A LOST INSCRIPTION FROM CASTLECARY ON THE ANTONINE WALL*

Lawrence Keppie
Glasgow University

ABSTRACT

An altar to the Mother Goddesses is reported in the later 17th century at or near Castlecary, Stirlingshire, Scotland, on the line of the Antonine Wall between Forth and Clyde. The Rev. John Horsley, the last antiquary to view it, saw two fragments which he believed came from separate altars, an interpretation followed by subsequent commentators. This paper, drawing upon early written and visual records, puts the case for the fragments, now lost, as belonging to a single altar.

A surge in antiquarian activity along the line of the Roman frontier in Central Scotland between the Forth and the Clyde in the half century from 1680 onwards resulted in a fivefold increase in the meagre number of inscribed stones hitherto recovered along its line and at its forts. Those which found their way to the University of Glasgow are still preserved there, in its Hunterian Museum.1 On the other hand, some of those which came into the hands of local landowners soon disappeared from view.2 One such stone was first mentioned by the physician Dr Christopher Irvine in his Historiae Scoticae Nomenclatura (Name-list of Scottish History), published in 1682.3 Irvine, Historiographer Royal for Scotland under King Charles II, was an authoritative witness: he had travelled along the Antonine Wall several times, and noted its forts in due sequence, categorising them as ‘Great Forts’, ‘Forts’ and ‘Small Forts’.4 The Historiae

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1 In 2010 I had the welcome opportunity to discuss the inscription by e-mail with Denis Saddington who was a friend and mentor from the time we first met at the British School at Rome in 1971-72. A draft was read by Dr R.S.O. Tomlin and Prof. David J. Breeze. I am also glad to be able to thank Prof. Roger Green for his assistance. The sources of the illustrations are acknowledged in the captions.
3 RIB 2138, 2147, 2152, 2154, 2154, 2157 (which was rediscovered recently), together with CSIR 96.
4 Irvine 1682.
5 Sibbald 1707:27, 30.
Scoticae Nomenclatura comprised an alphabetical list of proper names associated with Scotland's history, with explanations in English. The Roman world, including its provinces, tribes, kings and emperors, featured strongly.

One entry, sandwiched between two geographical names, was entitled Legio Praetenta Britannis, the 'legion which protected the Britons', which Irvine defined as 'A Roman legion that kept Guard upon the Roman Wall to defend their Province.' The Latin heading comes from the poet Claudian and refers to events in Britain in AD 402, during the closing years of Roman occupation; the words constitute the second half of a dactylic hexameter. Irvine added a commentary on the Roman army.

These Legions were not only compos'd of Italians, but also of diverse other Nations; yea of the Britons themselves, as is seen by an Ancient Stone, dig'd out of the ruins of Severus Wall, and keep in Combernauld by the Right Honourable the Earl of Wigtoun.

The Antonine Wall was believed by many at this time to have been built under the emperor Septimius Severus in the early 3rd century AD. By 'Combernauld' Irvine means Cumbernauld Castle which lies two kilometres south of the Wall. Irvine gives the text of the 'Ancient Stone' as follows:

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\begin{array}{l}
\text{MATRIBUS.} \\
\text{MILITES.} \\
\text{VEXILIO.} \\
\text{LEGION XXV.} \\
\text{BRITTONNUM.} \\
\text{V.S.L.L.M.} \\
\end{array}
\]

Figure 1: Dr Christopher Irvine's entry entitled Legio praetenta Britannis. Reproduced from Historiae Scoticae Nomenclatura (1682) 122.

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{MATRIBUS.} \\
\text{MILITES.} \\
\text{VEXILIO.} \\
\text{LEGION XXV.} \\
\text{BRITTONNUM.} \\
\text{V.S.L.L.M.} \\
\end{array}
\]

5 Irvine 1682:122.
7 The present-day Cumbernauld House, on the same site, was as yet unbuilt.
This, the only inscribed stone mentioned by Irvine in the *Nomenclatura*, was an altar dedicated to the *Matres* (Mother Goddesses). Irvine’s version can be translated as ‘To the Mothers, soldiers of a detachment of the Twenty-fifth Legion of Britons willingly gladly and deservedly fulfilled their vow.’ Irvine has, as we shall see, retained the original line-divisions.

