



PLATE VI.



PORTION OF A ROMAN TOMBSTONE (DEPICTING A ROMAN MATRON  
AND HER ATTENDANT), FOUND IN THE NORTH WALL OF THE CITY  
OF CHESTER, IN JULY, 1887.



## NOTES ON A SCULPTURED STONE RECENTLY FOUND IN THE NORTH WALL OF THE CITY OF CHESTER.

BY W. DE GRAY BIRCH, F.S.A.

(FROM THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES, DEC. 8TH, 1887.)<sup>1</sup>

I HAVE the honour of exhibiting to the Society of Antiquaries a sculptured stone—consisting of the red sandstone common to the district—found on the 25th of July last at Chester, at a depth of many feet below the surface of the ground. It formed one of the building stones of the city wall in the fourth course above the rock. The subject sculptured on it is remarkable for having aroused a very considerable divergence of opinion as to its date and meaning, and I have therefore accepted with great pleasure the kind offer of the municipal authorities of Chester city—(conveyed to me through Mr. I. Matthews Jones, the city surveyor, to whom I venture to suggest that the thanks of this Society are due)—to allow me to place the stone itself before the meeting, and invite your opinion as to the origin and date of the design.

Mr. Jones' drawings, here displayed, show :—

I. A section—scale one and a half inch to the foot—of

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted by permission of the Council.

the wall of the city at the "Dean's Field," where the sculptured stone was found, standing on the rock bed, and partly covered with a bank of soil. There is a restoration of the parapet on the top of the wall which need not trouble us on this occasion.

2. An elevation of the stone courses with the sites of certain stones marked. The stone under consideration is No. 1, and was found lying down in the fourth course above the rock.

I gather from the report of Mr. Jones to the committee in charge of the repair of the walls, dated 24th October, 1887,<sup>1</sup> that he was instructed by the Improvement Committee to make safe that portion of the city wall on the north side, popularly known as one of the "breaches" made during the siege of Chester, A.D. 1645-6. "This breach, situate fifty paces from the west angle of the Phoenix Tower, had been built in an inferior manner, *i.e.*, with small stones on the internal and external wall faces, with backing and filling in the body of small rubble in mortar; the outer face set twelve inches in from the older wall, right and left of it, and having no tie or bond with the same.

"The stones were very much decayed, and the face and body of the wall were parting from each other. Immediate action was necessary, more especially owing to its dangerous position on the scarped rock, overhanging the Shropshire Union Canal. This portion was at once taken down to the level of the massive stone wall underneath, which proved on examination to be the sub-structure. . . . Not a single stone, showing any characteristic workmanship, style, or period, was found in this stone-and-mortar work, from the sub-structure level upwards. Very small quantities of tile fragments were found, but coins, pottery, or other relics

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 1-10.

were remarkably distinguished by their absence during the whole course of the work.

"... It was deemed expedient, previous to rebuilding, to thoroughly examine the sub-structure, not only for that which it might contain, but also as regarded its strength and capability to bear the new work proposed to be built on it. Accordingly, with the permission of the Dean, a shaft was sunk close to the wall in the Dean's Field to the solid rock, twenty-six feet in depth from the top of the parapet wall.

"An opening was then made through the massive stone wall, in order to make a communication with the outer face, where a similar shaft had been sunk through the earth, which had accumulated on the top of the scarped rock. At this point, on the outer face, bedded on two footing-courses on the rock, was found a splayed plinth, running along the face of the wall, and of similar dimensions and workmanship to that... found elsewhere under the massive stone wall below the soil level.

"In this opening the most important finds were made. The sculptured stone, No. 1, exhibited here this evening, was found on the fourth course above the rock, and formed one of the building-stones of the wall."

