



THE "BIRTH OF MITHRAS" FROM HOUSESTEADS: 1, BEFORE CLEANING AND RESTORATION; 2, CLEANED AND RESTORED.

*Photos. University Library, Newcastle upon Tyne.*

## NOTES

### 1.—THE RESTORATION OF THE "BIRTH OF MITHRAS" FROM HOUSESTEADS<sup>1</sup>

There were two legends concerning the birth of Mithras. According to one of them he sprang, fully-grown, from a rock, and according to the other he was born from a tree. Both were represented in sculptures<sup>2</sup> of the Roman era, but the pierced sandstone relief from Housesteads<sup>3</sup> on Hadrian's Wall (Pl. XXVII), now in the Museum of Antiquities of the University of Durham and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, has no parallel amongst these. Restored, it measures 50 ins. in height and 31 ins. in width (maximum dimensions). The lower part of the stone is quite plain; the upper part, 30½ ins. high, shows the god, from the waist upwards, emerging from half of an egg, with the other half still on his head. Both arms are raised, the right hand holding up a sword or dagger, the left a torch. A mass of curly hair falls on either side of the face. Body, head and arms have been carved in the round, but the hands, sword and torch are represented in relief on the oval frame which encloses the representation of the divine birth. The frame itself is decorated with the twelve figures of the Zodiac which presumably symbolised for initiates the annual course of the Unconquered Sun-god (*Sol Invictus*), whom they identified with Mithras. The ovoid shape of the frame echoes the theme of the sculpture, in which the egg sym-

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Mr. C. M. Daniels for discussing this stone with me, but any errors of fact or interpretation in this note should not be attributed to him.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *passim* F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithras* II (1896) and M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* I (1956).

<sup>3</sup> *A.A.* I, 263ff.; 294, No. 5; *ibid.*, 2nd Ser., II, 255ff.

bolised Eternal Time (*Aeon*), while the two altars<sup>4</sup> which flanked the relief in the temple were dedicated specifically to Mithras "the Timeless" (*Mithras Saecularis*). It seems likely that the stone was designed so that lamps or candles placed behind it<sup>5</sup> would cause the figure of the god to appear as if surrounded by a halo of light.

The relief was found, face downwards and in fragments, during the excavation of the Mithraeum at Housesteads in 1822. One of the flanking altars may be assigned by the style of its lettering to the early third century, while the other is dated by mention of the co-emperors Gallus and Volusianus to A.D. 252. It seems reasonable, therefore, to infer that the relief likewise dates from the third century,<sup>6</sup> and this inference is supported by the evidence of its style and quality.

Together with the two altars and five pieces of the carved stone altarpiece depicting the tauroctony, or sacrifice of the primeval bull, the fragments of the birth-relief passed into the Society's possession at the conclusion of the excavations.<sup>7</sup> Though not quite complete, sufficient of the birth-relief remained to justify an attempt at restoration, and the attempt was presumably carried out soon after the stone arrived in Newcastle. But the work could hardly have been more carelessly done; pieces of brick and slate were used to make up for missing parts, without any effort to conceal them, and grey cement was allowed to splash about and run down the front of the stone (Pl. XXVII, 1).

In 1953 the stone was removed to King's College from the Society's museum at the Black Gate, where it had been on exhibition since 1885, to be cleaned and prepared for exhibition in the new museum which the University and the

<sup>4</sup> *CIL* VII 645, 646; *Lap. Sept.* 182, 190.

<sup>5</sup> A stone pedestal, perhaps for placing lights upon, stood behind the relief; see *A.A.* I, 274. Cf. *ibid.*, 4th Ser., XXIX, 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> The other two known Mithraea *per lineam valli*, at Carrawburgh and Rudchester, were both founded in the third century and lasted into the early fourth; for Carrawburgh see *A.A.* 4, XXIX, 1ff., and Rudchester, *ibid.*, XXXII, 176ff.

<sup>7</sup> The accession number in the Society's Donations Book is 1822.41.

Society had agreed to establish. In addition to a thick coating of grime and the unsightly repairs effected in the nineteenth century, one of the joins had come apart, and it was clear that if the relief were ever to be made presentable it would first have to be taken to pieces again, so that the fragments could be thoroughly cleaned, the cement and slivers of brick and slate removed, and the whole work reconstructed. Fortunately, it proved not unduly difficult to detach the pieces one from another and to chip away the cement and packing, but scrubbing with wire brushes and hot water was necessary to efface the stains and patches of cement.<sup>8</sup> An attempt to re-assemble the pieces was postponed, however, pending establishment of the Museum in permanent quarters.