We could easily suppose that Irvine had seen the stone at Cumbernauld Castle while traversing the Wall in or before 1682. However, another scholar had become aware of the inscription at much the same date, and may have alerted Irvine to it. This was Sir Robert Sibbald, a fellow physician, doyen of Scottish studies at the end of the 17th century, into whose hands Irvine’s papers fell. In 1683 Sibbald was composing entries for his projected *Atlas Scoticus* which, in the end, remained unpublished.\(^8\) His surviving manuscript features a drawing of this stone (Fig. 2), with the associated statement regarding the Antonine Wall that

> From there the Dyke goeth directly to the Forest of Combernald, and there is ane great Fort and a great building called Castle Kery.\(^9\) Near to this was a stone found with this Figure and inscription, which was taken of by the Earle of Perth Lord High Chancelor of Scotland, from whom I had a copie of it.\(^10\)

The Jacobite Fourth Earl of Perth was Sibbald’s aristocratic patron; how the Earl came to learn of the stone is unexplained.

The elongated drawing shows triple roundels on the front of the capital, with a rectangular panel below containing one line of the inscription; the shaft bore five more lines and was demarcated from the base by plain mouldings. What is unusual is that the capital is slightly narrower than the shaft.

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\(^8\) The project was announced in Sibbald 1683.  
\(^9\) Castlecary Roman fort.  
\(^10\) NLS Adv. MS 15.1.1, fol. 58v; cf. Sibbald 1710:33. By ‘taken of’ he means ‘drawn’. There is no indication that Sibbald himself had ever seen the stone.
Figure 2: Detail from a page of manuscript text by Sir Robert Sibbald (c. 1683), intended for his *Atlas Scoticus* (NLS Adv. MS 15.1.1, fol. 58v). Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

The inscription reads:

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MATRIBVS
MILITES
VEXILL IO
LEG XX VI
BRITTON
V. S. L. P. M.
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There are minor but significant differences from the Latin text offered by Irvine, so this can be counted as independent testimony. No commentary is offered on its meaning.

A much improved drawing (*Fig. 3*) was published in Edmund Gibson’s 1695 revision of William Camden’s masterly *Britannia*,\(^\text{11}\) to which Sibbald contributed an enlarged account of Scotland; no mention is made of the stone in the accompanying text. The inscription remains as Sibbald had copied it in 1683. However, the capital is much less elongated, and

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\(^{11}\) Gibson 1695:1101.
markedly narrower than the shaft. Capital, shaft and base are demarcated by bevelled mouldings. This high-quality drawing is not to be ascribed to Sibbald himself; the latter's draughtsmanship was poor, to judge from other sketches included in the 1695 edition of Camden's Britannia. It could be suspected that this was the work of the talented mapmaker John Adair, who we know worked intermittently for Sibbald. I suggest that Adair worked up the Earl's original drawing for publication, at Sibbald's request, rendering it more accurately than Sibbald himself had done.

Figure 3: The altar illustrated in Edmund Gibson's revised edition of William Camden's Britannia (1695) col. 1101.

Sibbald also notices the inscription in several others of his treatises published between 1697 and 1710. However, there is no specific mention of it in William Stukeley's Account of a Roman Temple near Graham's Dike in Scotland (1720), which lists inscriptions found along the Antonine

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12 Gibson 1695:1101, 1103-04.
13 Keppie 2012:49.
Wall. Stukeley’s principal source was Edward Lhwyd, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, who had travelled along the Wall in 1699, and noted that ‘Antiquities of this fort [Castlecary] are at Cumbernaul.