Sir James A. Picton, F.S.A., in a paper read on the 16th November last, before the British Archæological Association, descriptive of the recent excavations by the wall, states, with regard to the Phoenix Tower, where the breach was made:—

"The wall here is based on the solid rock, which, within about twelve feet outwards, is scarped down perpendicularly twenty-five feet to the towing path of the canal. About three yards in height, above the rock, a sloping bank of earth covers the base of the wall. The wall here—as at the Kaleyards—below the ground, about nine

feet thick, is built with solid ashlar, with a slight batter inwards. Above this the wall, eleven feet high, is composite; the outer skin is squared ashlar, the stones only reaching partly through the wall, and left with a toothing or zigzag; the rest is rough rubble, with an inner facing. It is here that the bulk of the moulded and sculptured stones were found."

No mediæval mouldings have been found among these remains, and none are of disputed date except this one, all others being universally accepted as Roman. I cannot, however, agree with Sir James Picton, when he proceeds to state that if the stole-like garment on the larger figure be ecclesiastical, it by no means follows that it is mediæval, "for Christianity being the prevailing religion before the departure of the Romans, this sculpture may therefore be Romano-Christian in its origin." I do not think so, for there is no need to attribute any Christian origin to the stone. The stole, as I will for convenience style this part of the dress, was part of the attire of a Roman matron, who is here, as I suggest, portrayed with a mirror in the left hand, an object probably not unfrequently found in her hands during life.

As for the stone itself, there are portions wanting on the right-hand side and at the bottom. In its present condition it measures nineteen inches long, nineteen and three-quarter inches wide, and ten inches thick. The feet of the two figures are wanting, and possibly some accessories on the right-hand side, which would have made up the dimensions of the stone, when perfect, to about two feet square. The band, or frame, which was left when the sinking or "scambling" was executed to obtain depth for the relief, measures nearly two inches wide on the left side margin and one inch along the top margin.

Almost the earliest notice of this stone, as a relic that

could be attributed to Roman origin, was given in the *Athenæum* of the 27th August, in an article descriptive of the visit of some of the members of the British Archaeological Association to Chester on the 22nd of that month. It is therein described as "a sculptured stone, bearing full-length figures, one of whom wears a cloak and stole-like bands, so exactly like the mediæval representation of a bishop's vestments that at first sight one refuses to believe in its Roman date." This implied assertion of a Roman date was shortly afterwards challenged by Mr. Thompson Watkin, of Liverpool (a writer on Roman epigraphy in Britain, and author of *Roman Cheshire*, and other works), who had, indeed, on the 13th August, described this very stone in the *Academy* as "probably a mediæval tablet, with the figures of an ecclesiastic and a female sculptured upon it. The exact age . . . will, however, I think, be difficult to determine." This statement of opinion comes almost as a corollary from his assertion, in another place, that "the wall is not Roman *in situ* in any portion."

In a letter addressed by me, shortly after the August visit referred to above, to the editor of the *Liverpool Daily Post*, and printed in that journal, I mentioned several reasons why I believe the sculpture to be Roman, chiefly (i.) the scooping out of the stone in order to obtain sufficient relief—a practice not uncommon in Roman art, as those who are familiar with the Roman sculptures in the British Museum will admit. The new room of Roman and Græco-Roman bas-reliefs shows several instances of this particular treatment, which is so well known as really to need no argument of mine to prove it; (ii.) the peculiarly-cut cramp-holes, which are quite Roman. Mr. Thompson Watkin, however, adheres, throughout the controversy which has arisen, to his attribution of a mediæval date for this so-called mediæval figure, and in this view he is

followed by many antiquaries. For example, Mr. E. W. Cox writes, under date of 14th September, 1887:—

