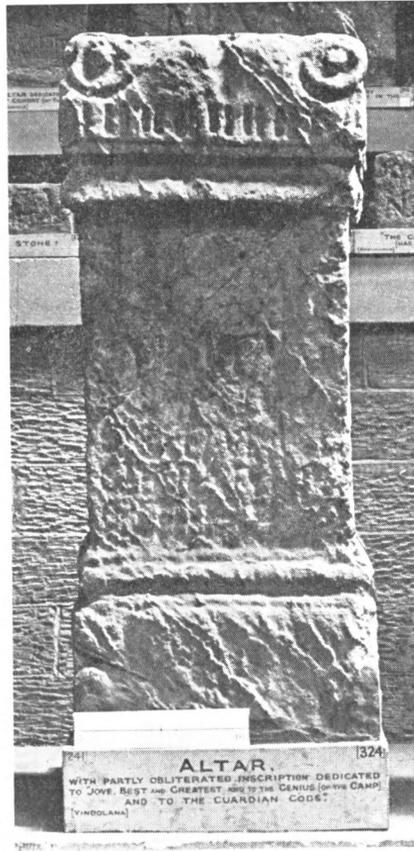




Altar from Chesterholm
(RIB 1686): Height 56.5 ins.



Altar from Chesterholm
(RIB 1687): Height 50 ins.



Altar from Chesterholm
(RIB 1685): Height 49 ins.

VIII

THREE ALTARS FROM CHESTERHOLM

Joyce Kewley

GLOSSARY

<i>Bar chevron:</i>	ornament produced by cutting away the background of a zig-zag pattern leaving the chevron upstanding.
<i>Fascia:</i>	the vertical plane above the graded mouldings of the capital.
<i>Focus:</i>	the place where offerings were laid or the sacred fire kindled.
<i>Focus-mount:</i>	the projection masking the <i>focus</i> .
<i>Guttus:</i>	the sacrificial jug.
<i>Patera:</i>	the sacrificial dish.
<i>Torus:</i>	half round moulding.
<i>Umbo:</i>	boss.

Chesters Museum houses three large altars from Chesterholm (*RIB* 1685, *RIB* 1686 and *RIB* 1687) found together in 1831 inside the Roman fort. The inscriptions of all three stones mention the Fourth Cohort of Gauls, a unit known to have been stationed at Chesterholm from the early third century. It seems certain that the altars may be attributed to the regimental workshop.

An examination of the surviving examples of this cohort's stone carving shows that the Gauls preserved a strong tradition of the craft with an affection for elaborate ornament. The splendid building inscription set up at Risingham (*RIB* 1227) in the second century illustrates perfectly the technical skill and ornamental and iconographic virtuosity of the masons of the unit. Their originality of approach is further demonstrated by the Chesterholm altars, each of which displays features unparalleled in Northern Britain.

Only one of the altars (*RIB* 1685) has a *focus* of the normal dish type and even this is unusual. It is sunken and elliptical, set with the long axis from back to front of the stone, and has an *umbo* with depressed centre. No other example of this type of dish survives from Northern Britain. Of the other two altars, one (*RIB* 1687) has a flat top, while the other (*RIB* 1686) is provided with a raised rectangular panel running from back to front of the capital. Offerings could be laid on these flat surfaces or a sacred fire could be kindled, perhaps in an incense burner.

On altars of traditional design, the *focus* is flanked by lateral rolls or bolsters, perhaps intended to shield the votive objects or the flames from the wind. None of these three altars displays bolsters that are free-standing (cf. *RIB* 822, *RIB* 828, *RIB* 830) but one (*RIB* 1685) has a well-cut pair of unique design. They are girdled by double, contiguous straps, alternately cabled. The ends of the bolsters are decorated with rosettes, the six petals of each outlined by a moulding and the whole enclosed within a raised rim; the centre of each is marked by a boss. Large bosses within dished roundels mark the position of the bolster fronts of a second altar (*RIB* 1687) but here only the sides of the rolls are shaped; their tops merge with the flat upper surface of the capital. The third and largest altar (*RIB* 1686) has no bolsters of any kind; in their place three rounded projections are set along the edges at the sides of the capital. This arrangement does not appear on any other altar from Northern Britain.

Only the altar with a dish-type *focus* (*RIB* 1685) has a *focus*-mount rising between the bolsters. The decoration of this feature is singular for it displays in relief an ansate, oval dish complete with offerings. The shape of this dish is the same as that of the *focus* of an altar of the First Cohort of Vangiones from Risingham (*RIB* 1230) while the presence of the votive gifts calls to mind altars from the Rhineland on which fruit is carved in high relief (e.g. *CIL* XIII 8580).

