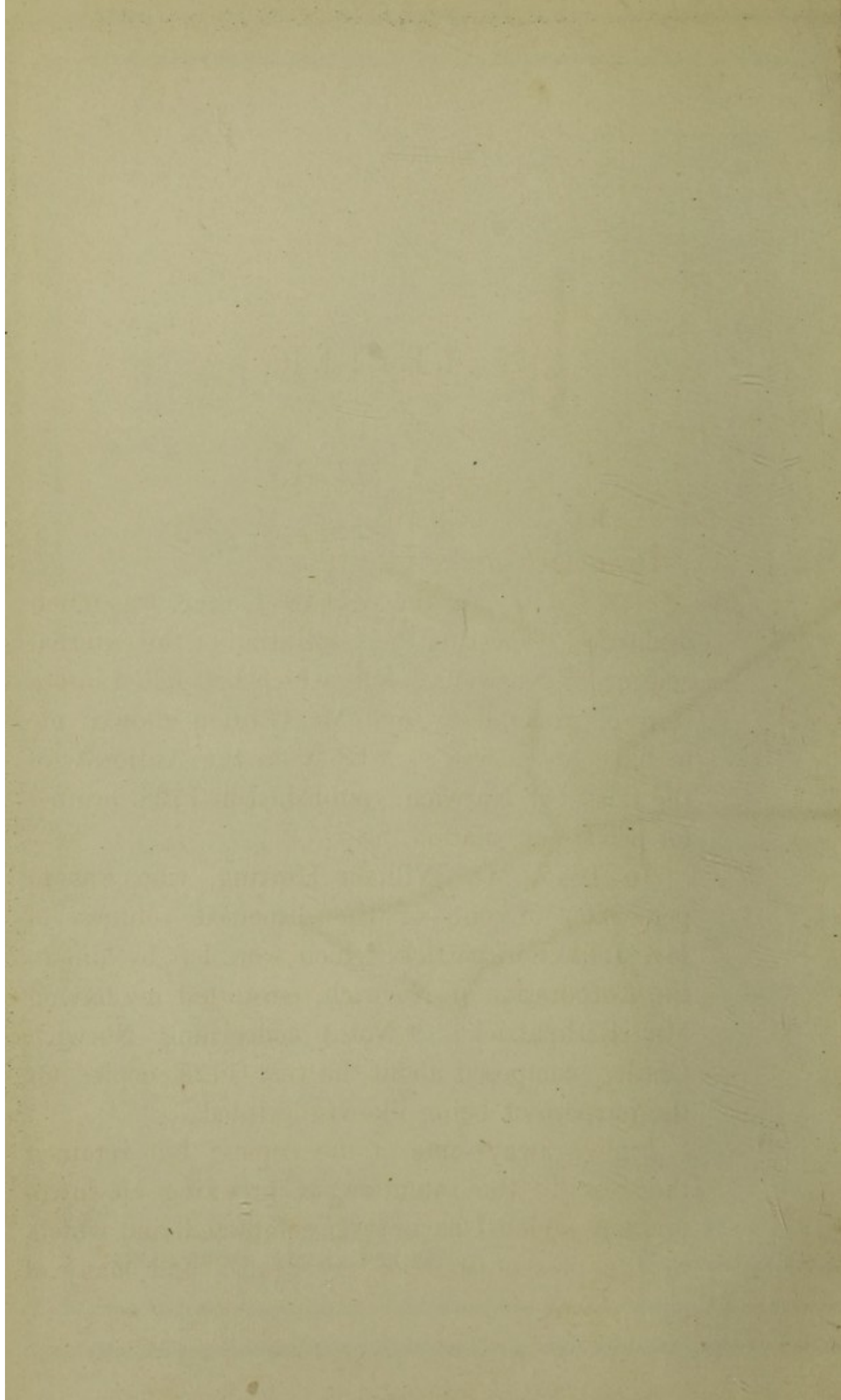
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