“With respect to the stone commented upon by Mr. de Gray Birch, I have examined it most carefully. I have compared it with the undoubted Roman sculptures standing beside it, and others equally accessible, and I take it to be certainly mediæval. This stone is most important in deciding the age of the walls, because, naturally, a wall built of old remains is more recent than the remains that compose it, therefore it must be later than the latest ascertained period of its material. The two figures represent an ecclesiastic with a cope and stole, and an object in one hand resembling a chalice; this latter is defaced, but the outline of the foot remains, and that of the bowl containing the consecrated wafer. The object is not at all like a ‘lamp’ or a ‘flower.’ The head is defaced, but there are clear traces of a nimbus. The other figure I do not take to be a female, but a youth—probably an acolyte. The countersinking of the ground, to give relief, which Mr. de Gray Birch says is characteristic of Roman work, and not of mediæval, is not a feature confined to classic or later work; it is abundant in late-Gothic work, especially on tombs, to which, probably, the stone once belonged. By looking at the adjacent Roman sculptures his assertion is at once refuted. The figures and inscriptions on various Roman stones show both relief from the plane surface and countersinking, proving that this feature is no peculiarity by which to distinguish Roman work. The tooling differs entirely from the Roman, and was wrought with a different tool. I venture to assert this with some confidence, being myself accustomed to the use of sculptor’s tools. Is it at all likely that the cope, the stole, the nimbus, all very clearly shown on this figure, to say nothing of the probable chalice—all mediæval characteristics—are mere accidental



resemblances that have somehow crept into a classical work? The anatomical details of the figure also contradict the Roman theory," &c., &c.

With regard to the supposed nimbus of Mr. E. W. Cox (whose entire statement I consider absolutely misleading and incorrect), I confess I cannot see it, but, even if it were there, the nimbus, nimbus-like head-dress or *meniscus*, is not unfamiliar to us on the figures of the *Deæ Matres*, and on the Tanagra figurines of an older period.

Mr. C. Roach Smith, F.S.A., whose opinion on matters relating to Romano-British antiquities is entitled to the greatest respect, and who has paid especial attention to the walls and antiquities of Chester, writing to me a short note of these figures, says: "They are most decidedly Romano-British, and the costume is quite in accordance with the many examples we have of Roman provincial costume. I see in this figure (the 'ecclesiastic') a female with a mirror."

In the *Academy* of September 24th last, Mr. Thompson Watkin reiterates his opinion thus: "I do not pretend for a moment to be a judge of the exact date of any mediæval<sup>1</sup> sculpture, but I can certainly see when a slab is genuine Roman and when it is of Christian times. My contention over this stone has been that it is post-Roman and Christian, the male figure having ecclesiastical vestments. True, I say the face of the female 'is of some beauty, much resembling the faces found on corbels, &c., *circa* the fourteenth century,' but as to the date of the stone I say nothing. I leave its date for mediævalists to decide. Few people who have seen the stone have denied the strong resemblance between the male figure and a mediæval ecclesiastic. Many are positive on the point."

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<sup>1</sup> "By mediæval I mean any time between (say) A.D. 700 to A.D. 1500." Mr. Watkin in *Liverpool Daily Post*, 14th September, 1887.

Sir Henry Dryden, in the *Academy*, says: "Some persons assert that the wall is not Roman, because one piece of sculpture of two figures is (as they assert) mediæval and ecclesiastical. If similarity of material, design, size, and workmanship is any evidence, this sculpture is contemporary with the rest of those found. It would be easy to produce Chinese or Buddhist figures, which to some extent resemble mediæval ecclesiastics."

Mr. C. Roach Smith, in a second letter addressed to me, under date of October 10th last, states that he considers the second figure holds a pet cat, the head of which is apparent to him. He says also that Mr. Blair, of South Shields, tells him he has seen photographs at Dr. Bruce's of this stone, and both he and I (Bruce and Blair) agree that it is, beyond all doubt, Roman. In another letter Mr. Smith says: "Both are girls, one with a mirror, the other holding a small animal."