The flat-topped altar (*RIB* 1687) has an enlarged fascia curved under the bolsters and rising in two convex arcs. It is ornamented by a row of vertical flutings, a scheme which may be paralleled on altars from Gainford (*RIB* 1022) and Brough on Noe.¹

The fascia of the largest stone (*RIB* 1686) is rectangular, inscribed and highly decorated. The dedication IOM is carved on a raised ansate tablet flanked by double cable mouldings; the two innermost of these mouldings terminate at the top of the stone in rosettes. Horizontal cable mouldings also frame the sunken panel in which the ansate tablet is set, while a third horizontal cable encloses a band of bar chevron outlined by bead mouldings. It is rare, but not unknown, to find masons decorating the sides of a capital. This altar displays an elaborate scheme. At the dexter side a band of bar chevron ornament appears above and below four small *tori* which, when newly carved, may have been cabled. Below the lower of these bands there is another cabled *torus* and similar mouldings run vertically at the front and back of the horizontal bands. The top of the sinister side of the capital is much weathered. Here the decoration is three cabled *tori*, a band of bar chevron and three other *tori*, the middle one of which is cabled. The base of the altar carries a scheme echoing that of this side of the capital: the front is decorated with a band of bar chevron ornament and three *torus* mouldings, the middle one cabled.

A noteworthy feature of the bar chevron cut by the masons of the Fourth

¹ *VCH Derbyshire* I, p. 208, no. 3.

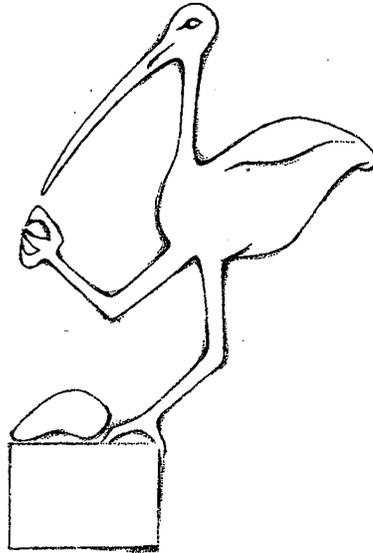
Cohort of Gauls is its flat background. This type of chevron is more difficult to carve than that produced by the usual "chopped out" technique and is a measure of the skill of the craftsmen of the unit.

Another of the altars (*RIB* 1685) displays bar chevron decoration at capital and base and the cohort's fondness for cable mouldings is further illustrated by the mouldings separating the capital and base of this stone. At the capital, *tori* with alternate cabling separate two plain, rounded mouldings; a stepped-in torus completes the scheme. At the base, weathering makes it less easy to discern the presence of cabling on any of the five *tori* at the front of the stone but the better-preserved sides still retain four mouldings of which two have been cabled. The mouldings on this altar are the best carved of any on the three altars: the largest stone (*RIB* 1686) has only one stepped *torus* at capital and base; the other (*RIB* 1687) displays at the capital a stepped-in fillet and large sagging *cyma reversa*, while at the base there are in descending order a stepped-out fillet, a debased *torus*, a stepped-out fillet and a stepped-out plinth.

Ornamental motifs are carved on the shafts of two of the altars and these are of remarkable interest. One altar (*RIB* 1685) carries representations of the sacrificial vessels and implements, all of them of interesting types. On the dexter side an axe with curved blade, square-ended beyond the shaft, and a knife with broad blade, the cutting edge of which is sharply angled to the tip, are depicted. Below these reliefs an ox, the sacrificial animal, is carved. On the other side of the shaft there is a bag-shaped *guttus*, an egg shape, and a *patera* with *umbo* in the form of a man's face and a handle curved at the tip. The dish is set vertically with the bowl towards the top of the shaft. The *patera* calls to mind the *focus* of an altar from Chester (*RIB* 450) and surviving vessels such as that found at Faversham, Kent.² The curved handle may be paralleled on altars from Ilkley (*RIB* 635), Lancaster (*RIB* 607), Hadrian's Wall (*RIB* 1767) and elsewhere.