From the 1720s onwards Sir John Clerk, second baronet of Penicuik, Midlothian, who indulged a passion for Roman archaeology, began to assemble inscribed stones and small finds at his house. In 1723 Clerk became aware of the whereabouts of several inscribed stones along the Wall in private hands and resolved to acquire them; he provided local farmer Richard Burn with a list of places where he believed they could be found and asked him to secure them. Burn’s subsequent written reports to Clerk detail the progress of his endeavours. Among the places visited by Burn was Cumbernauld Castle and though he offered half a crown (2 shillings and 6 pence) for the stone there, Thomas Baird, an innkeeper in whose care the stone had been temporarily put, would not hand it over until he could acquaint the Earl of Wigton. Clerk wrote back urging further effort. The stone remained at Cumbernauld.

At much the same time the antiquary Alexander Gordon of Aberdeen, newly acquainted with Clerk, traversed the Wall several times during preparation of his *Itinerarium Septentrionale*, published in 1726. Gordon visited both Castlecary and Cumbernauld. He was told of two stones at Cumbernauld Castle, of which he saw only one, preserving the upper half of the text we are considering here.

At this place [Castlecary Roman fort] was also dug up another portable Altar, with an Inscription partly obliterated; only in the Middle, beneath the Cornice, are these Words: MILITES VEXILLATIO III. On the top of the altar the *Thuribulum* is very distinct.

By *Thuribulum* (incense bowl) Gordon means the *focus* atop the capital, on which offerings were placed.

15 Stukeley 1720:12.
17 NRS GD18/5024/1, 5024/3.
18 NRS GD18/5024/1; 5068/3.
19 NRS GD18/5024/3.
20 Brown 1977:204.
21 Gordon 1726:57.
Gordon’s drawing (Fig. 4) shows that the altar was by then worn and damaged at the edges; the first line of the inscription was barely visible.\textsuperscript{22} He has the \textit{focus} flanked by bolsters with a double moulding separating capital and shaft. Gordon valuably describes the part he saw as ‘a portable altar’, the only indication we have of its size. Another stone, bearing the lower part of our text, is described by Gordon as ‘an Altar, on which were engraven these letters: LEGIO BRITANNORUM; but I never could procure a sight of it.’ He never hints that the two fragments might or should belong to the same altar.

A few years later the Rev. John Horsley, Nonconformist Minister at Morpeth, Northumberland, was at Cumbernauld, during fieldwork for his massive \textit{Britannia Romana}, published shortly after his death in 1732. He saw both fragments (Fig. 5). With some degree of satisfaction, reflecting his rivalry with Alexander Gordon, Horsley wrote about the lower part:

\begin{quote}
Mr \textit{Gordon} has informed us that this altar is in the house of the Earl of Wigton at Cumbernauld, and that he had heard it had \textit{legio Britannorum} upon it, tho’ he could not procure a sight of it. This copy is taken with care from the original, which favour his Lordship was so obliging as to grant very readily. The stone is evidently the lower part of an altar, both that and the inscription upon it
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Gordon 1726: plate 15.2. See also NRS GD18/5068/3 for another drawing of the stone, probably also by Gordon, which he passed to Sir John Clerk.
being imperfect. There is nothing of legio in the inscription, and the first word is plainly BRITTON.\textsuperscript{23}

He also reports on the upper part. ‘This is another piece of an altar now at the same place. It is the upper part, as the other was the lower, but not of the same altar as is plain from the different measures.’\textsuperscript{24} He concluded that the upper part had been erected by the Sixth Legion or, less probably, the Twentieth Legion, the lower by a cohort of Britons in the Roman service.

\textbf{Figure 5}: The altar drawn, as two separate stones, by John Horsley, \textit{Britannia Romana} (1732) plates (Scotland) xx-xxi.