Mr. Blair, to whom all antiquaries are indebted for the thorough and masterly investigation he has recently made of the fertile Roman cemetery in the district of South Shields, writes of this stone thus: "To place the subject on a proper basis, I think you should insist upon one or two of the other stones similar in design, and which are of undoubted Roman workmanship, being sent with it to show how alike they are in every respect, material, design, &c." Mr. Blair thinks the faces of the figures have been mutilated, as in almost all cases, from a superstitious dread in a post-Roman people, certainly not for the purposes of walling, as the level of the faces would not be higher than the edges of the stone. But this can hardly be the case, for the stone was found in the Roman wall already mutilated before its incorporation into the work. I have not, however, asked the Chester authorities to send me any of the other sculptured stones found in the north wall, for

Mr. Blair has kindly sent me a sheet of small drawings of the stones, which have been categorically described by Mr. M. Jones in his report referred to at the beginning of this paper.<sup>1</sup> Several of these bear comparison for treatment with the stone under consideration. The dove-tailed cramp-holes resemble those found on other stones taken from the wall—the material is identical, viz., the red sandstone of the locality—and I believe that the tool-marks and method of sculptor's art disclosed by close examination indicate nothing but Roman work.<sup>2</sup>

As for the details, the hair, or the little that is left of hair, on the larger figure seems to be worn long down to the collar, and is waved or plaited as in the smaller figure. I see no trace of nimbus, although Mr. Cox, in the passage I have just read, speaks strongly on the presence of this emblem. The cloak is large, and there is nothing about it which militates against its Roman origin. The stole or band (which I will call for convenience a stole) passes over the arm, and across the shoulder-blades behind horizontally, and not over the collar-bone, as it would have been worn in mediæval days by a clerical personage. The mirror in the left hand of the larger figure is very clear; its handle with knob at the end, and the shoulder-bar at the place of insertion of the tang into the handle, are unmistakeable. These peculiar ecclesiastical vestments of the Middle Ages, the surplice and stole, have their prototypes in the costume of classical times. Another peculiarity is the treatment of

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Since this paper was read Mr. Blair has pointed out an illustration of a tombstone in M. de Caumont's *Abécédaire d'Archéologie*, vol. i., p. 490, "representing a figure in an arched recess, wearing a dress similar to that of the so-called mediæval priest, and not only so but he has a chalice in his right hand, or rather what the middle-age advocates of the Chester stone would call one; the face is also knocked off. As regards the age of this there can be no question, as it is inscribed, D. TICILLÆ. M. along the top."

the drapery by a peculiar kind of parallel roll-work. This is well shown in a Roman sculpture discovered at Carlisle in 1879, figured in the *Journal of the British Archæological Association*, vol. xxxv., p. 104. There is, too, in this latter monument a border or band enclosing a sunken field in which the effigy stands in relief.

Mr. Hodder Westropp, writing of the Catacombs, states that "many<sup>1</sup> of the paintings are probably intended for portraits of the persons interred, surrounded by paintings of scriptural subjects as indications of the faith of the deceased, who is usually represented in the Oriental attitude of prayer, and attired only in a dress closely resembling the surplice and stole. The surplice is sometimes white, the emblem of purity, sometimes red, as washed in the blood of Christ; and the stole is the emblem of servitude, the yoke of Christ, over the shoulders." I am indebted to Mr. Jones for drawing my attention to this passage. Whether the paintings of persons in surplices and stoles<sup>2</sup> are to be referred to the early—say the third century—stage of the Catacombs, or the later—eighth or ninth century, I have no knowledge; but if these details are to be interpreted as pointing to a Christian element in the sculpture, conceding it to be Roman, then its importance is increased a thousand-fold, for it stands practically alone as a genuine relic of a *cultus* strenuously denied by almost every archæologist, mainly from the fact that hitherto it has received none of the support with which the occurrence of Romano-Christian British antiquities should and must invest it.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodder M. Westropp, *Early and Imperial Rome*. London, 8vo. 1884, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> For paintings of this kind see Raff. Garucci, *Vetri ornati di figure in oro trovati nei cimiteri cristiani di Roma*, Roma, 4to, 1864, tav. i. fig. 1; and De Rossi, *Roma Sotterranea cristiana*, Roma, fol. 1867, tomo ii. tav. xx.; tomo iii. tavv. x. xiv. xxxviii.

