



ALTAR TO COCIDIUS, FROM RISINGHAM.

VII.—A NEW ALTAR TO COCIDIOUS AND “ROB OF RISINGHAM.”

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[Read on 24th February 1937.]

The accompanying illustration (plate x) represents an altar long known to be walled up in Townfoot farm, East Woodburn, where it forms the main pier of a door in the byre adjoining the house. Hitherto only the back and one side, bearing a knife and pole-axe, could be seen. In February 1936, with the kind permission of the owner, Mr. Little of Hexham, and the tenant, Mr. Bell, we were able to have it turned round, so that the main face of the altar became visible.

The inscription has been a long one, of seven lines, and was much weathered before the stone was taken for building: subsequently, the dexter side was damaged by the sharpening of flaying-knives, when the present byre was in use as a slaughter-house. The mouldings, however, had shielded from weather and steel the first and last lines, leaving the text DEO COCIDIO . . . v.s.l.m. Despite its fragmentary nature, this text is of especial interest because Cocidius is a local god, whose dedications are common only in the district west of Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall, becoming increasingly frequent (fig. 1) until north Cumberland, the area of dense distribution, is reached. For the first time, a dedication to Cocidius can be recorded from Dere Street.

A remarkable note is also struck by the elaborately carved frieze upon the capital of the altar; of which the

front and sinister side are preserved, the dexter side and back having been trimmed off by those who built the stone into the byre. The centre of the front panel (fig. 2) is occupied by a standing figure, dressed in a short tunic, and carrying a bow on his left. This is doubtless intended for the deity. On his left, overshadowed by a tree, a hunting-dog awaits orders, nose in air. To his right, a stag edges

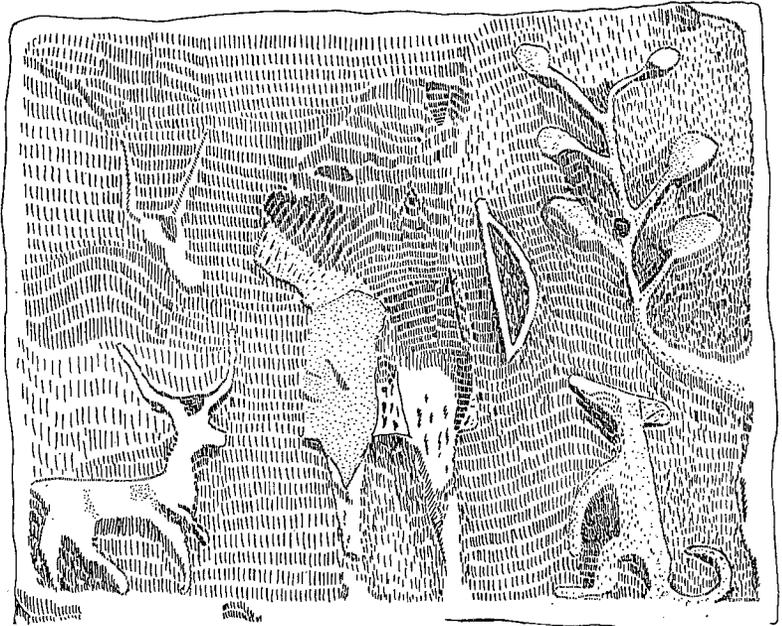


FIG. 2.

RISINGHAM ALTAR TO COCIDIUS, FRONT PANEL.

daintily forward; and it also was overshadowed by a tree, now considerably damaged. This neat and sensitive composition is the first representation of Cocidius on a stone bearing his name; and the type which the artist has sought to portray is evidently Silvanus Cocidius, as upon the Housesteads altar (C. vii, 642) rather than Mars Cocidius. The silvan emphasis is further marked by the treatment of the

