

VII

ROMAN BUILDING INSCRIPTIONS, RECORDING BUILDINGS COLLAPSED THROUGH AGE OR DESTROYED BY THE ENEMY?

Derek A. Welsby

THERE IS a group of Roman inscriptions found mainly at military sites, but also at London, recording buildings which have fallen in through age and have become covered with earth, or are specified as being in a ruined state.

Perhaps the best known of these is the inscription (RIB 1912) found in 1929 at Birdoswald, reused in the floor of a building immediately north of the *via principalis* (Richmond and Birley 1930, 170). This records that a cohort "restored the *praetorium* which had been covered with earth and had fallen into ruin . . .". This has on occasion been thought to illustrate official euphemism intended to conceal destruction by the enemy; e.g. Simpson, G. 1964, 48–51, referring to earlier examples where the same phrase is used. There is no foundation whatsoever for this interpretation. Although it is now accepted by some that these inscriptions record what has actually occurred, it seems worthwhile to examine these and other similar inscriptions in an attempt to understand their implications.

There are no inscriptions in Britain specifically recording destruction of any building by an enemy; though there is an inscription from Ambleside recording an *actuarius* killed in the fort by the enemy (Burkett 1965, 86–7). The strongest case that can be made for destruction of a building by the enemy being recorded epigraphically is an inscription from Bowes (RIB 730) recording that Virius Lupus "restored the bath-house, burnt through the violence of fire". Mr. B. R. Hartley maintains on archaeological evidence that there was destruction at this site, as well as at Brough-by-Bainbridge, Brough-under-Stainmore and Ilkley, at about this time. There are building inscriptions of Virius Lupus dated to A.D. 197–8 from Ilkley, Bowes, and Brough-under-Stainmore, of Valerius Pudens A.D. 205 from Brough-by-Bainbridge, and of Alfenus Senecio c. A.D. 205–8 from Brough-by-Bainbridge and Bowes. It is, however, plausible to suggest that the bath-house at Bowes was being repaired after having suffered from normal wear and tear rather than enemy destruction. It would not have been easy to set a bath-house on fire: bath-houses would be one of the few buildings associated with a fort to be built wholly of stone, also most of the roofs would have been of stone, concrete and tile; hence there would be very little that could be damaged by a fire. Mr. J. P. Gillam informs me that the changing room in some cases could have been of timber.

The inscription built into the Church at Cliburn (RIB 791), which probably came from the fort of Brougham, 4 miles to the north-west, records that ". . . this bath-house

... which after the old work had been burnt had fallen into ruins, ... by renewing the pillars in all the rooms and by ... the channels and pipes ...". Here the hypocaust *pilae* are specifically mentioned, their subjection to intense heat over long periods must have reduced them (and the other parts of the structure particularly exposed to the heat) to a very friable condition. The damage at Bowes could have been of the same order, and hence need not imply enemy destruction. At the bath-house of Red House near Corbridge, excavated in 1956 and 1957 (Daniels 1959), the main stoke-hole had been relined and this relining had become cracked and worn. This bath-house only had a life of about 10 years. The furnace of the bath-house at Prestatyn (Newstead 1937) also showed evidence of much heat damage; this structure was thought to have had a short life. As would be expected, the furnace area particularly needed a great deal of attention and refurbishing to keep it in working order.

What is the implication of the inscriptions recording buildings collapsed through age? These certainly demand that the building in question had been abandoned or neglected for a time, though how long it would take to achieve that state is impossible to ascertain. Many buildings within a fort and in its *vicus* would be either wooden framed wattle and daub structures, or provided with stone sill walls. These types of buildings would probably decay quite quickly, whereas buildings wholly of stone would take much longer. In both cases, however, there could be a wide variation in the period of survival of an unoccupied structure. Six of these inscriptions record ruined temples and shrines; no doubt many of these structures were very crude; cf. the temple probably of Mars Thincsus at Housesteads (Birley, R. 1962). The fact that these structures were in ruins need only reflect current religious beliefs or economic conditions, rather than evidence of enemy action, nor need they imply that the *vicus* in which, and the fort by which they stood had been abandoned. The *mithraeum* at Carrawburgh seems to have gone through many periods of neglect (Richmond and Gillam 1951). Some of the structures so recorded, however, could be thought of as being vital to the continued military occupation of a site.