The controversy as to the date of the city walls still rages, but I think that in some respects this sculptured stone is the key with which we may at least unlock some of the secrets connected with them. If it be that Mr. Watkin, Mr. Shrubsole, and Mr. Cox, and their followers are right in attributing it to mediæval times (*i.e.*, after A.D. 700), then it follows that the cyclopean walls of Chester<sup>1</sup>—built *more Romano* of fine squared stones set together with very close joints and no mortar—a city eminently teeming with undoubted Roman remains of a fine character, as is evinced by the important collections, well cared for in the Grosvenor Museum—cannot be of greater antiquity than the stone which has been taken out of its fourth lowest course into which it was set at the time of building. On the other hand, if it be made clear—and I call upon the Society to decide this point—if it be made clear, beyond doubt, that the stone, notwithstanding its apparent novelties and peculiarities, is Roman, then I think we are entitled to hold that the wall itself which contained it and many other Roman sculptured stones, not one of which, with this solitary exception, has been challenged by the gentlemen above referred to, and which possesses the three peculiar characteristics of Roman wall—want of mortar, massive blocks, and fine joints—is indeed a Roman monument of the very highest value for its many aspects.

Much has been written on the wall, but not always have the writers observed accuracy in their research. In one of the latest contributions to the literature of this subject, the description of Caerleon, in South Wales, co. Monmouth, by Giraldus Cambrensis, has been transferred to Chester

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<sup>1</sup> For the two kinds of Roman walls (1) Murs de grand appareil, of fine squared stone 2, 3, or 4 ft. by 1 or 2 ft. thick, juxtaposées *sans ciment*, and (2) Murs de petit appareil, of small stones encrusted in mortar, see De Caumont, *Abécédaire*, vol. i., p. 52.

because of the use by Giraldus of the Latin periphrasis *Urbs Legionum*<sup>1</sup> in reference to that city, notwithstanding that the *urbs* is declared by the chronicler to have been fortified “per Romanos muris *coctilibus*,” an explanation which ought to have put Sir James Picton on his guard against so remarkable an error. It is true that the “*civitas quae Karlegion Brittannice et Leagaceastre dicitur Saxonia*,” of Hoveden, relying on the Saxon Chronicle—which occasionally transmutes names in a poetic crucible—is Chester, and Higden expressly mentions “*civitas Carlegioun sive Legecestria quae modo Cestria dicitur* ;” but I am inclined to suggest that in some instances at least Holt, in Denbighshire, may with great probability be intended ; and the variant forms of place-names attributed now to Chester, now to Leicester, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, are very much alike. As for Holt, Camden states that the ancient *Castrum Leonis* was on the river Dee, opposite Holt Castle. Roman antiquities are frequently found here, whence it is supposed to have been a Roman station. The fortress here, according to some, was called *castra Legionis*, or “the castle of the Legion ;” in Welsh *castell Llion*, at a later time mistaken for the *castle of Lions*.

It has, I believe, been suggested by one antiquary at least, that this sculptured stone may be part of a representation of the *Deæ Matres*, but in the newest work on these divinities, which is found in the current number of the *Jahr-Bücher des Vereins von Alterthumsfreunden im Rheinlande*, heft lxxxiii. (Bonn : Marcus, 1887), under title of “Der Mütter oder Matronen Kultus

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<sup>1</sup> This is a false derivation by Giraldus. The proper name of Caerleon is *Caer Llion*, as it is always found in our more ancient MSS. The signification of *Llion* seems to be streams, torrents, or floodings, and the situation of the place which bears that name is on the banks of a river.—Gunn’s *Nennius*, p. 102.

und seine Denkmäler," by M. Ihm, I see little or nothing that can be very critically compared with this stone. The *Matres* not unfrequently are seated, and carry baskets or dishes of fruits. No. 345 of Ihm's exhaustive list of extant monuments dedicated to the honour of these *Deæ* is from Chester, and it bears the explanatory inscription: DEABVS MATRIBVS. Ihm takes it from the *Corp. Inscr. Lat.* vii. 168a, but it has no resemblance to the work on the stone before us.