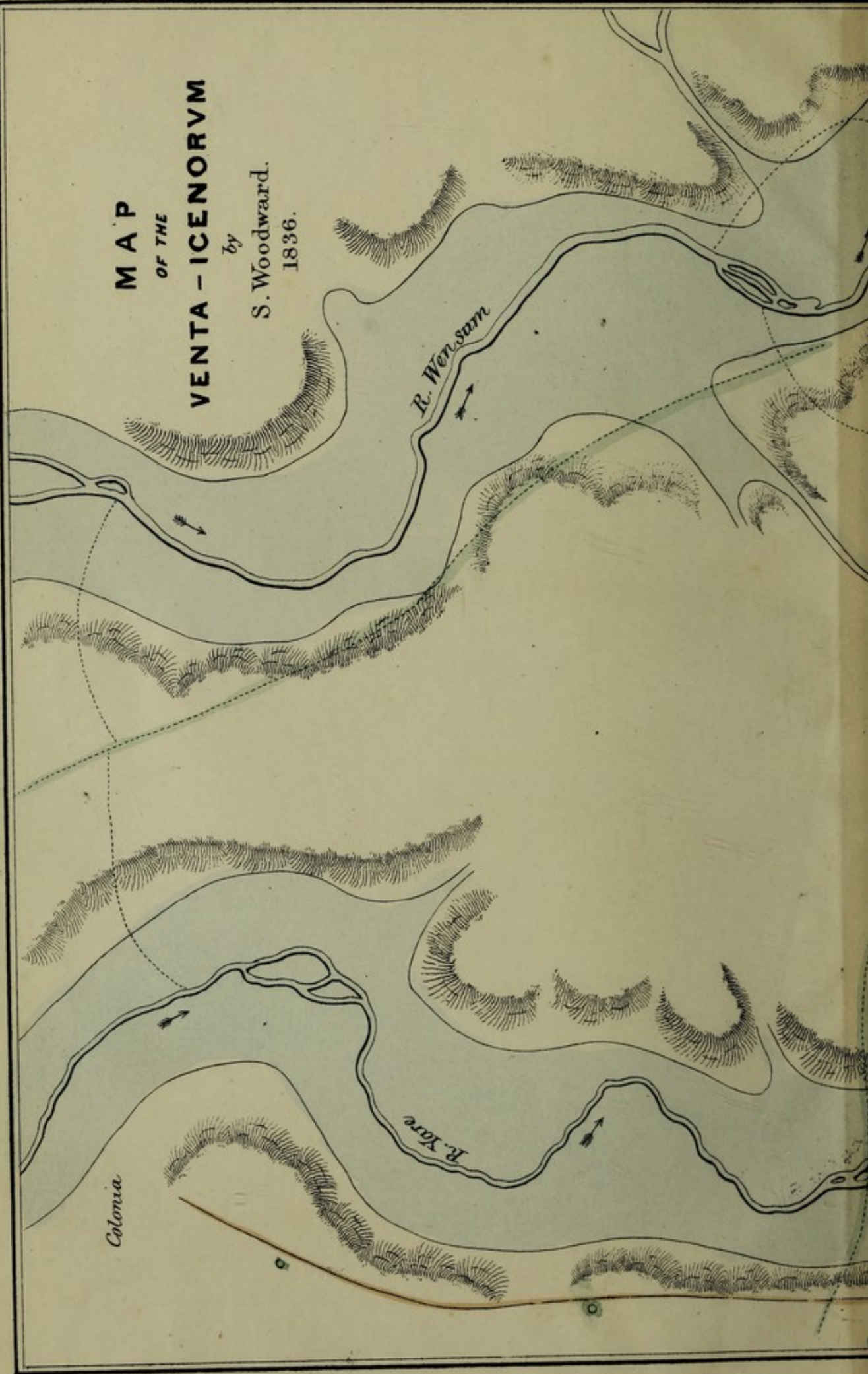
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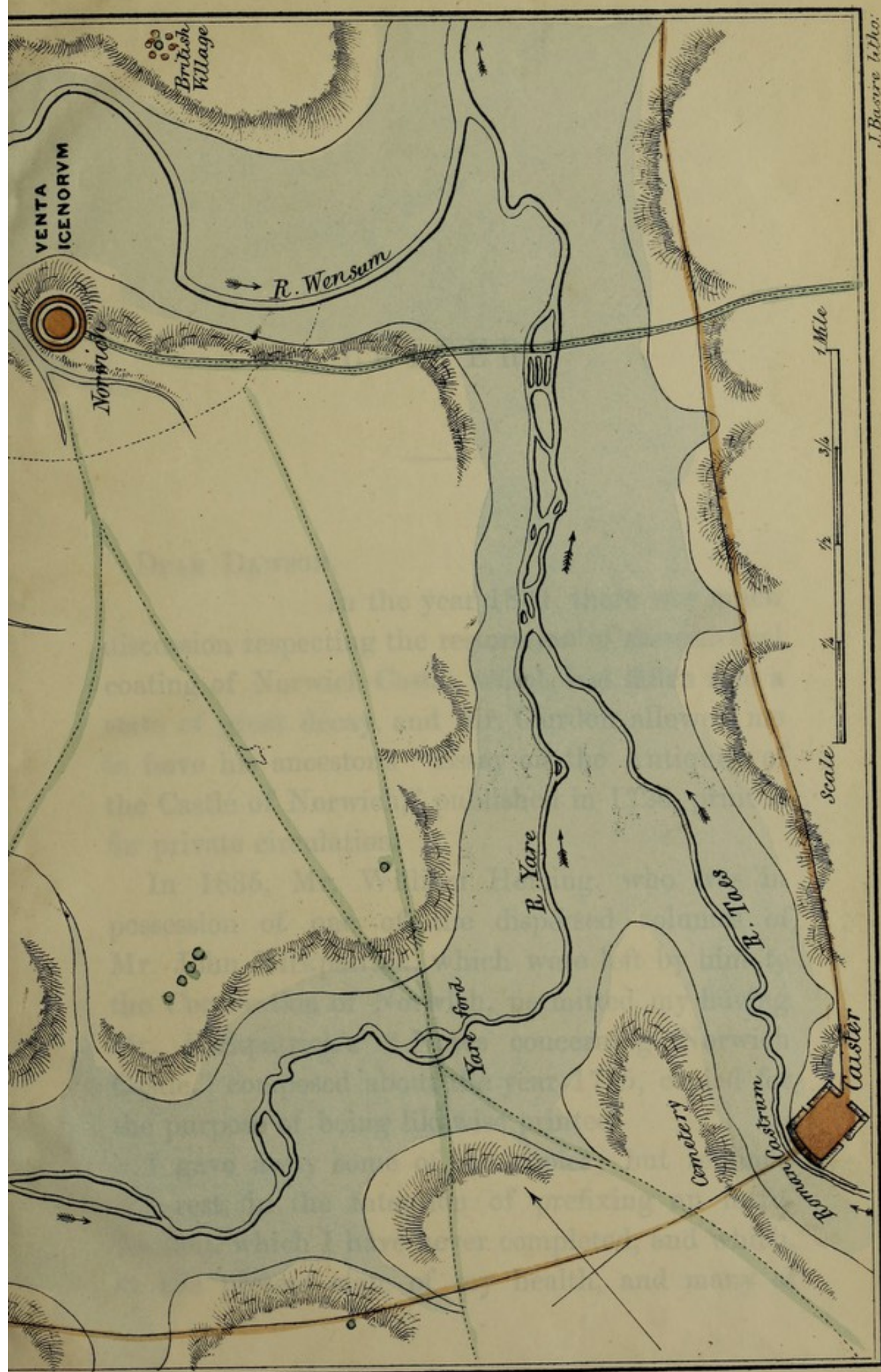
