

THE STATUS OF ROMAN CHESTER: A REPLY

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In an article published in this *Journal* in 1948, Professor Eric Birley argued in favour of the civil settlement which grew up outside the legionary fortress of *Deva* having been elevated to chartered town status, with the rank of either a *municipium* or a *colonia*, at some time during the second century (Birley, 1948). He based his case primarily upon the evidence of two inscribed altars dedicated by men who appear to have been civilians and who give '*Deva*' as their *origo* (not necessarily an individual's place of birth but rather the officially registered place of his family's origin; this could be either a *colonia*, a *municipium* or a native *civitas peregrina*, in short any self governing town or tribal territory). One of these altars (*CIL* XIII 6221 = *ILS* 4573) was found at *Borbetomagus* (Worms) in *Germania Superior* and the inscription reads: '[*in honorem*] *domus divinae Marti Loucetio sacrum Amandus Velugni filius Devas v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*' i.e. '[In honour of the Imperial family, sacred to Mars Loucetius, Amandus son of Velugnus (citizen) of *Deva*, willingly and deservedly fulfills his vow]'. The text of the other altar (*AE* 1915 no. 70 = 1916 no. 28), discovered at *Augusta Treverorum* (Trier) in *Gallia Belgica*, is as follows: '*Leno Marti et Ancamnae Optatius Verus Devas ex voto posuit*' i.e. '[To Mars Lenus and Ancamna, Optatius Verus, (citizen) of *Deva*, has set up (this altar) in accordance with a vow]'. Birley identified the *Deva* mentioned in these inscriptions with Chester and because only those communities which had been officially accorded rights of self government could be cited as legal places of origin, he concluded that its civil settlement (*canabae legionis*) must have been granted chartered town status. Furthermore, as Amandus and his father do not seem to have possessed Roman citizenship (for both bear only the single name typical of *peregrini*) Birley dated this altar and thus the supposed promotion of Chester's *canabae*, to the period before the enactment of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* by which all free born inhabitants of the empire were automatically entitled to hold Roman citizenship.

Interest in Birley's hypothesis was rekindled in the late 1960s by the discovery at Chester of a fragmentary slate cut inscription found among make up material for an early third century re surfacing of the road which ran along the north side of the *principia* (Petch and Robinson, 1971, 21-6; Wright and Hassall, 1971, 290 no. 7; and 1973, 336, item a/). Although those parts which survive are insufficient to enable a restoration of the complete text, the inscription is clearly something out of the ordinary, for it is set out in normal prose rather than the stereotyped formulae

usually employed in Romano British inscriptions, especially those set up by the military. Its style is reminiscent of that used for edicts and rescripts issued by the emperor; documents mainly concerned with administrative matters and expressed in legal or quasi legal language, permanent copies of which were set up in the communities concerned as a public record of decisions affecting some facet of their administration or status. Partly because of its style and partly because a fragment thought to come from the same inscription (*RIB* 462) was discovered in the *canabae* east of the fortress many years ago, it has been suggested (Petch and Robinson, 1971, 25-6) that these fragments originally formed part of a grandiose inscription commemorating the elevation of Chester's extra mural settlement to a chartered town, perhaps during the reign of Hadrian, which once adorned some major building in the *canabae*.

More recently, a variant on this hypothesis has been proposed by Mr. T.J. Strickland (1981, 415-19). Legion XX is known to have played an important role in the construction of Hadrian's Wall and that of its Antonine successor (for the former *RIB* 1385, 1390, 1391, 1430, 1645, 1708, 1762, 1852, 2028, 2035, 2077, 2078, etc.; for the latter *RIB* 2173, 2184, 2197-9, 2206, 2208, 2210), the departure from Chester c. A.D. 120 of the cohorts involved in this work and their eventual return c. A.D. 160 being reflected by the disuse and subsequent rebuilding of a number of barrack blocks and by a general spate of building activity at the end of this period (Ward and Strickland, 1978, 3 and 14-22; Strickland, 1978, 27-8; 1981, 418-19; 1982, 9-10). Speculating upon events at Chester in the period c. A.D. 120-160 and perhaps intended more as a stimulus to further discussion than a totally serious hypothesis, Mr. Strickland has suggested that all, not just part, of the legion may have been moved forward around 120 and that the fortress was then re founded as some form of chartered town as part of Hadrian's scheme for the promotion of urban development in Britain. The inscription found in the road north of the *principia*, which he prefers to see as having adorned an important building nearby rather than one in the *canabae*, was therefore set up to commemorate this change of status (Strickland, 1981, 415-19). Subsequently, as a result of the withdrawal from Scotland and the consequent redeployment of military forces which this entailed, Legion XX returned to Chester and 'repossessed' the fortress.