The most obvious of these is the gate and its walls recorded on RIB 1234 from Risingham. This surely must imply that the fort had been abandoned for a good number of years, and it is now accepted by some scholars that the fort was probably unoccupied from early in Commodus' reign until c. A.D. 205-8. The case of Lanchester is equally clear; here the *principia* and armouries were not in use. The excavator accepted and found archaeological evidence to show that there had been a period of abandonment of about 40 years (Steer 1939).

In some cases, however, there is no evidence that a particular site was abandoned, we can only guess at the state of a fort when the *praetorium*, a granary, aqueduct or bath-house was in total disrepair. No one has ever suggested that Great Chesters was abandoned prior to A.D. 225 when its "granary was restored from ground level after having fallen into ruin through age". One explanation could be that the garrison was much reduced for a number of years before A.D. 225, making one of the granaries (there were no doubt two), redundant. It has been thought that the *praetorium* at Birdoswald was in decay because it was no longer used (Wilkes 1966, p. 125). The acting commander of the cohort mentioned on the inscription (RIB 1912) was probably a

centurion; (Mr. J. P. Gillam has suggested that Flavius Martinus may have been a *centenarius*). Wilkes thought that as a centurion would not have had a large household like the earlier equestrian commanders he would not need to use the *praetorium*, and suggested that the acting commander could have lived elsewhere in the fort. It should be noted, however, that it was when a centurion was in command that the *praetorium* was being rebuilt.

Other inscriptions record the rebuilding or restoring of structures from their foundations. Though here the state of ruin is not specified, they again imply that the buildings so referred to were out of commission or at least had been neglected before that date. At Caerleon RIB 334 records the restoring from ground level of the barracks of the seventh cohort. This possibly implies that before this the seventh cohort had been absent from the fortress for a long time (Nash-Williams 1954, p. 106). At Chesterholm a period of abandonment of the fort (and *vicus*) for perhaps 25 years in the third century A.D. is now postulated (Birley 1977). It is tempting (though at variance with Birley's present dating), to associate the reoccupation with the inscription of A.D. 223 (RIB 1706) recording that the *cohors IV Gallorum* "restored from the foundation this gate and its towers . . .".

At Birdoswald RIB 1912 also records that the *principia* and *balneum* were restored. It would be difficult to accept that a fort continued in use when its *principia* was in disrepair. Frere suggests that these two buildings could have been damaged by enemy action, or that there may have been in the late third century A.D. much official lethargy (Frere 1967, p. 343). Another solution could be that the fort was unoccupied for some time during or after the reign of Probus, the *cohors I Aelia Dacorum* is recorded at the fort under Probus (Wright 1961, 194 no. 12) but not later. Archaeological evidence to support this view is wanting at Birdoswald but there is archaeological evidence from Halton Chesters and probably from Rudchester for a period of abandonment as there may be from other sites. This would explain the ruin of the part-timbered *praetorium* and the repairs to the stone fabric of the *principia* and *balneum*. At Halton Chesters Mr. J. P. Gillam, in his excavations of 1960 and 1961, found proof of buildings having become ruined and covered with earth. Here a building, probably to be identified as the *praetorium* and possibly a granary, were totally covered by up to 400 mm of soil. The period of partial or total abandonment postulated here was between 85 and 100 years. This is quite a rapid decay when one takes into account the solid construction of a store granary (the evidence for the collapse of the granary at the time was not conclusive), though the building does seem first to have been destroyed by fire (Gillam 1961). The same state of decay appears to have occurred at Rudchester over the same period (Gillam, Harrison and Newman 1973).