Horsley was the last antiquary to view the fragments at Cumbernauld; subsequent visitors did not see them.\textsuperscript{25} One possibility could be that they were lost when Cumbernauld Castle was set on fire during the 1745-46 Jacobite Rebellion.\textsuperscript{26} Nineteenth-century reports on it are entirely derivative.\textsuperscript{27} Emil Hübner’s assessment of 1873, in the \textit{Corpus of Latin Inscrip-

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\textsuperscript{23} Horsley 1732:201, pl. (Scotland) xxi.
\textsuperscript{24} Horsley 1732: 201, pl. (Scotland) xx.
\textsuperscript{25} A copperplate manuscript preserved at the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh, which is attributed to James, 14th Earl of Morton who died in 1768, lists ‘Ancient Inscriptions on Stones found in Scotland’, both Roman and medieval (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland \textit{Communications Book} 1827, fols. 331-33). Amongst the former is our inscription, in Irvine’s version of it. It is not, however, to be supposed that the Earl of Morton had viewed the stone himself, \textit{pace} Hübner 1873:196 on \textit{CIL} VII 1094.
\textsuperscript{26} Watson 1845:143.
\textsuperscript{27} Nimmo 1817:6; Hodgson 1840:264; Stuart 1844:339.
tions, was cautious and measured; he allowed for various readings. The editors of *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* followed Horsley in assigning the fragments to two separate altars.

The Inscription

There were six lines of text, one of which was lost when the altar broke in two. The first line was on the capital, the remainder on the front of the shaft. All the sources agree on the word MATRIBVS in line 1 and MILITES ('soldiers') in line 2. The word VEXILLATIONIS ('detachment') seems likely in line 3, which we can expand to the genitive case vexillationis. The phrase *milites vexillationis* is relatively rare, and usually denotes a composite unit, as seemingly here.

One or more legions are named in line 4. Irvine's text reports a legion XXV which he believed consisted of Britons, and the Earl of Perth's a legion XXVI. No legions with these numerals existed under the Roman Empire. One possibility is that this was a dedication by soldiers of legion XX Vic(trix). However, in inscriptions from Britain legion XX is generally given both its titles Val(eria) and Vic(trix); Victrix alone without Valeria is rare, and uncertain. It may be preferable to identify the soldiers as belonging to legions XX and VI, with both legions lacking titles.

The word in the fifth line is presumably in the nominative case (Brittones) or the genitive case (Brittonum), more probably the latter. Irvine gives the fuller form Brittonum [sic] which is not supported by any later observer. Line 6 is given over to a standard formula of dedication. The wording V(otum) S(olverunt) L(aeti) L(ibentes) M(erito) is to be preferred, on the authority of Irvine and Horsley, to the Earl of Perth's V S L P M.

The inscription can thus be read as Matribus | milites | vexillationis | leg(ionum) XX | XX (et) VI | [et] Britton(um) | v(otum) s(olverunt) l(aeti) l(ibentes) m(erito): 'To the Mothers, soldiers of a detachment of the Twentieth and Sixth Legions and of Brittons willingly, gladly and deservedly fulfilled their vow.'

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28 Hübner 1873:196 on CIL VII 1094.
29 *RIB* 2147, 2152.
30 See *RIB* 1136; *AE* 1938:13; *AE* 1984:921 (restored).
31 *RIB* 2028, 2114.
32 Birley 1979:106.
33 Notice P.S.P.L.L. for p(ecunia) s(ua) p(osuerunt) l(aeti) l(libentes) at Castlecary (*RIB* 2146 = Keppie 1998:97 no. 27).
34 For construction work undertaken jointly by legionaries and auxiliaries, see *AE* 1962:304 = *AE* 1992:1761; *AE* 1983:927.
Provenance

Stones from Castlecary Roman fort generally accrued to the Baillie family, owners of the nearby Castle Cary, and later to the Dundas family which acquired the estate in the 18th century. However, Dr Christopher Irvine locates the stone at Cumbernauld Castle, the residence of the Earl of Wigton, whose land lay further west, beyond the Red Burn, which runs through a glen 200 metres west of Castlecary fort. The Red Burn has always been an important demarcation line; formerly the county boundary between Stirlingshire and Dunbartonshire, it is currently the local authority boundary between Falkirk to the east and North Lanarkshire to the west (Fig. 6).