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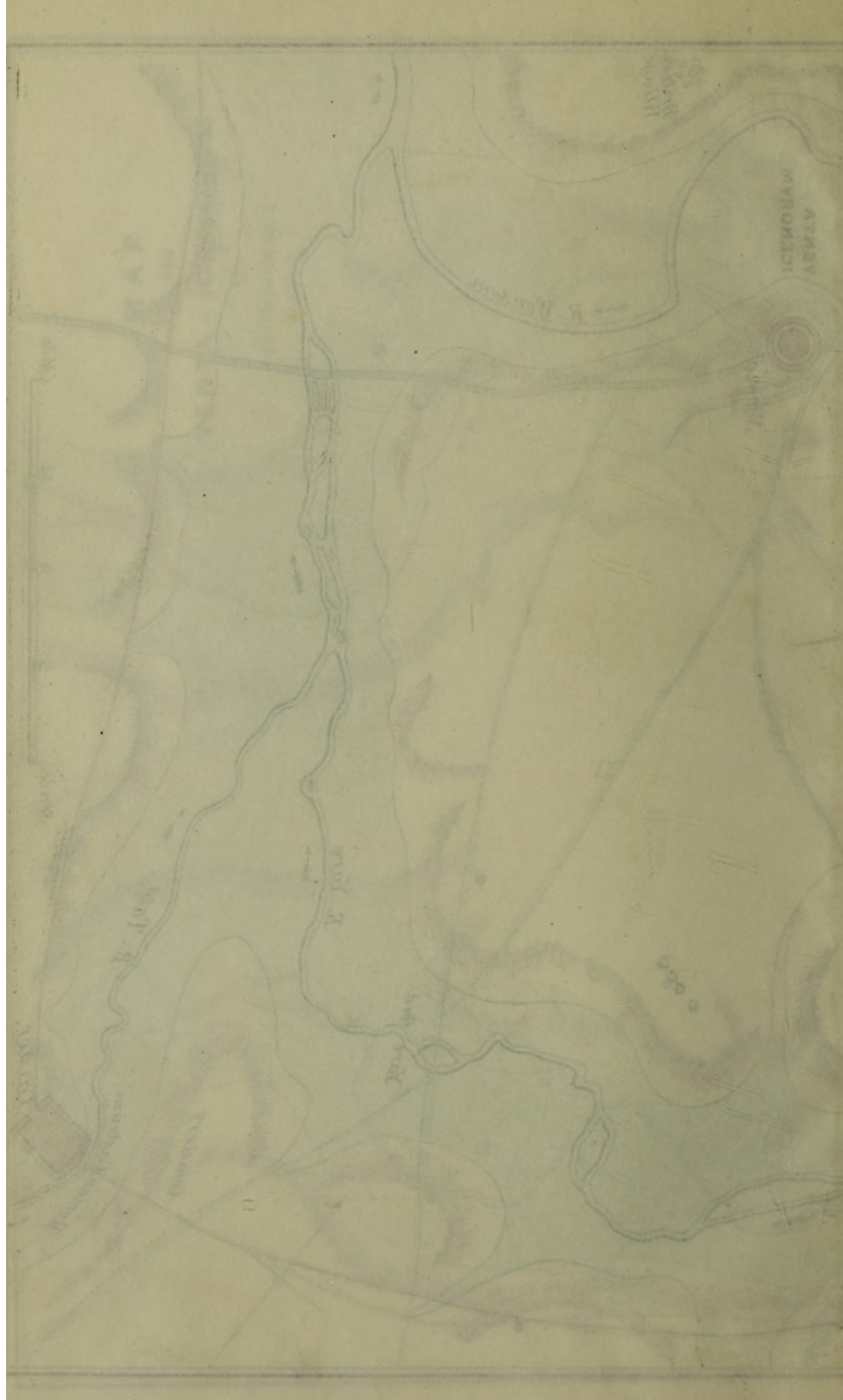
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MAP
OF THE
VENTA - ICENORVM
by
S. Woodward.
1836.







