

ART. IV – *An Altar to Vulcan from Maryport.*

By G. R. STEPHENS.

THE altar, *RIB* 846,¹ was found at Maryport in 1870. It was one of seventeen altars found buried in pits near the second century parade ground, about 320 metres north-east of the fort.² Sixteen are inscribed,³ their texts showing that they were dedicated by commanders of auxiliary units, in the main to Jupiter Best and Greatest (*I.O.M.*). The number recovered suggests that they were dedicated annually at the beginning of January, when the garrison renewed its oath of loyalty to the emperor. The absence of weathering implies that they were buried not long after being set up.⁴

RIB 846 is badly damaged. The die is mostly intact, but is separated from the capital and base. Part of the capital was found in the pit, showing that the base had been lost, and at least part of the capital detached, before it was buried; the presence in the pit of part of the capital could suggest that further damage was suffered during burial. It is likely that some of the other altars were disinterred and reburied in the Roman period.⁵ Possibly *RIB* 846 was also reburied, and was broken when originally buried, or when first disinterred.⁶ In that case, the base was discarded, or left in the original pit, which may still await discovery. Like a number of other altars from Maryport,⁷ it is a private dedication. Clearly, therefore, more than one altar was dedicated in some years: one on behalf of the unit, and a second by some commanders on their own behalf.

The altar was set up by Helstrius Novellus, a prefect, to the divine power (*numen*) of the god Vulcan. One of the other 1870 altars shows that he was prefect of *cohors I Hispanorum equitata*, probably within the period 130-38.⁸ The name Helstrius is extremely rare; indeed, these may well be the only recorded instances of it. It was an Italian name, perhaps denoting Etruscan origin,⁹ but since two-thirds of all known Novelli are recorded in Africa,¹⁰ this could suggest that the family were Italian colonists. An appreciable number of dedications to Vulcan are known from Gaul, Germany and the Danubian provinces, but it seems clear that many of these were made to native Smith gods who were equated with Vulcan.¹¹ Outside these areas, by far the largest number of dedications come from Italy, where Vitruvius envisaged a temple of Vulcan outside every town;¹² conversely, few are known from Africa.¹³ This does not preclude African extraction, but makes it much more likely that Novellus's home was in Italy.

Vulcan dedications are comparatively uncommon in Britain.¹⁴ Here, as elsewhere, it is unclear how many were made to the Roman god, to Smith gods, or to an amalgam of the two. The distinction is not merely semantic, although normally passed over in enforced silence. Where a distinction can be made, it will reveal something of the perceptions of the dedicator. It will also reveal something of the rites performed, which are likely to have been influenced by the identity of the god as perceived by the shrine or the devotee. Vulcan, although in origin perhaps a volcano *numen*, was the Roman Smith god. Smithing employs fire, and sacrifices to Smith gods may have involved consumption by fire. Sacrifices to the Roman god involved casting live fish into fire. The burning of offerings was common in Graeco-Roman religion, but the burning of live creatures was not;¹⁵ the sacrifice of live fish appears to have been confined to Vulcan.¹⁶

Since this rite was unique in Roman religion, it seems unlikely that Celts sacrificed live fish to their Smith gods other than when consciously imitating the Roman rites. This may imply a fundamental difference in the ritual associated with the Roman god and his Celtic and Germanic counterparts, a difference perhaps replicated in other equated cults.

A Smith god is portrayed on two pre-Roman coins; at least one of these might have been copied from an imported clay sealing,¹⁷ but for all that was almost certainly perceived by ruler and subject as a native god, rather than Vulcan. Vulcan is represented in two hoards of silverwork: on two votive plaques from Barkway, and a silver plate from Stony Stratford (*RIB* 215). These are fully classical in style, and might have been imported or worked in Britain by immigrant craftsmen.¹⁸ It does not follow that they portray the classical god, for Mars appears in the Barkway hoard as Mars Alator and Mars Toutatis (*RIB* 218-9). At best, these were made as syncretistic figures; despite naming Vulcan, it is more likely that they represent a Smith god.¹⁹ There seems little doubt that many portrayals of Smith gods were dedicated to native gods, albeit in classical guise.²⁰

Vulcan appears on at least two other British altars. Both are third century, one by the *vicani Vindolandesses* at Chesterholm *pro domu divina et numinibus Augustorum Volcano sacrum*, and the other by the *magistri vikanorum* at Old Carlisle to *I.O.M. et Vulkano*.²¹ There are a number of comparable dedications outside Britain, presumably where smiths (and perhaps armourers) were important.²² Smiths may well have been important at Chesterholm, and perhaps at Maryport, where iron slag and coal has been found.²³ This does not mean that the *vicani* at Chesterholm and Old Carlisle were devotees of Vulcan. In view of the date, it is more probable that they worshipped a composite god, notwithstanding the form and language of the dedications. A second altar from Maryport records either Vulcan or Victory. It is a fragment reading *Iov[i O. M.] et V[. . .] Cr[. . .]* (*RIB* 835). Dedications to Vulcan Augustus show that the god was associated with the imperial cult in popular imagination,²⁴ but the Old Carlisle altar seems to be the only precedent for *I.O.M.* and Vulcan.²⁵ Since, however, *I.O.M.* and Victory were commonly associated, *Iov[i O. M.] et V[ictoriae]* seems much more likely. *Cr[. . .]* was clearly the name of a prefect.²⁶ To judge from the other altars, the name was given in the nominative; if it was followed by unit (which it need not have been), this was given in the genitive. The unit in question was probably not *I Hispanorum*, all of whose commanders at Maryport seem to be known.²⁷ If the altar was second century, as are most of the Maryport altars, *Cr[. . .]* probably commanded *cohors I Baetasiarum* or *cohors I Delmatarum*. The letter-forms are not unlike those recording the latter unit,²⁸ but there are insufficient letters to resolve the question.

