

ART. V. – *A Celtic God from Netherby, Cumbria.*

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THE subject of this paper is a Romano-British relief of cream-coloured sandstone¹ carved with the figure of a headless, semi-draped, divinity; the dimensions of the stone are 39×39cm. The figure holds a *cornucopiae* in the crook of his left arm against the shoulder, broken off half-way up the horn. The right hand grasps a large wheel, held by the upper felloe over a small altar² (Plate 1).

The clothing and many of the accompanying attributes, notably the altar and *cornucopiae*, classify the figure at first glance as a Genius or Bonus Eventus. As such, the relief would belong to a well-known series of personifications of localities (Genius locus) and abstract ideas (Bonus Eventus/Good Outcome). These figures are characterised iconographically by being nude or semi-draped and by their possession of a *cornucopiae* and a *patera* or offering-plate held over a flaming altar. The partial drapery probably indicates in this instance that a Genius is being portrayed³, and thus the Netherby figure represents a minor deity symbolizing the prosperity and fruitfulness of *Castra Exploratorum* (“The Fortress of the Scouts”).⁴

The flaw in the straightforward categorization of the Netherby relief as representative of a classical personification is the substitution of a wheel for the *patera*. The circular object in the right hand, held in the normal offering attitude, possesses eight distinct spokes joining the outer rim (felloe) to the inner hub (nave). In terms of art, the only alteration necessary to make a *patera* resemble a wheel is the addition of spokes since the normal offering-plate is generally represented as two concentric discs. The wheel on the Netherby carving is a very naturalistic depiction of a Celtic wheel, with a narrow bentwood felloe, a realistic number of slightly tapering spokes and a small, perforated nave⁵.

A further point about the Netherby figure which is very striking concerns the attribute-proportions. Whilst the *cornucopiae* and (even more so) the altar are small, sketchily treated and visually insignificant, the wheel, by contrast, is large, well-modelled and dominates the scene.

The presence of the wheel classifies the Netherby relief as representing a Celtic deity whose main identifying symbol is the wheel. The size of the object on this particular carving implies that it is the dominant feature and that the other attributes are subsidiary. By this argument, we may call the Netherby portrayal that of a wheel-god. I have elsewhere argued⁶ that it is possible to identify a Celtic celestial divinity whose specifically solar power is indicated by the presence of a spoked wheel representing the central sphere, nimbus and rays of the sun.

We possess two categories of North British evidence to support the view that the Netherby wheel-bearing figure represents a specifically Celtic divine concept. Before proceeding to discuss these, I should first mention another relief from Netherby, that of a god in similar attitude but with the additional features of a boar and tree. Whilst it has been suggested that this second Genius⁷ also bears a wheel, in my opinion the circular object in the right hand is a *patera* of traditional form. Nevertheless, Netherby has yielded



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PLATE I. – Stone Carving of the Wheel-Bearing Deity from Netherby, Cumbria.

a great deal of other evidence for Celtic or Romano-Celtic symbolism. The site has, among other depictions in stone, produced representations of *Genii cucullati*,⁸ the *Deae Matres*⁹ and evidence relating to the cults of, for example, *Belatucadrus*, *Cocidius*, *Mogontius*,¹⁰ and the *Veteri*.¹¹ Netherby has produced also a horned stone head.¹² At the same time, there is abundant data from elsewhere in North Britain recording the worship of the Romano-Celtic wheel-god, generally linked iconographically and epigraphically with classical divine concepts, usually those related to the classical sky-god Jupiter. Of these the most important are the altars from Castlesteads, Birdoswald and Maryport (Cumbria) which bear dedications to Jupiter Optimus Maximus but which possess also wheels carved in relief. At Castlesteads two such altars are recorded.¹³ The Maryport altar¹⁴ differs from the others in the group in having the wheel positioned on the rear surface of the stone rather than on a lateral face. The other important North British find, is from the eastern side of the Wall region, at Corbridge. This consists of a clay mould depicting a god wearing a long tunic and helmet and bearing a rectangular (legionary's) shield and a large crooked club; by his right ankle is a small wheel.¹⁵ Here, by contrast, the wheel is associated not with the normal Jupiter but instead with a warrior armed with a shield but with a club in place of a sword or spear; in addition, at Corbridge the god is represented iconographically, the Cumbrian group only by the wheel itself and epigraphic allusion. I have elsewhere argued¹⁶ that the Romano-Celtic wheel-god is frequently portrayed as a warrior, for example on Jupiter-columns¹⁷ and on southern Gaulish carvings exemplified by the *Séguret* statue.¹⁸ It is argued, in these instances, that the celestial god of the Celts is being portrayed as a champion of light over darkness and life over death.

