

## II.—A FOURTH-CENTURY ROMAN INSCRIPTION FROM THE SAXON CHURCH AT ESCOMB, COUNTY DURHAM

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For many years it has been recognised that much of the fine ashlar used in the Saxon church at Escomb,<sup>1</sup> one mile west of Bishop Auckland, shows Roman cross-hatching and must have been transported from the fort at Binchester (*Vinovia*). A fine building-stone<sup>2</sup> recording the Sixth Legion can still be seen on the outer face of the north wall of the nave.

When Escomb Church was refurnished in 1964-5 the interior was thoroughly cleaned and lime-washed. On a visit to the church in June 1969 a schoolboy from Lanchester detected lettering on a stone at a height of 12 feet 8 inches and brought it to the attention of the Rev. J. W. Wilson. He notified the present writer that he could read BONO and supplied three squeeze-impressions from which it was possible to read the full text. He later provided facilities and assistance when the writer drew the text. The buff sandstone slab is 17 in. wide by 34 in. high by 12 in. deep and, placed on its left side, forms the lowest course of the west jamb of the more easterly window in the north wall of the nave. About one inch must have been cut away from the frontal edge at the top of the stone to make it fit the splay of the

<sup>1</sup> Grid ref. NZ 189301. Binchester lies 1½ miles to NE.

<sup>2</sup> *RIB* 1038. As recorded in *RIB* 2387\*, when the plaster was removed from the inner face of the north wall of the nave during a restoration of the church in 1880 Dr. R. E. Hooppell claimed that he could read parts of three Roman inscriptions. On the other hand R. J. Johnson, the architect who superintended the work, expressly stated that no inscription was found, although the plaster had been removed in the hope that they would be found. The position of one (*RIB* 2384\*) was not given. In the position claimed for the other two (*RIB* 2387\* and 2395\*) the present writer could find no trace of any intentional lettering.



Fig. 1. Inscription from Escomb (1/12)

window; there is now no free space above the first line of the inscription. In lettering<sup>3</sup> which is rough and poorly aligned it reads:

*Bono rei | publicae | nato* 'To the man born for the good of the state'.

As the inscription on the stone was of no importance to the Saxon builders who placed it so that the text ran vertically it is clear that it served merely as a building-stone and will have been included in a load of material collected in the fort or its immediate vicinity. It is unlikely to have been one of a series of milestones placed at appropriate intervals

<sup>3</sup> In REIPUBLICAE the letter B has a wide space between the two loops and can be matched on *RIB* 2274, a milestone of Gallus and Volusian, A.D. 251-3 and on *RIB* 2307, a milestone of Numerian as Caesar, A.D. 282-3. Nash Williams *Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (1950) 223, fig. 255 B7 says "met with exceptionally in Gaul in the 4th century A.D., but more characteristic of the 6th and 7th centuries".

along a Roman road. In Hampshire, however, where stone was scarce, at least four milestones<sup>4</sup> were included in the late walls at Bitterne (*Clausentum*), and any of the other three milestones from that site may also have come from the wall. As the Escomb slab has been incorporated it is now impossible to know whether it was originally only a rectangular shaft or had some mouldings at the base or on either side. As the top has been bevelled off in forming the window jamb we cannot know whether it once carried a socket to take the pedestal of a statue. It may in its setting have been a milestone from the fort or its vicinity or it may have been either a plain pedestal or a shaft with additional mouldings for a statue.

When showing that the Roman inscription<sup>5</sup> kept at Knells, near Carlisle, had come from the fort of Old Penrith Professor E. Birley observed that the formula *bono reipublicae nato* should be dated to the fifth century as well as the fourth. He cited one inscription<sup>6</sup> which dates to the last quarter of the fifth century. But among the inscriptions indexed in *CIL* the present writer has found no other instance beyond A.D. 395 for this formula, and considers that<sup>7</sup> its use by Theodericus appears to be an archaism. The formula on the Binchester stone may have referred to almost

<sup>4</sup> *RIB* 2222, 2223, 2226, 2228. The other stones are *RIB* 2224, 2225, and 2227. As three record the same emperor they must have come from at least three milestone sites.

<sup>5</sup> *Cumb. & Westm. AAST* LVIII (1958) 90. *RIB* 930.

<sup>6</sup> Dessau *ILS* 827, Diehl *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae veteres* 35, of the Gothic king Theodericus.