As Cumbernauld Castle was the repository of stones found on the Earl's land, we can deduce that our altar did not derive from Castlecary Roman fort itself, but from somewhere west of the Red Burn, though probably not as far west as the next fort on the Wall at Westerwood (also on the Earl of Wigton's estate), given that Sir Robert Sibbald states it was found 'near to' Castlecary (above).
Discussion

The altar bore a dedication to the *Matres*, the Mother Goddesses, erected by one or more units of the Roman army. The *Matres* were a frequent object of veneration by soldiers based in Britain and the Rhine provinces. Interestingly a detachment of *cohors I Vardullorum*, which was in garrison at Castlecary in the Antonine period, built a temple to the *Matres* while on service at Hadrian’s Wall sometime during the 2nd century. There can be little doubt that the dedicators of this altar were, or included, legion XX, perhaps combined with legion VI. The latter is attested several times at Castlecary and at the adjacent forts of Westerwood and Croy Hill.

Difficulty arises in line 5 when we try to interpret the word *BRITTON*, which has long perplexed scholars. It is hard to suppose that this was the title of a legion, so that we could be looking here at the presence at Castlecary of a *cohors Brittonum* or an *ala Brittonum*. Several regiments of Britons are recorded as auxiliaries in the Roman army, but none served in Britain itself. Under Antoninus Pius, *Numeri Brittonum*, irregular units, occupied small forts on the land frontier in Upper Germany. They are often supposed to have been enrolled during or after the campaigns in Central and Southern Scotland of Q. Lollius Urbicus in AD 139-42, but could belong earlier. Conceivably the Britons here were newly conscripted in Central Scotland, and about to be despatched to the Continent. Commenting on this inscription, Saxer considered them recruits to legion XX, serving in Britain, who maintained a separate identity within it under a *vexillum*. Britons did serve in the Roman army, both as auxiliaries and legionaries, though the number of inscriptions recording them remains relatively small; most of the evidence comes from outside Britain.

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36 *RIB* 1421.
37 *RIB* 2146, 2148, 2151.
38 *RIB* 2160, 2161, 2162, 2163, 3504.
40 Southern 1989:94.
41 See R.P. Wright on *RIB* 2152.
42 Saxer 1967:71 no. 175.
43 Birley 1979:101; Dobson & Mann 1973 do not refer to our stone.
Another possibility could be that the Brittones were a civilian work-detail, engaged on building or repairing the Antonine Wall.44

Though the style of lettering in the various drawings of our inscription does not assist in any close dating, there is no good reason to doubt that the altar belongs in the Antonine period, when the Wall was in active occupation. While the placing of a line of inscription on the capital of an altar has been held by some scholars to connote a later, perhaps Severan date,45 parallels occur in the Antonine period, including on the Wall itself.46 The capital of an altar was sometimes utilised if space on the shaft was judged to be insufficient for the intended text, or if the altar itself was quite small, as evidently here.

Conclusion

It has been customary to accept the testimony of Horsley that the two fragments reported in the 18th century came from different altars.47 However, given that the earliest written report and the early drawings, all unnoticed by scholars in recent times, imply one stone, it can be argued that this was a single altar. Horsley observed that the width and depth of the shafts on the two fragments were so different that they could not belong together. However, the Earl of Perth’s drawing shows the capital as narrower than the shaft. The style of lettering remains the same throughout, so far as we gauge it from the available drawings. If our full understanding of the inscription is imperfect, it is not made easier by splitting the text in two. There the matter must remain unless, as Hübner vainly hoped in 1873, the fragments resurface at some time in the future.48

Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>AE</td>
<td>l’Année Epigraphique.</td>
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<td>CIL</td>
<td>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum.</td>
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<td>RIB</td>
<td>The Roman Inscriptions of Britain.</td>
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44 For civilians similarly employed on Hadrian’s Wall in the mid-2nd century or later, see Frere 1999:162, 349; Fulford 2006; RIB 3376 with R.S.O. Tomlin ad loc.  
46 RIB 2176, 2177. See R.S.O. Tomlin on RIB 3509 ad loc.  
47 See RIB 2147, 2152 with comments by R.P. Wright ad loc.  
48 Hübner 1873:196 on CIL VII 1094.
Bibliography


Lawrence.Keppie@glasgow.ac.uk
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

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