

IX

INSCRIBED CAPITALS ON ROMAN ALTARS FROM NORTHERN BRITAIN

Joyce Kewley

WHEN votive altars were erected in the Roman world, whether as an act of formal piety or as an indication of more heart-felt devotion, it was customary for the name of the deity and of the dedicator to be recorded on the stone. The inscription, either in carved and painted lettering or, more simply, painted directly on to the prepared stone, was usually accommodated on the front of the shaft. Painted inscriptions have not survived the hazards of weathering and adverse soil conditions but there is a significant number of altars with carved dedications on which the first and most important line of the text appears on the capital. Fifty-five instances of letters carved upon the fascia are known; two other altars display letters on bolsters and *focus*-mount respectively (see Appendix).

For twenty-nine of these stones the inscriptions provide no dating evidence but, when the text can be closely dated or an altar can be assigned to a specific period because the military unit mentioned in the dedication is known to have been in garrison at that time at or near the find-spot, it is possible to establish a rough chronology. On this basis it is possible to analyse the datable stones statistically to ascertain whether the practice of inscribing the capitals of altars was common in any particular period of the Roman occupation.

If the altars are grouped into two broad time-bands representing the periods before and after the Severan redeployment of Roman soldiers in Britain, a pattern becomes apparent. It should be noted that, for the purpose of this exercise, all altars found north of Hadrian's Wall and its outpost forts have been included in the pre-Severan group (see Appendix).

The results of the analysis are striking. Of the twenty-eight datable examples, only seven may be assigned to the second century. As for the rest, fifteen may with confidence be placed in the Severan or post-Severan age; a further six almost certainly belong there. On this evidence therefore, it seems likely that the fashion of inscribing the capital with the name of the deity honoured by the erection of an altar was one especially favoured in the third century.

DATABLE ALTARS WITH INSCRIBED CAPITALS

A. Pre-Severan (including all Antonine Wall altars)

<i>Site</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Auchendavy	<i>Legio II</i>	<i>RIB</i> 2176
Auchendavy	<i>Legio II</i>	2177
Cramond	<i>V Gallorum</i>	2134
Croy Hill	<i>Legio VI</i>	2160
Newcastle	<i>Legio VI</i>	1319
Newcastle	<i>Legio VI</i>	1320
Old Kilpatrick	<i>I Baetasiorum</i>	<i>Britannia</i> , I, p. 310, no. 20.

B. Severan or later

<i>Site</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Bowes	<i>I Thracum</i>	197-198	<i>RIB</i> 730
Chesterholm	<i>IV Gallorum</i>	213-235	1686
Chesterholm		After division of province	1696
High Rochester	<i>I Vardullorum</i>		1262
High Rochester	<i>Numerus Exploratorum</i>		1270
Housesteads	<i>I Tungrorum</i>		1578
Housesteads	<i>I Tungrorum</i>		1584
Housesteads	<i>I Tungrorum</i>		1586
Housesteads		258	1589
Housesteads	<i>Cuneus Frisiorum</i>	222-235	1594
Housesteads	<i>Numerus Hnaudifridi</i>		1576
Housesteads		252	1600
Old Carlisle	<i>Ala Augusta Ob Virt.</i>	242	897
Old Penrith	<i>II Gallorum</i>	244-249	915
South Shields		211-212	1054

Probably Severan or later

<i>Site</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Bowes	<i>RIB</i> 735
Bowes	736
Housesteads	1587
Housesteads	1588
Housesteads	1599
Lancaster	600

Other Altars with Inscribed Capitals

<i>Site</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Bowes	<i>RIB</i> 731
Brougham	779
Carvoran	1783

<i>Site</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Chesterholm		1683
Chesters		1449
Clifton, Westmorland	<i>IV...</i>	792
Corbridge		1131
Corbridge (inscribed <i>focus</i> -mount)		1135
Corbridge		1141
Corbridge (now lost)		1142
Ebchester		1102
Great Chesters		1729
Great Chesters		1732
Hadrian's Wall		2063
Hadrian's Wall		2064
Hadrian's Wall		2065
High Rochester		1269
Housesteads		1596
Housesteads		1603
Kirkby Thore		760
Maryport		834
Milecastle 60 (near)		2020
Newcastle		1321
Old Penrith		918
Piercebridge (inscribed bolsters)		1024
Risingham		1225
York		651
York	<i>Legio VI</i>	653
York		657

