

ON AN ALTAR, WITH INSCRIPTION, RECENTLY FOUND
AT BINCHESTER (THE ANCIENT VINOVIUM).

READ 28TH JANUARY, 1880, BY THE REV. R. E. HOOPPELL,
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AT a comparatively early period of the recent exploration of Vinovium an altar was found by the workman, and placed by him with other stones which he had exhumed, such as the bases of pilasters, &c. It was much broken about the edges, but bore upon its broadest side a representation of a patera, or sacrificing dish, with handle. The opposite side to this was blank and rough. The two narrower sides appeared also blank. It was often scrutinized, but, evidently, from what has since occurred, not with sufficient care. And, yet, I am not sure that anything more could have been discovered upon the altar if it had not been removed, some time ago, to a chamber where other articles found in the exploration were stored. In this chamber it was placed on the floor, at the head of the stairs, and, by chance, in such a way that the right side of it was turned obliquely towards anyone entering the chamber by the stairs. One day last month I happened to go to the chamber for some potters' stamps. The sun was shining outside, and the light, entering by a window and some lattice-work, was reflected in the room in a peculiar manner. As I ascended the stairs my eyes fell upon the altar, and there, on the side turned towards me, was an inscription, evidently in five lines, some of the letters of which stood out, in the peculiar light, with marvellous distinctness. As soon as possible I visited the chamber again, and took paper impressions of the side of the altar turned towards the entrance, and examined, also, the opposite side, and I was glad to find that neither side was in reality so blank as they had appeared during the whole time the altar had remained in the open air.

The altar, as already said, has been much injured; whether designedly, however, or by natural causes, is not easy to determine. The top, to a depth of perhaps three inches, is gone, and the edges

are chipped in various places. The right side appears never to have been sculptured. Probably the altar was placed against the wall of the temple or other building in which it was erected. It stands, at present, fifteen inches high. It is seven inches broad, and twelve inches deep. On the left side, it has, as already stated, a patera, with handle. The handle is uppermost. On the back it has the "culter" and "securis," the sacrificial knife and axe, the edges turned towards the left side of the altar. On the front it has the inscription, which is enclosed in a kind of panel. Held in various lights, some of the letters come out quite plainly; but it requires great patience, and some ingenuity, to make out, or supply, the whole. I think, however, a high degree of probability attaches to the reading I am about to give. I took numerous paper impressions and one or two rubbings of the stone, and have diligently compared them all again and again, and have carefully examined the stone in every variety of light, and at every possible angle. Of the correctness of the first two lines I have little doubt, and, in the probability of the correctness of the rest, at any rate of their general scope and significance, I entertain considerable confidence.



M	A	T	R
T	R	A	M
E	Q	V	I
V	E	T	T
V	S	L	M

That is to say :—

MATRIBUS
 TRAMARINIS
 EQUITES ALAE
 VETTONUM CIVIUM ROMANORUM
 VOTUM SOLVERUNT LIBENTES MERITIS

Or in English :—

“To the Goddess Mothers across the sea, the horsemen of the Ala of the Vettonians, Roman citizens, have erected this in due and cheerful performance of a vow.”

As already said, there can be little doubt about the first two lines, and these give us a very interesting dedication. Though not unknown, dedications to the Transmarine Mothers are not common. Horsley was delighted when he found one at Plumpton (or Old Penrith), inasmuch as it was the first instance he had met with. Another had been recorded by Selden as existing near Lowther (possibly at Brougham Castle), though Horsley sought in vain for the original. Two more have been discovered since, one at Risingham, now in the Museum at Alnwick Castle, the other in this town, now in the Museum of this Society. The one Horsley saw, as well as the one he sought in vain for, have both been long lost. All four are given in the "Lapidarium Septentrionale," and in Dr. Hübner's "Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum." I do not know of any other examples found in Britain.

The Plumpton inscription expanded ran thus:—

DEABUS MATRIBUS TRAMARINIS
ET NUMINI IMPERATORIS ALEXANDRI AUGUSTI ET JULIÆ MAM
MAEÆ MATRI AUGUSTI NOSTRI ET CASTRORUM TO
• • • • • TI • • DOMUI DIVINÆ EORUM
• • • • • VEXILLATIO • • •

The Lowther inscription thus :—

DEABUS MATRIBUS
TRAMARINIS VEXILLATIO GERMA-
NORUM PRO SALUTE
REIPUBLICÆ VOTUM SOLVIT LIBENS MERITO.

The Risingham one has :—

MATRIBUS TRAMARINIS
JULIUS VICTOR
VOTUM SOLVIT LIBENS MERITO.

And the Newcastle one :—

DEABUS MATRIBUS TRAMARINIS
PATRIIS AURELIUS JUVENALIS.

It will be observed that the Risingham one omits the word "Deabus," as our Binchester one does, and that both the Plumpton one and the

Lowther one were dedicated by vexillations of troops, while the Risingham one and the Newcastle one were dedicated by individuals.

In giving the readings I have followed our learned colleague, Dr. Bruce. Dr. Hübner differs slightly in the Plumpton example, and somewhat more considerably in the Lowther one.

In connection with the Risingham altar, it may not be without interest to note that Publius Victor, the dedicator, has left other memorials of his piety, one being an altar to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, and the other an altar to the gods of the locality in which he was stationed—"Diis cultoribus hujus loci." Julius Victor was Tribune of the First Cohort of the Vangiones, a people from the neighbourhood of the Rhine.

The Newcastle inscription is surmounted by the sculptured representation of three females with folded hands, sitting on chairs or thrones within three arched recesses. Their heads appear destitute of locks; and it was pointed out to me by a friend that their countenances are of a decidedly eastern cast.

The Deæ Matres seem to have been favourite objects of worship at Vinovium, for this is by no means the only altar to such goddesses recorded as having been found there. Of the eight or nine inscriptions known before the recent exploration commenced, I think three are to Matres. Two are, certainly, the one commencing "Deabus Matribus Lot" (or Q. L. Ot.), and the one commencing "Matribus Sacrum Gemellus." The one given by Camden as commencing "Trib Cohor I Cartov" was also, in all probability, dedicated to Matres, the "Trib" being part of the word "Matribus," and the "Cohor I Cartov" existing in Camden's imagination rather than on the stone, as suggested by Dr. Hübner.

As far as can be judged, I should assign an early date to this altar. It was found on the line of the street at Vinovium, where remains of the earliest period of Roman occupation seemed particularly abundant. I should think, too, that it had long stood in its place in the temple or other building in which it had been erected, and that the inscription had become faint and difficult of decipherment through age before it was cast down and mutilated by conquerors, Christians, or neglect. It is now in the Museum of the University of Durham, with the Votive Tablet to Æsculapius and Salus, and a large collection of other sculptures and articles exhumed in the recent exploration of the interesting and important Station of Vinovium.