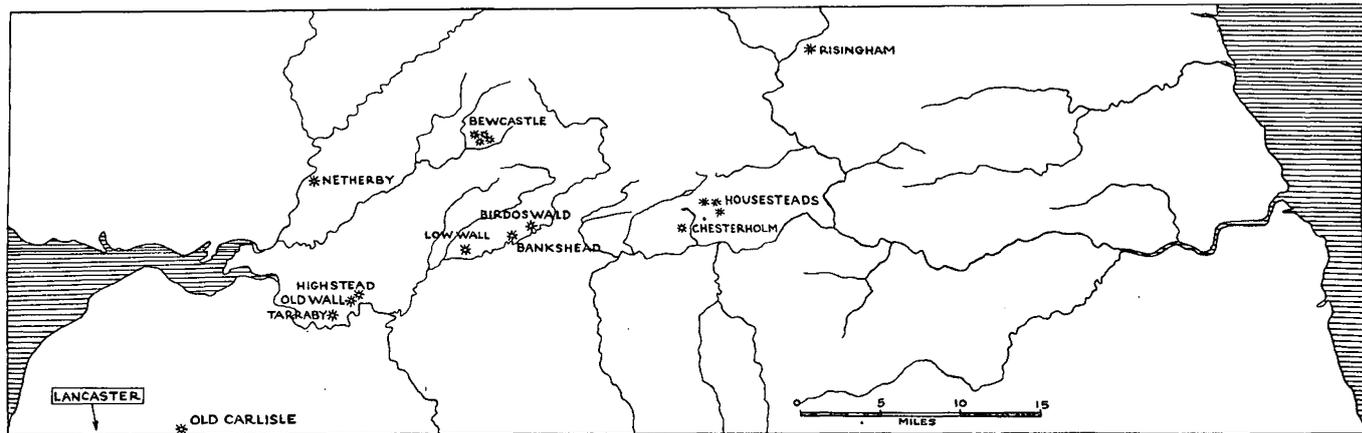


FIG. I.

DISTRIBUTION-MAP OF ALTARS TO COCIDIUS.

surviving two-thirds of the sinister panel (fig. 3), on which a doe and its young (fore-part only surviving) once more tread their way lightly past a great tree. Doubtless the missing dexter panel bore a similar scene, in which the denizens of the forest gathered round their patron, who sometimes slew beasts and sometimes man. The whole composition is of exceptional interest as giving a vivid



FIG. 3.

RISINGHAM ALTAR TO COCIDIUS, SINISTER SIDE.

impression of a native deity and his environment, the forest. The forest region, alive with deer, was not far away. If proof were needed, the numerous antlers from High Rochester, and the name of the Scottish tribe beyond, the Selgovae or Hunters, demonstrate that our altar reflects essentially local colour.

Seeking then for parallels, the frieze of stags in a forest is matched, if in cruder style, by an altar from Chester-