<sup>7</sup> The frequency of the use of *Bono reipublicae natus* or its abbreviation *B R P N* or similar phrases can be gauged from the figures calculated from examples in the indexes of *CIL* and *AE*. There is one instance for A.D. 292-304, citing Diocletian and Maximian as *Augusti* and Constantius and Galerius as *Caesares* (*CIL* XII 5520). There are two instances of Constantine I as *Caesar* (*CIL* IX 6068, XII 5584). For Constantine I and his house there are 52 other instances. For Magnentius and Decentius 9, for Julian 27, for Jovian 9, for Valentinian I and his house there are 20, for Magnus Maximus and Flavius Victor 10, and for Theodosius I and Honorius (to A.D. 395) 11. The total is 141. These figures do not include those which the editors of *CIL* have marked with asterisks. The general picture is clear even if others were to adopt a slightly different selection. As a foretaste of this formula one might cite the phrase applied to Caracalla in A.D. 213 in the High Rochester text (*RIB* 1265) *bono generis humani imperante*.

any of the fourth-century emperors, and of these Constantine I is the most likely, but certainty cannot be attained.

The inscription<sup>8</sup> from Old Penrith was classed in *EE* by Haverfield as a milestone, but he did note (in *Cumb. & Westm. AAST*) that once or twice, as on what is now *RIB* 289, the phrase "occurs in forms which do not look much like milestones". Birley followed this lead in his article. But when Collingwood inspected the original he concluded that it was a statue-base and not a milestone. As his block in *RIB* shows, the text has been cut in a recessed panel, and the dimensions, 17 in. wide by 31 in. high by 15 in. deep, confirm Collingwood's interpretation of it as the base for some statue. The comparable stone is the one which Haverfield cited from Wroxeter, *RIB* 289, in which the old sketch<sup>9</sup> there reproduced shows that it was squat and had a shallow recess on top. Attempts by Collingwood and the present writer to find the original in Shrewsbury were unsuccessful, but Dr. Graham Webster chanced in 1964 to see letters on a stone<sup>10</sup> of similar dimensions outside Wroxeter Museum which matched this text. It is represented in fig. 2. It is a reddish sandstone base, 23 in. wide by 18 in. high by 19 in. deep, with letters roughly pecked and poorly aligned. The capital and upper part of 1.1 have been dressed off to leave a bevelled edge. The sides of the die are cut in a curve. It once carried a carefully incised primary text of which a ligatured Æ ends 1.2. The secondary text was a recutting: BONO REI|PVBLICÆ|NATVS. There are parallels for this use of the nominative instead of the dative singular.

We have then at Wroxeter a roughly cubical stone with curved sides, base and (originally) a capital with a recess on top to secure the foot of a statue. It is reasonably probable that the new stone from Escomb formed a similar pedestal for a statue, but probably without mouldings. But it remains

<sup>8</sup> Haverfield *Cumb. & Westm. AAST*<sup>2</sup> XI (1911) 469, *EE* IX 1256. Birley, loc. cit., Collingwood, Ms. note. *RIB* 930.

<sup>9</sup> *Victoria County History Salop* i, 247 fig. 21.

<sup>10</sup> *JRS* LV (1965) 228 (change of location). Drawn in 1967 in that museum by the present writer.

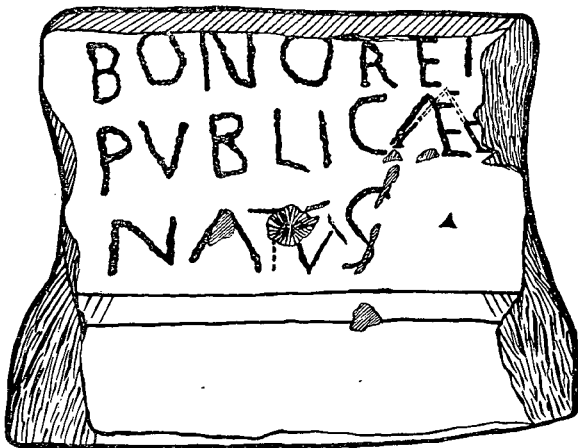


Fig. 2. Inscription from Wroxeter ( $\frac{1}{8}$ )

a possibility that it was a milestone without naming the emperor, as on that portrayed<sup>11</sup> by Horsley one mile west of the milestone at Chesterholm (*Vindolanda*). It is hard to make an extensive comparison with continental examples recorded in *CIL* because we are not given line-blocks in illustration. There is, however, in *CIL X* a list<sup>12</sup> of stones which carry our formula without mentioning any emperor, and Mommsen concluded that only four out of the eleven could with certainty be regarded as milestones. There is here an opportunity for those who are scrutinising the contents of museums and private collections on the Continent to see whether they can find and record any further parallels to match the variant type which can be established in Roman Britain from two certain examples and from a third one with fair probability.

<sup>11</sup> Horsley *Brit. Rom.* pref. p. xiv, 228 *Northd.* LIX. *RIB* 2308.

<sup>12</sup> Edited by Mommsen for the regions of Bruttium, Lucania, Campania, Sicilia and Sardinia. In his note to 8419 he shows that, out of eleven stones which he classes as milestones, four stood beside the *Via Appia* and were undoubtedly milestones. He says that it is not clear whether the other seven are to be deemed milestones.