Dedications to the *numen* of a god were not uncommon.²⁹ But apart from two Gallic dedications to the *num. Aug. deo Volcano*,³⁰ the Barkway dedication to the *numini volcano* (*RIB* 220) may be the Maryport altar's only direct parallel. This, as has been seen, probably commemorated a native god in classical guise. This can scarcely be the case with the altar, which was dedicated by a Roman knight, probably from Italy, and was apparently set up amongst a group of official altars to Jupiter Best and Greatest. It almost certainly denoted Novellus's personal veneration of the Roman cult.

In historic times, the cult of Vulcan was pre-eminent at Ostia, where the *Vulcanalia* on 23 August³¹ was a major occasion.³² It seems highly probable that the altar was dedicated on 23 August, no doubt with the customary sacrifice of live fish, for which the

fort was ideally placed. It may not be too fanciful to imagine that Novellus had been to Ostia and taken part in the *Vulcanalia*. Two generations later, M. Antius Crescens Calpurnianus, *iuridicus* and acting governor of Britain, served as *pontifex Volcani et aedium sacrarum* at Ostia.³³ Calpurnianus presumably came from Ostia. It is possible that the city was also the *patria* of Helstrius Novellus, although this is pure conjecture.

Notes and References

- ¹ = LS 871 = CIL VI 398.
- ² J. C. Bruce, CW1, i, 175-88 = AA² VII (1876), 184-95.
- ³ LS 889 is uninscribed.
- ⁴ L. P. Wenham, CW2, xxxix, 19-22; M. G. Jarrett, CW2, lxxv, 115-17.
- ⁵ M. G. Jarrett, *op. cit.*, 116-17.
- ⁶ The altars were well, rather than carefully, buried, for some of the capitals were damaged, "apparently by the force with which they have been projected into their places – the displaced fragments lying beside them" (J. C. Bruce, *op. cit.*, 179, 187).
- ⁷ e.g. RIB 812, 833.
- ⁸ RIB 822; H. Devijver, *Prosopographia militarium equestrum* (Louvain, 1976), H4; M. G. Jarrett and G. R. Stephens, CW2, lxxxvii, 61-6.
- ⁹ W. Schulze, *Zur Geschichte lateinischer Eigennamen* (Berlin, 1904), 75.
- ¹⁰ I. Kajanto, *The Latin cognomina* (Helsinki, 1965), 286.
- ¹¹ e.g. CIL xiii 3026 = ILS 4613a (Paris); F. Brommer, *Der Gott Vulkan auf provinzialrömischen Reliefs* (Cologne and Vienna, 1973).
- ¹² *de arch.* 1.7.1.
- ¹³ CIL viii 24657 (Carthage), 25362 (Tunis).
- ¹⁴ M. Henig and R. Wilkins, *Ant. J.* lxii (1982), 372. See M. Green, *A corpus of religious material from the civilian areas of Roman Britain*, BAR 24 (Oxford, 1976), with M. Henig and R. Wilkins, *id.*, 370-2; *Oxford J. Arch.* i (1982), 119-24.
- ¹⁵ The only parallel seems to be the burning of live game in honour of Artemis Laphria at Patrai (Pausanias 7.18.12).
- ¹⁶ Festus, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Teubingen, 1913), 274; H. J. Rose, *JRS* xxiii (1933), 58, 61-2. n.b. CIL xii 4338 = ILS 3298 (Narbo) for a possible example of fish sacrifice.
- ¹⁷ B. Allen, *PPS*² xxiv (1958), pl. vii. 56, 57; M. Henig, *Britannia* iii (1972), 222-3.
- ¹⁸ *Catalogue of silver plate (Greek, Etruscan, and Roman) in the British Museum* (London, 1921), 230-41; J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (Oxford, 1964), 330.
- ¹⁹ J. Leach, AA⁴ xl (1962), 42.
- ²⁰ A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), 380. e.g. The appliqué figures from Corbridge (J. Leach, *op. cit.*, 35-6), and on the sceptre binding from the Romano-Celtic temple at Farley Heath (R. G. Goodchild, *Ant. J.* xviii (1938), 391-6; xxvii (1947), 83-5).
- ²¹ RIB 1700, 899.
- ²² P. Salway, *The frontier people of Roman Britain* (Cambridge, 1965), 25-6, citing CIL iii 3505; xiii 6454; ILS 7111.
- ²³ R. Birley, *Vindolanda* (London, 1977), 17, 76; J. Robinson, CW1, v, 248.
- ²⁴ e.g. CIL iii 3646, 4447; v 838, 4294; xii 1552; xiii 1676, 2451; AE 1974. 512.
- ²⁵ n.b. CIL iii 10418+AE 1961.1 (Aquincum); *I. O. M. T*(eutanus?).
- ²⁶ Overlooked in H. Devijver, *op. cit.*.
- ²⁷ M. G. Jarrett and G. R. Stephens, *op. cit.*.
- ²⁸ RIB 832, 847.
- ²⁹ e.g. The *numen* of Saturn: AE 1975.874 (Chul); 1978.363 (Tergeste).
- ³⁰ CIL xiii 3164, 3528.
- ³¹ W. F. Snyder, *Yale Class. Stud.* vii (1940), 284.
- ³² R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*² (Oxford, 1973), 337-43.
- ³³ CIL xvi 324, 325 = ILS 4176.