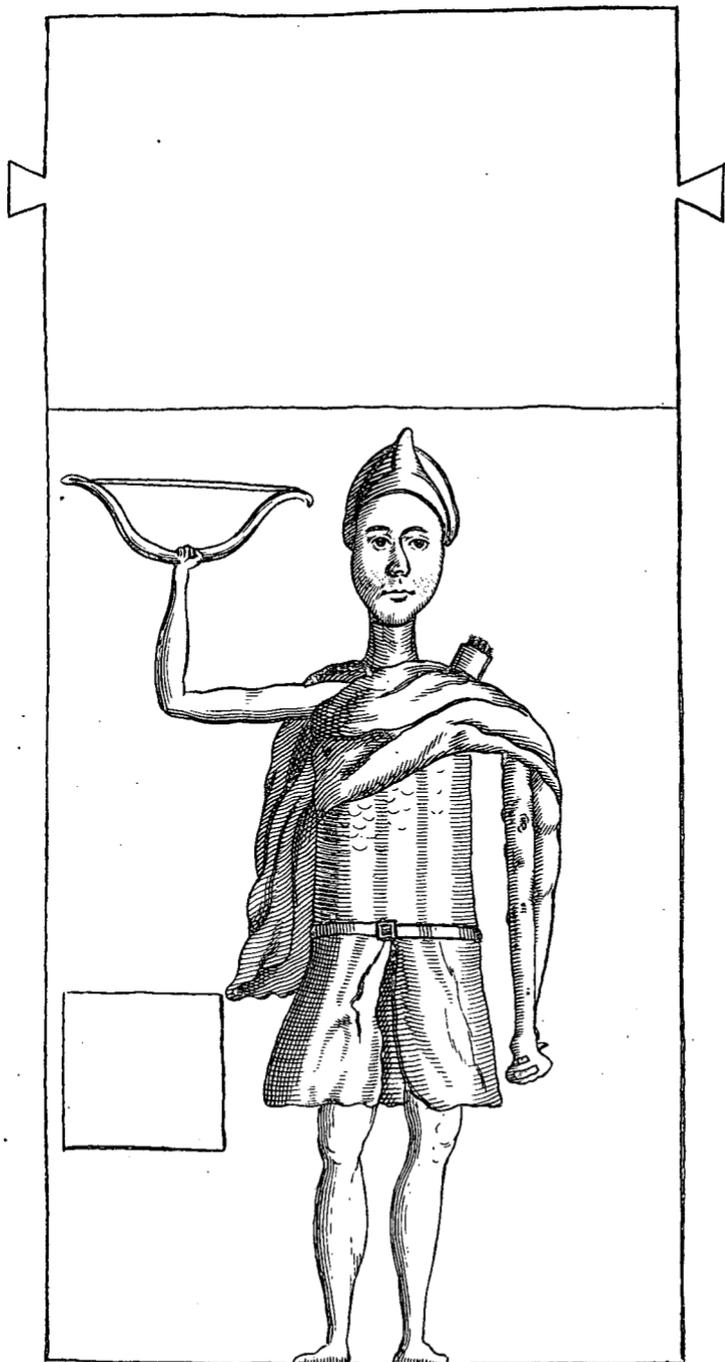


FIG. 4.
ROBIN OF RISINGHAM (AFTER HORSLEY).

holm (LS 271), whose text is worn away. For a similar representation of the god, we are disposed to look nearer Risingham. The richness and length of this important dedication are sufficient evidence that his cult was honoured there with due circumstance. Weight may therefore be attached to the resemblance between this archer-god and a famous figure from the same locality, now mutilated yet widely known as "Rob of Risingham." To-day, only the legs and the skirt of a tunic remain, together with an animal carried in the left hand. These features are themselves suggestive of a kinship between the two figures. But the older and somewhat unsympathetic engravings (fig. 4) portrayed a helmed figure bearing a bow, thus making the resemblance a very close one. The stones on which they are carved, are, however, very different. The surviving figure of Rob is cut upon a large slab of native rock, now detached from its original bed and overshadowed by quarrymen's waste-heaps. It is on record that it was detached from a true crag of living rock. Rock-carvings of this kind are not uncommon in the Roman world: another British example is on the Eagle Rock at Cramond, where a much defaced human figure is seen through thick wire netting, applied too late for its adequate preservation. The Cramond figure is on a sea-cliff, and its identity is a guessing matter; but there can be little doubt as to the identity of "Rob." The hare and bow stamp him as Silvanus, in harmony with the locality, a wild crag on the bleak hill-side.

The altar, however, teaches us that at *Habitancum* Silvanus had a local aspect. He was equated with Cocidius the Red, whose hands were stained in time of war with human blood. West overland, in Cumbria, this warlike aspect of Cocidius was predominant. It is not without significance that in Northumberland a milder version appears. The old head-hunter becomes a god of venery, patron of wild life, a veritable St. Hubert. The change corresponds to a difference in political conditions,

long ago detected by Haverfield, and now strongly confirmed by the knowledge that both High Rochester and Risingham forts were still held in the fourth century. In Roman Northumberland the land beyond the Wall, separated east of North Tyne by neither wild mosses nor estuaries from contact with civilization, was not only more thoroughly supervised by the frontier troops, but was also more receptive of Roman commerce. It was, in fact, a more peaceable land, whose inhabitants were more closely bound to Rome, whether by compulsion or the stronger bonds of self-interest. The milder life might be expected to reflect itself in milder religious beliefs, of which there could hardly be a more striking example than this metamorphosis of Cocidius.



SILVANUS-COCIDIUS, FROM SOUTH SHIELDS.

The intaglio in red jasper, of which an impression is here drawn, was found on 12th December 1877 at The Lawe, South Shields, and came into the possession of the late Robert Blair; it was bought from his executor by Mr. C. H. Hunter Blair, in whose possession it now is. It was figured in *Ant. Jour.* IV, 248.