VI: Tales from the Tomb

Sculpture in Roman Chester

by M Henig MA, DPhil, DLitt, FSA

A new study of the sculpture of Roman Chester, much of it funerary in character and presumably incorporated in late Roman repairs to the north wall of the fortress where it was disengaged in the late nineteenth century, has confirmed its unique importance for the study of sculpture workshops in Roman Britain and more generally for its iconographic interest. This is the theme of my paper 'Chester and the art of the Twentieth Legion' (Henig 1999) and the full results will be published in a forthcoming fascicule of the *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* (now in press).

Amongst the discrete groups which can be seen are the simple tongue-like panels of the first-century tombstones of Legion II *Adiutrix*, sometimes with astrological symbols. The majority of the funerary monuments are, however, later, for the most part dating from the third century. Some of those of soldiers, like the centurion Marcus Aurelius Nepos who is shown with his wife, the *optio* Caecilius Avitus or the *imaginifer* Aurelius Diogenes, are surprisingly inept. However, this is probably not the result of their late date, as a contemporary altar dedicated to the *genius loci* by the military tribune Flavius Longus and his son Longinus is superbly detailed, following a remarkably consistent tradition of work beginning with Twentieth Legion distance slabs from the Antonine Wall and continuing with a relief from Lanchester and the famous altar found in Chester in the seventeenth century and now in the Ashmolean Museum, dedicated to Jupiter Tanarus by a *princeps* of the legion in AD 154. Presumably first-rate sculptors were hard to attract to remote stations, and it was only the legionary legate and his immediate circle who could provide the incentive regularly to attract talent from afar.

The range of subject matter is wide and the stones tell us a great deal about the inhabitants of the fortress. A relief showing a Sarmatian horseman holding a *draco* standard, is a reminder of a foreign element amongst the troops stationed here. One of an important group of banquet tombstones is enlivened by unusual additions. The feasting horseman Aurelius Lucianus is shown with his armour hanging on the wall behind him and accompanied in front by a servant holding a trophy, the head of an enemy. Was he a Celt or a Thracian tribesman like Caecilius Donatus? The latter's stele was, however, more conventional, giving no sign of a bloodthirsty career. The best of these banquet tombstones belong to civilians, several of them with names suggestive of an oriental origin. The stele of Callimorphus and a boy with the theophoric name Serapion was found in the nineteenth

century *in situ* with both skeletons present and wealth and status guaranteed by a gold ring, now apparently lost. A second name recalling a deity is that of Curatia Di(o)nysia, who dines beneath hanging swags on which perch soul-birds, as does Fesonia Severina. The small girls Restita and Martia have a pecten shell behind them as does a lady on another stone; these shells probably symbolise the seas over which the departed soul must pass to the Blessed Isles. We can relate these stones to an altar tombstone showing a child, sleeping rather than dining. On each side is a bird standing on a block. Such blocks support the feet of Callimorphus' couch and that of one of the woman with the pecten shell. The birds pecking at a bunch of grapes allude to the wine of life and the saving power of Bacchus/ Dionysus.

It is noteworthy how many of the finest tombstones at Chester were memorials to wealthy women, which strongly suggest that in the third century, perhaps in particular towards the middle of the century, Chester acquired many of the features of a town. Of key interest are two stones, one showing a woman holding a mirror and the other a woman with a parrot, the bird of Bacchus, in each case accompanied by her maid. A third stele depicts a woman holding a hare, symbolising fecundity. Idiosyncrasies of this group include rich draperies and hands with fingers of exaggerated length.

All human life and death is here on the Chester gravestones, from the masons' tools showing the monument had been formally dedicated *sub ascia* (under the adze), perhaps in the owner's lifetime, to the guardian lions which will protect it from evil forces. There are a number of figures of Attis, the vegetation deity who died for love of the Great Mother and some believed was resurrected each year. Two reliefs of this 'dying god' ornamented one grand monument. A superb pediment from another built tomb has at its centre a Minerva mask conflated with a head of Neptune, the former a protective symbol against the Evil Eye but the latter indicating the voyage to the Isles of the Blessed, as do several representations of Neptune's retinue of tritons. Neptune-Medusa is best known as the central emblem on the pediment of the Flavian Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath. Was this a later copy of that sculpture?

Other sculpture on built tombs showed scenes of myth: Lycurgus, Bacchus' adversary (surely doomed for his *hubris*), and Actaeon, who was turned into a stag by Diana for seeing her naked and then torn to pieces by his own hounds. On the other hand Hercules is depicted rescuing Hesione (from a sea monster), a clear image of superhuman salvation, while Adonis, perishing of a mortal wound beneath a carob tree, is the type of a 'dying god' resurrected each year in the spring vegetation. A cupid fishing represents the felicity of the soul, while hounds chasing stags more ambiguously represent both sudden death and the field sports in which the deceased hoped to indulge in the other world. A vegetal scroll on three adjoining blocks, inhabited by birds and flowers is not purely formal, bringing to mind as it does the soul, new life and the spring *rosalia* festival when the graves of the beloved dead were decked with roses.

The overwhelming impression given by these stones is optimistic. They show individuals proud of their past lives and facing the future with equanimity, looking forward to another life of plenty and of pleasure, under the protection of beneficent gods. As everyone who

has worked on them for any length of time has realised, there is no collection like them in Britain and few with their range elsewhere in the western provinces of the empire. Indeed the Chester tombstones are of international importance.

It is thus very regrettable that many of them are badly stored, dirty, inaccessible and in some cases badly in need of sensitive conservation, and it is very much to be hoped that the present situation can soon be remedied, at the least by modern, adequate storage but ideally by a gallery large enough to display this wonderful collection to full advantage.

Bibliography

Henig, M 1999 Chester and the art of the Twentieth Legion. *In*: Medieval archaeology, art and architecture at Chester. (*British Archaeol Assoc Conf Trans* **22**), 1–15