

The Roman Altar from Bogton, Stirlingshire

by Gordon Maxwell

The Roman altar which is the subject of this brief note was discovered during fieldwork by Mr William Aitken in the summer of 1967. It had been built into the lower course of a ruinous boundary wall¹ on the farm of Bogton, about 1000 yds W of the Roman fort at Camelon.

The altar (pl 23) is made of a buff sandstone and measures 27 in in height by 10 in in maximum width at its base; the maximum thickness is 8½ in. Unfortunately it has received extensive damage, especially to the upper half of its front face. The sides and back are also much worn, but the top, exhibiting a *focus* flanked by crude bolsters, is tolerably well preserved, as is the moulding round the base. It is, in fact, ironic that the stone has sustained its most serious injuries in precisely that area which would have told us most about its purpose and origin, i.e. the upper part of the inscription. Of this only the two last lines are legible, the penultimate barely so:

. . . / [P]RO SE ET SVIS / V : S · L · L · M ·

' . . . discharged his vow on behalf of himself and his family (or household), gladly, willingly and deservedly'.²

The name of the divinity to whom the altar was devoted, the name of the dedicator, and more important, his rank and possibly the unit to which he belonged – all these important details are missing.³ It may, however, be noted that there is room in the three missing lines for about thirty letters at the most and it is therefore less likely that the dedicator's unit was mentioned.

About the source of the altar it is impossible to be absolutely certain. Unless it belonged to some wayside shrine it most probably came from the fort at Camelon, which appears to have been occupied, at least in the second century, by a cavalry regiment (*ala quingenaria*), as yet unidentified.⁴ The fort at Rough Castle, however, is only slightly further away, at a distance of three-quarters of a mile. Two inscriptions have been found here, both indicating the presence of the sixth cohort of Nervians as the garrison; on one the name of the commander is also given.⁵

There are also Roman structures nearer to the findspot of the Bogton altar.⁶ These are all temporary structures, marching camps occupied for a matter of days or weeks, although recent investigation of the largest of these, the temporary camp at Lochlands, has revealed evidence of the re-occupation, possibly in the second century,⁷ of the SW angle of the camp. This lies at a distance of only 450 yds from the place where the altar was discovered but it is surely not to be associated with it.

It is interesting to note that, although only one authentic Roman inscription has been found at the fort of Camelon, and that the briefest of building records, two remarkable forgeries have turned up in its vicinity.⁸ The first is a sandstone altar similar in appearance and size to the Bogton stone, but clearly a modern falsification, the forger having probably copied the inscription on an altar from Castlecary fort.⁹ Nevertheless the work has been executed with a certain amount of skill and knowledge of epigraphic texts.

The second is an imposing piece of sculpture in high relief, standing to a height of 4 ft 3 in with a breadth of about 19 in. It was found during building operations in Camelon in 1901, approximately three years before the discovery of the forged altar. The stone depicts in its upper panel a cavalryman with shield and upraised sword astride a galloping horse, and, in a smaller panel below, the prostrate body of a naked warrior. This is a common enough motif in Roman monumental art, although on most examples the cavalryman carries a lance not a sword, and the prostrate barbarian is not shown on a separate panel. On the Camelon stone the native appears in the position normally occupied by the inscription, while one feels the sword has been shown in preference to the lance simply because it was easier to carve. Nevertheless, apart from the general arrangement, such details as the pommels and hilts of the swords belonging to the cavalryman and his victim, the native's little square shield and the horseman's larger oval one argue a close acquaintance with the material being copied.¹⁰ Such a combination of knowledge of Roman archaeology and skill in stone-cutting was also apparently possessed by the forger of the Camelon altar.

It is interesting to speculate whether the same forger produced both stones. If his inspiration for high relief carving was the handsome Second Legion distance slab from near Carriden his work must date from some time after 1868. The whole design may, however, have been inspired by the earlier discovery of some funerary monuments: that found near Gloucester in 1824,¹¹ for example, is similar both in its general treatment and in the handling of such details as the horse's mane and tail; two similar tombstones were found at Cirencester in 1835 and 1836¹² and another in the vicinity of Chesters fort, Northumberland, before 1716,¹³ while the well-known carving from Hexham Abbey was discovered as late as 1881.¹⁴ All were adequately published in learned journals or such periodicals as the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Nevertheless it is clear that, whatever the date of the relief carving from Camelon, the forged altar must be later than c 1845, for this is the approximate date of discovery of the altar from near Castlecary upon which the forger evidently based his text. Perhaps future years may bring to light more examples of his craftsmanship and give a clue to his identity.

The Bogton altar is, however, undoubtedly genuine. It seems a pity that, despite its authenticity, it furnishes us with so little information.

NOTES

1. National Grid reference NS 852812.
2. For the use of the formula 'pro se et suis' cf. Collingwood and Wright, *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (hereafter *RIB*), nos 1225, 1539, 1599 and 1686. In these examples one dedicator was a *praefectus cohortis*, two were *beneficarii* and one was a woman civilian.
3. Assuming, that is, that the dedicator was not a woman or civilian.
4. RCAMS, *Inventory of Stirlingshire*, no. 122.
5. *RIB*, nos 2144-5.
6. RCAMS, *op cit*, 111 f.
7. *PSAS*, xcix (1966-7), 259 ff.
8. *RIB*, no. 2346 and *PSAS*, xxxvi (1901-2), 606-10.
9. *RIB*, no. 2148.
10. Details of shields and swords would be available to the forger in the distance slabs from Bridgeness and Castlehill (Macdonald, G, *Roman Wall in Scotland*, 1934, 362 ff and 373 ff).
11. *RIB*, no. 121.
12. *ibid*, nos 108-9.
13. *ibid*, no. 1481.
14. *ibid*, no. 1172.



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