LETTER.

DEAR DAWSON,

In the year 1834, there was much discussion respecting the restoration of the external coating of Norwich Castle, which had fallen into a state of great decay, and Mr. Gurdon allowed me to have his ancestor's "Essay on the Antiquity of the Castle of Norwich," published in 1728, printed for private circulation.

In 1835, Mr. William Herring, who was in possession of one of the dispersed volumes of Mr. John Kirkpatrick, which were left by him to the Corporation of Norwich, permitted my having Mr. Kirkpatrick's "Notes concerning Norwich Castle," composed about the year 1725, copied for the purpose of being likewise printed.

I gave away some of the copies; but retained the rest, in the intention of prefixing an introduction, which I have never completed, and which, in the present state of my health, and many of

my books being in London, I am unable to put together.

But as the Archæological Institute are about to meet at Norwich, I will endeavour, through your intermediation, to get the few following notices placed in their hands, which may be useful in any researches they may make in viewing the localities.

The first question to examine, on the view of Norwich, Norwich Castle, and the Roman Camp at Caistor, may be, whether Norwich or Caistor be the "*Venta Icenorum*" of the Romans; Norwich standing on the Wensum, and Caistor on the Taes, on the opposite side of what was the great æstuary.

CAMDEN.

To begin then with Camden. In his accounts of Norwich and of Caistor, he falls into the most extraordinary errors, confounding the courses of the three rivers, the Wensum, the Taes, and the Yare. He places Norwich upon the Yare instead of the Wensum, and gives the Wensum the course of the Taes, as "flowing from the south;" and still more strangely as a king at arms, he attributes the erection of the present castle of Norwich to Hugh Bygod, "from the lions salient carved in stone on it, which were the old arms of the Bygods on their seals, though one of them bore a cross for his seal."

Now the lions were two lions passant regardant, very rudely carved, one on each side of the arch of the great entrance; and the Bygods, whose original arms were or, a cross gules, never bore the lion till assumed by Roger Bygod in the reign of Henry III., who took the arms of his mother, the heiress of William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke, in whose right he became Earl Marshall of England.

HORSLEY.

Horsley, in his *Britannia Romana*, states that Venta was the capital of the Iceni, situated on the "Wentfar," and thence deriving its name; and misled by, and quoting, Camden, he places Venta at Caistor.

SPELMAN.

Sir Henry Spelman, in his *Icenia*, states Norwich to have been the capital of the Iceni, in British *Caer-Guntum*, or *Caer Gwynt*, situated on the *Wensum*; the Saxons using the *w* in the word which the Romans turned into "Venta;" but whether Norwich were the *Venta Icenorum* he leaves in doubt.

KING.

King, who, born in Norwich, might have been supposed to have been better informed, in his *Munimenta Antiqua* follows Camden, and turns the

Taes into the Wensum; and in his paper in the fourth volume of the *Archæologia*, he pronounces the existing castle of Norwich to be "the very tower which was erected about the time of King Canute."

WILKINS.

In the elaborate "Essay towards the History of the Venta Icenorum and of Norwich Castle," by the elder Mr. Wilkins, in the twelfth volume of the *Archæologia*, he follows the authority of Camden in supposing Caistor to be Venta, and gives a very beautiful drawing of the tower over the entrance of Norwich castle, which, still following the authority of Camden, he says, "I have ventured to call Bygod's Tower." This was the origin of a name which had no other foundation than Camden's story of the lions; and which the late Mr. Wilkins, R.A., who added the new buildings in 1824, and most accurately examined the castle, said, his father had been led into, by an endeavour to reconcile, if possible, the tradition of a restoration by one of the Bygods, with his own conviction as to the period of its erection. And Mr. Wilkins the younger also wrote to me, that the same principle obtained in all the castles of the same æra, "of outside stairs abutting against a tower, which has an opening opposite, and commanding the approach, both from the gallery of the tower and the roof of it."

COLONEL LEAKE.

In 1834 I went over the Camp at Caistor, and the country adjacent, with Colonel Leake, who may be considered the greatest living authority for the sites of ancient cities and fortified camps, and he at once said that he was convinced Norwich was the Venta Icenorum, and capital of the Icen, and Caistor the fortified Camp planted by the Romans over against it, on the other side of the æstuary, to bridle, as was their custom, a hostile population.

Colonel Leake has since written me the following note, which he has allowed me to use.

VENTA ICENORUM.

