

# A new Romano-British sculpture from Benwell

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## SUMMARY

*A sandstone bust of a woman was found in a garden in Benwell, on the line of the Vallum and to the west of the Roman fort; it is described and discussed in relation to other stone heads and busts found along the line of Hadrian's Wall.*

## INTRODUCTION

A NEW SCULPTURAL STONE OF ROMAN DATE FROM THE WALL was reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme in April 2012 (PAS reference no. NCL-9714A3). The stone was found during gardening work on Crescent Ave, Benwell (NZ 210 649) in 2005. Until it was reported, the stone remained in a bed of the garden where it was discovered. It had lain at a depth of about 0.9–1.0 m, on the line of the Vallum as it runs west out of Benwell and toward Denton. It seems likely, though unproven, that this stone was originally erected outside the extramural vicus to the west of Benwell fort. It is still in private hands, although it is hoped that it will join the Society's collection.

## DESCRIPTION

The sculpture measures 412 mm in height by 340 mm in width and 200 mm in depth. Carved out of local sandstone, it depicts the head and neck of a female in relief on a roughly squared rectangular base (fig. 1). The stone is complete, as tooling on the underside of the base indicates it was squared. There is no inscription on the stone, although two horizontal inscribed lines on the upper left quadrant of the base can be seen. The face is executed in a fashion typical of Romano-British sculpture. A sub-circular head with a flat face retains almond-shaped eyes and the bridge of a rectangular nose. Damage to the lower nose, mouth, and chin has removed a portion of the face. The hair falls back behind the head, with distinct strands or locks indicated by the pecked grooves running backward for approximately 100 mm from the hairline. The strands are pecked longer down the left side of the face to the squared base. This texturing of the hair does not extend down the full length of the back, but is restricted to the top of the head and to the sides of the face. Rounded protrusions to either side of the face probably indicate the presence of ears. The inscribed lines on the base of the stone may indicate an arm or wrist, but any trace of the rest of the hand has been lost. The overall surface of the stone has suffered from weathering, apparently in antiquity.

## DISCUSSION

This rough bust of a woman is the most recently found example of a phenomenon attested across Britain. Referred to commonly as 'Celtic heads' or 'unidentified anthropomorphic



figures', many heads are already known from the Wall corridor, with the closest examples being from Walker, West Denton, and Lemington (Allason-Jones 1994). Other examples are from Chesters, Carrawburgh, Sewingshields, Housesteads, Vindolanda, Carvoran, Castlesteads, Netherby, Carlisle, and other less well defined locations (*CSIR* 1.6, nos. 327–31, 335, 339, 342–45, 356, 363, 369, 377–8, 508–10, 531–4). The heads vary in quality of execution and in the degree to which they emulate the naturalistic portraiture of the classical Mediterranean. Many are relatively simple and very roughly shaped — a stone with a face. The Benwell head does not fall into the classical Mediterranean style, but it was executed with more detail than its closest neighbours from West Denton and Lemington. Unfortunately, there is no precise dating for the carving of these heads although, broadly speaking, they date from the second to third century.

The function of the Celtic heads is unknown, and will probably have varied depending on whom was being depicted. It is noticeable that some are described as 'horned' and that when the sex can be determined both men and women are illustrated. Allason-Jones (2008, 117) has suggested that these heads may be an imported cult practice from Gaul, perhaps representing the heads of dead warriors and linked to the established cult of head-veneration in Gaul. The fact that both men and women are portrayed, however, suggests that any head-veneration was not restricted to men.

A further possibility should also be considered. The Benwell head is different from most of the Celtic heads found in the Wall corridor, which consist only of a head or a face carved onto a shaped stone. In contrast, the woman from Benwell is more closely related to a bust, even if it is not as detailed and as naturalistic in its execution. Other examples of 'unidentified anthropomorphic figures' also can be considered as busts rather than Celtic heads: for example, a female head, possibly from Chesters; a 'goddess', probably from Birdoswald; and a female head from Netherby (*CSIR* 1.6, nos. 331, 366, 380). These should probably be understood as dedications to local spirits or deities; they can be seen as a more provincial practice emulating the Roman taste for anthropomorphic sculpture, but without strictly adhering to Mediterranean motifs, design, or literacy.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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