The Netherby figure is unique in British contexts in that it appears to provide evidence of an identification or collation between a Celtic sky and solar god and the symbolism generally associated with protection, prosperity and well-being. The *cornucopiae* is surely present to enhance rural fertility-symbolism, and the question has to be considered as to whether we have here a wheel-bearing deity who has all but lost his original sky-significance and has become instead a local protective and prosperity spirit. If that is so, he still retains his original identity by means of the old wheel-emblem. Alternatively what we may have instead is evidence of a familiar Celtic iconographic practice, that of increasing the general power of an image by means of compressing several different themes, adding to one depiction attributes normally appropriate to more than one divine concept. Association of elements, the manner and content of which is unfamiliar to the classical world, which is apparent on the Netherby stone (the classical image of a *Genius* accompanied by a wheel in place of a *patera*), may be paralleled by representations of other divinities within Britain. The most prominent example of curious association concerns Mars. Though in Romano-British contexts Mars is generally portrayed as a warrior (and it was surely in this role that he was introduced to Britain from Rome), the god is sometimes represented instead, especially in the Cotswold region, as a local protective power of prosperity. It is of interest that in the rural environment of the Dobunnic tribal area (roughly equivalent to modern Gloucestershire) Mars, who was originally in any case an Italian agricultural deity, should have adopted this peaceful function. The most blatant such portrayal is the relief from Custom Scrubs, Glos., where a stone dedicated to Mars Olludius¹⁹ (the Celtic epithet meaning 'Great Tree'²⁰) displays the figure of a god in the guise of a *Genius* (as at Netherby) with a double *cornucopiae* in

his left hand and a *patera* held over an altar in his right. The god wears a tunic, cloak and close-fitting cap or hood. The figure does not resemble the traditional Mars in the least and it is only the dedication which informs us of the identity of the god.

Finally, the specific identification at Netherby of celestial and prosperity-symbolism should be considered, together with the religious significance of such associated themes. There are few parallels in British iconography; closest perhaps, in terms of general theme, is the stone from Lypiatt Park, Glos.²¹ where, on the *focus* of a small altar, is a worn four-spoked wheel-carving and, twined around the stone, a ram-horned snake. This Celtic creature is itself a prime example of Celtic conflation. In the classical world, the ram symbolized fertility²² and the serpent was both a beneficent and a chthonic motif.²³ The amalgamation of the two elements may be seen as a method of enhancing or augmenting the potency of the animal. The Lypiatt altar has, moreover, an additional significance, directly related to the Netherby iconography. If we accept the general well-being symbolism of the ram-horned snake, its presence associated with that of the wheel indicates a combination of concepts almost identical to those depicted on the Cumbrian stone. The only distinction is that on the northern carving the prosperity-element is of classical origin whereas in Gloucestershire it is Celtic.

There are Continental instances of a Romano-Celtic connection between sky and prosperity/fertility cults. A stone from Naix (Meuse) portrays a god seated on a throne which bears a six-spoked wheel-motif on one side and two *cornucopiae* below it.²⁴ At Clarensac in *Gallia Narbonensis*²⁵ an altar marked with a wheel-symbol is dedicated to Jupiter and Terra Mater, thus linking the sky-god directly with prosperity and crop-growth.²⁶ Fertility and celestial motifs are present together in Britain also: a fragmentary relief from an unprovenanced Cotswold locality²⁷ depicts three Mother-Goddesses, the Deae Matres, seated in a triangular-roofed niche or *aedicula* in the apex of which is a wheel-symbol. The association is perhaps repeated at Easton Grey (Wiltshire), where a detached head from a Deae Matres group bears a wheel-derivative mark on the forehead.²⁸