“In September 1834, I visited, in company with Mr. Gurney, the ruins of an extensive Roman fortress in a well-watered valley three miles to the south of Norwich. Caistor, the name of the parish in which the ruins are situated, is a word Anglicized from the Roman *Castrum*: Venta, on the contrary, is Latinized from the British *Gwent*. At Winchester (Venta Belgarum) and at Caerwent (Venta Silurum) it is not unlikely that the Roman fortifications may have been on the site or a part of the site of the British town, and then the Roman and the British site may have become identified. But this was not the case among the Icen. Here are two sites: Caistor was evidently

nothing else than a *Castrum stativum* or fortress, such as the Romans usually erected after conquest, for the use of their garrison and colony, and who often chose a situation abounding in good water, in preference to one of natural strength, relying for protection on their walls and military discipline. If *Caistor* was nothing more than a *Castrum Romanum*, *Norwich* was in all probability *Venta*, being a position marked by nature for the stronghold of a people less advanced in the art of war than the Romans, and such as the Greeks, and most other people, have generally chosen in the infancy of civilization.

“I find nothing contrary to this opinion in any ancient authority.”

In the Roman Itineraries you have three “*Ventas*,”—*Venta Belgarum*, *Winchester*; *Venta Silurum*, *Caer-Went*, in *Monmouthshire*; and *Venta Icenorum*; and of these *Ventas*, the confusion between *Winchester* and the *Venta Icenorum* seems to have begun very early, both with the chroniclers and romancers, probably from the one having retained the rudiments of the name, and the other becoming known as *Northwic*.

PALGRAVE.

Sir Francis Palgrave, in the researches which he has made for his forthcoming *History of England under the Normans*, being led to the examination

of all contemporary authors, in order to clear up points which he found otherwise inexplicable, has referred me to the two following passages, which would seem to prove that Norwich was the Venta Icenorum, almost beyond dispute.

WILLIAM OF POICTIERS.

William of Poitiers, chaplain to William the Conqueror, and attending him in many of his expeditions, says in his "Life of the Conqueror," in relating his return to Normandy in 1067—

"Gwenta urbs est nobilis atque valens, cives ac finitimos habet divites, infidos, et audaces: Danos in auxilium citius recipere potest: a mari quod Anglos a Danis separat millia passuum quatuordecim distat. Hujus quoque urbis intra mœnia, munitionem construxit, ibidem Gulielmum reliquit Osberni filium præcipuum in exercito suo, ut in vice sua interim toti regno AQUILONEM versus præesset."—*Hist. Norman. Scriptores*, 208.

ORDERICUS VITALIS.

Ordericus Vitalis, also a contemporary, and born in England, under the year 1067, states:—

"Intra mœnia Guentæ, opibus et munimine nobilis urbis, et mari contiguæ, validem arcem construxit, ibique Guillelmum Osberni filium in exercitu suo præcipuum reliquit, eumque vice sua toti Regno versus AQUILONEM præesse constituit."

Now William, on his return to Normandy in 1067, left the wardenship of the whole country to the SOUTH to his half-brother Odo, in whose division, it should appear, Winchester must have lain; and the description of the "Gwenta" committed to William Fitzosbern, tallying in every point with the position of Norwich, seems in every way totally inapplicable to that of Winchester.

Taking therefore Norwich as the Gwenta, or Venta, where William constructed his fortifications, or perhaps only greatly strengthened those he found there, the next historical event we come to, is the rebellion, in 1074, of Ralph Guader, Earl of Norfolk, Waltheof, Earl of Northumberland, Huntingdon and Northampton, and Roger, Earl of Hereford, the son of William Fitzosbern, who had been killed in the wars of Flanders in 1070, which was planned in the Castle of Norwich, at the marriage of Ralph Guader with Emma the daughter of William Fitzosbern, and sister of Roger, Earl of Hereford. And we then find the Castle so strong that it could not be taken by the king's forces,—that Ralph Guader escaped by sea to his castle of Guader in Brittany,—and that the countess and her garrison were at last only driven to capitulate by famine, under a safe conduct for her and her adherents.

On the return of William from Normandy, he imprisoned Earl Roger, who died in captivity; and also committed Waltheof and his wife Judith,

the Conqueror's niece, to close custody. And here we come to some coincidences between Norwich and Winchester, so remarkable, that it may be difficult to determine in which the imprisonment and execution of Waltheof took place. Ordericus Vitalis states that Waltheof was imprisoned in "Guenta," that the Normans greatly feared his escape, and that he was taken out to execution in the morning, whilst the inhabitants were still sleeping, "extra Urbem Gwentam," to a hill over against it, where the Church of St. Giles "nunc constructa est."