There are, however, a number of serious flaws in all of the hypotheses outlined above. To take the most recently discovered piece of evidence first, although the inscription from the roadway north of the *principia* is clearly unusual both in style and content, there is nothing in the surviving parts of the text to link it either directly or indirectly with the *canabae*. Furthermore, the size and number of the recovered fragments imply the inscription originated from a building nearby. The piece found in Seller Street east of the fortress in 1896, assuming that it did belong to the same inscription (which is by no means certain), was retrieved from an area known to have been used as a rubbish dump in the Roman period (Wilson, 1971, 255) and so it could quite easily have been transported there along with other debris as part of a tidying up operation following repairs or alterations to one or more of the buildings at the heart of the fortress. However, while it is possible, if not probable, that this inscrip-

tion did come from an internal building, the scenario constructed by Strickland to account for its dedication is, as he himself concedes, extremely difficult to accept. Indeed, at the end of his review of events at Chester in the second century he concludes that, on balance, the evidence is such as to indicate that Legion XX never actually relinquished control of its old base (1981, 419). The occupation by civilians of abandoned military installations was a fairly common phenomenon, as was the conversion of obsolete legionary fortresses into veteran colonies (e.g. Colchester: Crummy, 1977; Gloucester: Hurst, 1976; and Lincoln: Colyer, 1975) and it is perfectly possible for the absence of part or all of the legion from Chester in the mid second century to have given rise to a situation in which civilians 'colonised' vacant areas within the defences. On the other hand, an official re foundation of the fortress as a chartered town c. A.D. 120 followed by a re militarisation of the site some forty years later, even assuming the new town had failed to develop for some reason, is a proposed sequence of events for which it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to find a parallel.

With regard to Birley's suggestion, the objections are twofold. Firstly, *Deva* was a very common place name both in Britain and in Gaul (Whatmough, 1970, 456; Rivet and Smith, 1979, 336-7) and so the chances of Chester having been the home town of the dedicants of the altars cited by Birley are somewhat remote. Secondly (and this also applies to both Petch and Robinson's and Strickland's interpretation of the slate cut inscription found in 1967), there is absolutely no evidence, either from Britain or from any other province, for the promotion of extra mural settlements like that at Chester to chartered towns before the time of Severus (Mócsy, 1953, 194-8; 1974, 140-2 and 218-23; Mason, 1984, 232-67). In those cases where a *municipium* was created in the vicinity of a legionary base in the second century (e.g. *Apulum*, *Aquincum*, *Carnuntum* and *Viminacium*) this status was conferred upon a civil settlement lying several kilometres distant from the fortress not the *canabae legionis* (Vittinghoff, 1968; Mócsy, 1974, 139-42; Mason, 1984, 135-40). It is possible of course, to accept the identification of Chester with the *Deva* mentioned on the inscriptions from Worms and Trier and suggest that the men who dedicated them originated from the civil settlement at Heronbridge, 2 km. south of the fortress, with this being the community that was granted chartered status in the second century (at those legionary bases where this arrangement is known, the fortress with its suburbs and the independent town nearby apparently shared the same place name, being differentiated by the fact that one was a *castra* and the other a *municipium*; e.g. *castra Aquincum* and *municipium Aquincum*). However, while such an explanation is feasible, the character and extent of the Heronbridge settlement as known at present argue against it ever having attained a size and importance sufficient to warrant promotion (Thompson, 1965, 60-5; Mason, 1984, 152-72).

Although, in view of the foregoing, it seems most unlikely that Chester's extra mural settlement became a chartered town during the second century, there is nothing to say that it could not have attained this status at some time after A.D. 200. Indeed, comparison with developments in other provinces renders this more than probable. Most of the *canabae* settlements in the Danubian provinces for example were granted

full rights of self government in the third century (Vittinghoff, 1968; Mócsy, 1974, 218-23; Mason, 1984, 249-67) and so too were the *canabae* at Mainz in Upper Germany (von Petrikovits, 1963, 30 on *CIL* XIII 6727) and the extra mural settlement at York in Britain (*JRS*, 11 (1921), 101-18). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that, as a result of administrative reforms connected with the *Constitutio Antoniniana* which were designed to simplify the hierarchy of local government institutions, even those *canabae* which were not so promoted were freed from any form of military control, becoming *municipia* in fact if not in law (Mócsy, 1974, 221; Mason, 1984, 199-203 and 249-67). Thus, although it may never have attained the actual status of a chartered town, Chester's extra mural settlement may well have achieved more or less full rights of self government during the third century.

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