The evidence from British and Continental material which has been considered (*supra*) suggests spasmodic but positive instances in Britain – and in widely scattered areas of Gaul – of an association, within the context of Romano-Celtic cult-iconography, between sky-symbolism and prosperity/fertility motifs and themes. The interest of the Netherby relief lies in the sharing of classical and Celtic elements on one and the same stone. Whilst it could be argued that a *cornucopiae* is a universal fertility-symbol, easily and naturally adopted from Roman iconography by the Celtic world, the precise copying by a craftsman in North Britain of the classical theme (if not in a traditional classical art-style) of a Genius sacrificing over an altar, with the subtle substitution of a positive sky-symbol for a (somewhat passive) *patera*, argues a knowledge, on the part of craftsman and/or patron, of classical religious art-forms. A ‘pattern-book’²⁹ may well have been employed here, but no pattern-book would have provided a sculptor with the idea of shrinking the importance of classical altar and *cornucopiae* and of introducing a flamboyant and dominant Celtic sky-symbol. The Netherby stone is evidence of personal, thinking, religious expression by an individual or a group of devotees.

Appendix

Evidence in Stone for the Cult of a Wheel-God in Britain

1. *Netherby*, Cumbria NGR NY 3971.
Relief of Genius, half-draped, with wheel held over altar in place of usual *patera*; *cornucopiae* in left hand. Carlisle Museum.³⁰

2. *Birdoswald*, Cumbria NGR NY 6166.
Relief of wheel. Carlisle Museum.³¹
3. *Birdoswald*, Cumbria NGR NY 6166
Altar dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, by 1st Aelian Cohort of Dacians. Swastika-motif on front at top flanked by two enclosed crosses (or four-spoked wheels).³²
4. *Caerleon*, Gwent NGR ST 3390.
Small stone object, possibly a mould for a bronze object. It portrays a man, very crudely represented. At the end of each arm is a wheel; a further wheel is by left foot and, at right foot, is rectangular object.³³
5. *Castlesteads*, Cumbria NGR NY 5264.
Altar with dedication to Jupiter Optimus Maximus by 2nd, part-mounted, Cohort of Tungrians. On left side is thunderbolt, on right is ten-spoked wheel. Along top of altar series of six enclosed crosses or four-spoked wheels. Carlisle Museum.³⁴
6. *Castlesteads*, Cumbria NGR NY 5264.
Altar dedicated to Jupiter, with ten-spoked wheel in relief. On left side thunderbolt, on right wheel. Found in 1660. Dedication is to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the Numen of the Emperor, by 2nd, part-mounted, Cohort of Tungrians. The altar was set up in A.D. 241. Carlisle Museum.³⁵
7. *Churcham*, Gloucestershire NGR SO 7618.
Oblong stone plaque built into wall of church. In the centre is male figure with huge head, long tunic and possibly horns. Hands and elbows symmetrically half-extended from body. In each hand is firmly grasped a trilobate object; at each of lower angles of plaque is four-spoked wheel.³⁶
8. *Cotswolds*, unprovenanced.
Carving of Mother-Goddesses bearing wheel-sign at apex of niche above heads. Devizes Museum.³⁷
9. *Easton Grey*, Wiltshire NGR ST 8987.
Carving of Mother-Goddess with stylized wheel-symbol on forehead. Devizes Museum.³⁸
10. *Lypiatt Park*, Gloucestershire NGR SO 9005.
Altar with ram-horned serpent entwined around the external surface; worn but recognisable wheel on top *focus*. Stroud & District Museum.³⁹
11. *Maryport*, Cumbria NGR NY 0336
Wheel carved on stone.⁴⁰
12. *Maryport*, Cumbria NGR NY 0336.
Altar; on either side *patera*, on rear wheel. Dedication is to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, by 1st Cohort of Spaniards. Found 350 yards north-east of fort. Netherhall Collection.⁴¹

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