I am more inclined to see in this disputed monument a rudely-carved iconic figure of a deceased Roman provincial lady with her daughter or servant beside her. It is to be hoped that some day the lower part of the sculpture may be found, bearing an inscription to settle the points of controversy. But the prime and paramount interest is not whether the figure be a divinity or a mere mortal, but whether the work be Roman or mediæval.

The following letters relating to the stone under notice were also read:—

" 242, West Derby Road, Liverpool,  
December 7th, 1887.

" Dear Sir,

" I observe that Mr. W. de Gray Birch is to read to-morrow night a paper on the peculiar sculptured stone recently found in the north wall of Chester, and that the stone itself is to be exhibited.

" In the *Athenæum* of the 26th November there is a communication from Mr. Birch on this stone, in which he says that whilst he holds it to be of Roman date I hold it to be mediæval. This is somewhat inexact, and I have so stated it to be in some correspondence I have had with Mr. Birch in the *Liverpool Daily Post*. I have there stated, and again repeat, that I believe the stone to be *post-Roman*, but I will fix no date. My idea of the mediæval period seems to

differ from that of Mr. Birch considerably in the date of its commencement as well as (probably) its duration.

"As it might be understood in the discussion to-morrow that I pronounced it mediæval, I beg that you will communicate this letter to the meeting of the Society.

"I may add that I know of about eighty archæologists and architects who have either seen the stone or a photograph of it. About exactly one-half of these deem it post-Roman—the others Roman. But every one (with two exceptions), of whatever age they think the stone, consider the figure on the left (minus its face) to be that of a male.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Roach Smith's view, I believe, is that it represents a female holding a mirror.

"But though if the stone were unanimously admitted to be mediæval, it would prove that the wall whence it was taken could not be earlier than mediæval times, still, if it were conclusively proved to be Roman, it could no more affect the question of the date of the walls than the numerous Roman tombstones and sculptures which have been found built in them.

"The opinions of its age which I have heard expressed vary from the eighth to the end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century.

"I remain, dear sir, yours faithfully,

"W. THOMPSON WATKIN.

"W. H. St. John Hope, Esq."

"Temple Place, Strood,

December 5th, 1887.

"My dear President,

"I have before me a photograph of a sculptured stone taken out of the Roman wall of Chester. It is broken

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<sup>1</sup> The official report made to the Chester City Council also states it to be a male. (See p. 6.)



from the inscription, and there may have been a third figure. It is of a class of sepulchral monuments well known to you as well as to myself; and highly interesting in more points of view than one. I have given examples in my *Collectanea Antiqua*. I refer you to Plate xviii. vol. v. which represents two examples taken out of the walls of Bordeaux. They are of young females, the one holding a basket of fruit and a mirror, the other a pet cat, the tail of which a cock standing at the foot seems to be pecking.

"The Chester stone has two young females, one holding a mirror; the other, as I see it, a small animal; symbols common and appropriate. The animal appears to have been fore-shortened, and it has been intentionally mutilated; but the photograph, to my mind, leaves no doubt as to what was intended by the sculptor.

"In the costume we have a further instance of peculiar provincial habiliments quite distinct from those known as classical. Many of these, as I have shown in the work referred to, have a very modern aspect.

"I am, my dear President,

"Yours sincerely,

"C. ROACH SMITH."

An interesting discussion took place, in which Mr. Thomas Morgan, Mr. Stuart Moore, Mr. Brock, and others took part. Mr. Waller and Mr. Micklethwaite also spoke as to the non-mediæval character of the stone, and pointed out the un-ecclesiastical nature of the costume of the figures.

The Roman character of the stone was not called into question.