These motifs are common enough on votive altars. The decoration of the shaft of the second altar (*RIB* 1686) is more unusual. Here, in sunken panels, the mason has carved birds with long legs and beaks. The competence of the carving of these birds, far superior to that of any other part of the altar, suggests that more than one hand has been at work. Birds are not of course unknown in religious ornamental schemes: the eagle, Jupiter's bird, appears for example on altars from Ebchester (*RIB* 1099) and Gainford (*RIB* 1022), while sea birds are to be found on an altar from Birrens (*RIB* 2104) and a cock has been used to decorate a statue-base from the same site (*RIB* 2102). The birds on the Chesterholm altar have no parallel on similar stones from Northern Britain. On the dexter side of the shaft, in low relief and below a raised ansate tablet, a large adult bird and tiny chick move towards the rear of the stone, while on the sinister side a second full-grown specimen stands in enigmatic pose upon a small rectangular projection. He rests upon his left

² B.M. *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* (1951), p. 38, no. 5; p. 39, fig. 18 no. 5.



Bird on the sinister side of RIB 1686

leg, the right being raised with claws extended; beneath this leg a rounded pebble-like object lies on the projecting platform. Bruce,³ Budge⁴ and Collingwood⁵ identified these birds as storks, imagining no doubt that Quintus Petronius Urbicus, the dedicator, stationed on the bleak northern frontier of a remote province, wished to have upon the altar he erected some reminders of the sunnier homeland so proudly recorded in the inscription (EX ITALIA DOMO BRIXIA). Yet such an interpretation leaves unsolved the problem of the stance of the sinister bird. Now the stork resembles another stately terrestrial bird, the crane, and indeed, in the absence of colour, an unpractised observer might easily mistake the one for the other. Both have long legs and beaks, although the beaks of cranes are shorter than those of storks and in height the crane has the advantage.

The crane is a motif not unknown to Roman metalwork and sculpture. It appears on a silver bowl in the Bosco Reale Treasure⁶ and figures on shields forming part of a Gallic trophy on the Triumphal Arch at Orange.⁷ In this connection Richmond put forward the suggestion that amongst the Gauls cranes were associated with victory or good luck.⁸ Dr. Anne Ross notes the importance of the crane in Celtic mythology and ideas,⁹ while Toutain concludes that the bird was of sacred significance to the Gauls.¹⁰ All this is

³ *The Roman Wall*, edition 3 (1867), p. 214.

⁴ *An Account of the Roman Antiquities preserved in the Museum at Chesters, Northumberland*, edition 2 (1907), p. 344.

⁵ RIB 1686.

⁶ Héron de Villefosse, *Le Trésor d'Argentierie de Bosco Reale* (1895), p. 11, nos. 9, 10.

⁷ Espérandieu, E., *Recueil Général des Bas-*

reliefs, Statues et Bustes De La Gaule Romaine, I, pp. 188-205, no. 260; figs. 197, 199.

⁸ *NCH* XV (1940), p. 135.

⁹ Ross, A., *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1967), pp. 279-289.

¹⁰ Toutain, J., *Les Cultes Païens dans L'Empire Romain*, III (1920), p. 284.

especially interesting for masons of this cohort had already, when stationed at Risingham,¹¹ used the crane as a motif (*RIB* 1227). Furthermore, if, in spite of the length of their beaks, the birds are intended for cranes, the posture of the sinister bird becomes intelligible. Literature provides the key. The early church fathers used the crane and other creatures as illustrations of Christian virtues. St. Ambrose, writing in the fourth century relates that at night cranes organize a system of sentries and patrols to guard the sleeping flock from surprise attack.¹² Bishop Isidore, three centuries later, adds that the sentinel cranes keep themselves awake by holding stones in their claws,¹³ the idea being that if sleep overtakes any crane, he will relax his hold upon the stone, which, dropping, will awaken him. This is what has just happened to the sinister bird. He is standing in a strategic position upon an eminence. He has been holding a pebble in his claw and has dropped it, thus startling himself out of sleep; the pebble lies beneath his raised leg; his eye is open; his intention must be the recovery of the pebble. These legends about cranes are probably of great antiquity and were no doubt current long before they were ever recorded so that the date of Isidore's work need provide no stumbling block. The sentinel crane thus suggests that Quintus Petronius Urbicus clearly intended his altar to be graced by a decoration which would recall not only his native land and the victory which Roman arms had achieved, but also that quality most laudable in frontier troops—vigilance.

¹¹ Birley, E., *Journal of Roman Studies*, XXII, p. 57.

¹² Migne, J. P., *Patriologiae Cursus Completus* . . . Tome, XIV (1845) *Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis, Opera Omnia, Hexaëmeron*, Lib. V, c. XV, column 227.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Tome LXXXII (1850), *Sancti Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, Opera Omnia, Etymologarium*, Lib. XII, c. VII, columns 460-461.

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