This perfectly answers to the position of our St. Giles's, out of the then city, inhabited by the English, on a rising ground, by the new borough, inhabited by the French, and where the church of St. Giles appears to have been built in the time of the Conqueror.

After the execution, the body of Waltheof was buried in the crossways on the hill of St. Giles; but was afterwards transferred to Croyland, where it was deposited in a tomb near the high altar, and wrought many miracles. On the whole, however, I should think that the probability may be, that the execution of Waltheof took place at Winchester.

On the accession of William Rufus, the Castle of Norwich was seized by Roger Bygod, and for some time held by him for Robert Curthose.

Knighton, in his Chronicle, mentions the Castle of Norwich amongst the many castles which he

enumerates as having been built by William Rufus. And as the works must have been much damaged by the preceding sieges, it appears most likely that the present Keep, of the same stone and of the same style of architecture with the Cathedral, was built by him, and then received its Norman name of Blanchefleur. (*X. Scriptores*, p. 2373.)

Taking, then, Norwich for the Venta Icenorum of the Romans,—called Caer-Guntum by the British, and Northwic by the Saxons and Danes,—you find the capital of the Iceni founded on the shoulder of the promontory overlooking the Wensum, towards the great æstuary, which formed a natural stronghold for successive races of inhabitants. Whilst the Romans, fixing their permanent camp at Caistor on the Taes, where that river joined the æstuary into which the Wensum, the Taes, and the Yare all discharged themselves, would command the passage into the interior of the country—and taking Caistor for the “Ad Taum,” you will find the distances sufficiently to agree with the Roman itineraries.

The camp at Caistor contains an area of about thirty-five acres, and the Roman station at Taesborough, on another promontory higher up upon the stream, has an area of about twenty-four acres.

The great inundations which altered the form of the coast, appear to have taken place in the centuries preceding and immediately following the

Conquest: there appear no historical data as to the progress of the silting up of the rivers.

The almost entire destruction of all documents relating to the kingdom of the East Angles, probably through the irruptions of the Danes, leaves us less acquainted with this than with any other kingdom of the Saxon heptarchy.

But taking Norwich for the Venta, the capital of the Iceni, you get an indication of a continuous story, which, true or false, brings together most of the various traditions.

You have the castle founded by Gurgunt, the grandson of Malmutius Dunwallo, who is said to have died in the year 336 before the Christian æra. You find Boadicea issuing from the capital of the Iceni, slaughtering 70,000 of the Romans and their allies, and overrunning the whole country, till she was finally vanquished, on her march against the other "Venta," Winchester.

Norwich is stated to have been the residence of Uffa, A.D. 575,—Anna, King of the East Angles, to have had the Castle in 642,—lands granted to the monastery of Ely by Etheldreda, the widow of Tombert, held by service of Castle-guard of the Castle of Norwich, about 677,—the Castle repaired by Alfred, and granted by him to Guntrum,—destroyed by Swain in 1004, and rebuilt by Canute in 1017,—which brings you to the fortifications of William the Conqueror, and the probable construction of the present Keep by William Rufus.

Norwich Castle became a prison in the reign of Henry the Third ; and, by the Sheriff's report, the whole was greatly dilapidated in the reign of Edward the Third, when the defences were secured by the erection of the walls of the city.

For those visiting Caistor, the best position for seeing the whole course of the æstuary of the Yare, was from a spot on Merkeshall hills, where the old church of Merkeshall stood, but since covered by the plantations of the late Mr. Dashwood ; as far, however, as I can judge from a distance, I think the works of the newly projected railroad will have re-opened the view.

Mr. Woodward's map of the Venta Icenorum gives all the localities. But the clearest indication, beyond all compare, of the courses of the æstuary and the rivers, is in Mr. Woodward's map in his *Geology of Norfolk*, where the alluvial soil distinctly shows the access of the waters to the Roman camp on the Taes.

I am yours most truly,

HUDSON GURNEY.

Keswick, July 26th, 1847.

DAWSON TURNER, ESQ.