It was not until early in 1961, in fact, that this task could be undertaken. It proved as difficult as had been anticipated, for the fractures were old and weathered and the missing part of the frame at the top of the stone, the arms and part of the face of the god had to be restored. Brass dowels or galvanised wires were inserted in every join and the joins themselves were cemented, and where necessary made up, with a mortar consisting of 3 parts of washed sand, 1 part of Arden Lime and 1 part of Portland cement, the same mix being used, with Bondcrete, for the restoration of details of the frame. The arms and part of the face were restored with coloured cement fondu, the former being built up on wires. In order to ensure rigidity, two  $\frac{1}{4}$ " thick steel bars, welded into the form of a T and coated with aluminium paint, were fixed with Rawlplugs to the back of the stone. When thoroughly dry, all the cemented parts were primed, then appropriately tinted with artists' oil paints, mixed with a little turpentine to produce a matt finish, and missing parts of the zodiacal figures were indicated in outline in a darker tone (Pl. XXVII, 2).

<sup>8</sup> This treatment is not so drastic as it may seem; for an account of the method and its results see the writer's article in the *Museums Journal* LVII, No. 9 (Dec. 1957), 215-219.

The restoration was carried out by the Museum's Senior Technician, Mr. W. Embleton, and Artist/Draughtsman, Mr. Robert Cessford. Mr. L. C. Evetts, Master of Design, Dept. of Fine Art, King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, kindly advised on the composition of the mortar used, and the present writer supervised the work from beginning to end.

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2.—NOTE ON THE FIGURE OF A GENIUS CUCULLATUS  
FROM CORBRIDGE

During the excavations of 1913 at Corbridge there was found the appliqué figure of a Genius Cucullatus. No reference, however, was made to it in the report, and it is here published for the first time. The fragment (Pl. XXVIII) measures 3" × 2" at the widest part. The cloak is painted cream with two  $\frac{1}{8}$ " orange stripes down the front and a thinner stripe of the same colour round the border. The figure would appear not to have been made in a mould but to have been shaped by hand before being applied to the pot; which is of coarse orange/red fabric, light grey in fracture. This discovery adds another item to the list of these deities from Britain published by Prof. J. M. C. Toynbee in *Collection Latomus xxxviii (Hommages à Waldemar Deonna)*, 1957, pp. 456-469.

*John Leach*

3.—SHERD FROM SCREMERSTON HILL, NORTHUMBERLAND

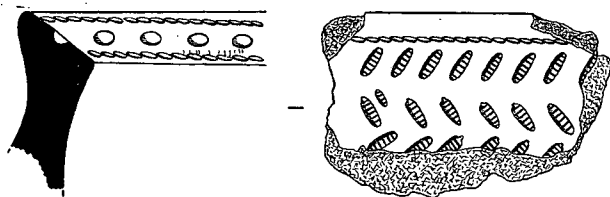
It seems desirable to place on record locally a sherd from Scremerston Hill, Northumberland, given to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1925 by Mr. Robert Kinghorn, F.S.A.Scot. (Reg. No. EB 39).



GENIUS CUCULLATUS FROM CORBRIDGE.



The sherd is from the mouth of an Enlarged Food Vessel, with a rim diameter of approximately 14", of a hard, coarse, granular paste tempered profusely with large grits. The external surface is brown, the rim and internal surface discoloured brown to grey and the core black. Decoration consists, externally, of a whipped cord herringbone pattern bounded immediately below the rim by a horizontal twisted cord line. The internal rim bevel carries a row of pits, made



IHL 62

SHERD FROM SCREMERSTON HILL, NORTHUMBERLAND

with a blunt instrument, between single twisted cord lines and at one point the impressions of the potter's finger-nail are visible where the twisted cord has been pressed firmly into the clay. The sherd appears to have broken away along a structural joint, approximately where the first ridge or shoulder of the vessel must have been.

It should be noted that this sherd was erroneously included by Professor S. Piggott in his revised list of Peterborough Ware which appeared as Appendix B in his *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles*.

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