At a number of forts there is reasonable certainty, or at least unanimity of opinion, that there was destruction at a certain period. It is instructive to look at the inscriptions recording the rebuilding of these sites. In every case these inscriptions are normal building inscriptions. The Romans were neither seeking to hide nor to advertise destruction wrought by the enemy, or by the garrison pulling out rapidly in the face of enemy attack. The Romans were not adverse to acknowledging enemy pressure; the Commodan inscriptions from near Aquincum (ILS 395) and from Intercissa (ILS

8913) admit that the authorities were being forced to provide defences against *Latrunculi*.

At Netherby RIB 978 records that the *cohors I Aelia Hispanorum* "built a cavalry drill hall long since begun from the ground, and completed it". Quite what this implies is unclear, but it need not mean that the fort had been abandoned for a time, yet something caused a cessation of the work, when only a little had been completed. There is an interesting parallel to this situation at Corbridge, where the two granaries, sites 7 and 10 and the "store house", site 11, were begun but the construction was halted when the walls were only a few courses high. This has always been obvious on site 11. The excavator of the west granary inferred that it had been demolished down to the level of its raised floor, it previously having been ruinous and fallen into decay, so that the new floor could be supported on an inset at a higher level than the original floor. (Knowles and Forster 1909, 314.) Richmond noted two different styles of masonry in the granary (Brassington 1975, 67). Mr. J. P. Gillam has also noticed two periods of work in the east granary. He postulates that the granaries, *castellum aquae* and site 11 were in the course of construction when the site was overtaken by the invasion of c. A.D. 180 recorded by Dio (73, 8). After this the site was largely neglected until the time of Septimius Severus when there is epigraphic evidence for building work under Virius Lupus, and specifically of a granary (RIB 1151) under Alfenus Senecio. RIB 978 from Netherby would very aptly describe this work though whether the late second century history of Netherby was the same as that of Corbridge is unclear.

It has been suggested that describing a structure as being collapsed through age was a standard formula first used in the Severan period and that it cannot be taken literally. Around the Empire this phrase is widely used. In ILS the phrase is found on inscriptions ranging in date from Hadrian to the late fourth century A.D., and relating to many different types of structures in Italy and the provinces.

In Britain the dated inscriptions recording buildings having been ruined by age span the whole of the third century A.D. In some cases they could not refer to destruction by the enemy, there being no other evidence to support that interpretation and enemy attack being unlikely in any case. In no instance does one of these inscriptions need to refer to destruction by an enemy. If one accepts them literally, though there is no way of proving that they must be so interpreted, they do imply periods of partial or total abandonment of some forts, in many cases the reasons for which are still unclear.

Inscriptions recording buildings "ruined by age" or "fallen into ruin"

Birdoswald	RIB	1912	A.D. 296–305	<i>praetorium</i>
Bitterne	RIB	2228	210 or 215	road
Caerleon	RIB	333	198–209	—
Caernarvon	RIB	430	198–209	aqueduct
Castlesteads	RIB	1988	—	temple
Chesters	RIB	1465	221	—
Cliburn	RIB	791	—	bath-house
Great Chesters	RIB	1738	225	granary
Greta Bridge	RIB	747	third century A.D.	—
Lancaster	RIB	605	262–66	bath-house and basilica
Lanchester	RIB	1092	238–44	<i>principia</i> and armouries

London	Britannia	1976 no. 1.	—	temple
London	Britannia	1976 no. 2. perhaps third century A.D.	—	temple
Netherby	RIB	979	222	temple
Old Penrith	RIB	916	—	temple
Old Penrith	RIB	919	222–235	shrine
Old Penrith	RIB	927	—	—
Risingham	RIB	1234	205–7	gate
Risingham	RIB	1242	—	—

Inscriptions recording "rebuilding" or "restoring from the foundations"

Caerleon	RIB	334	A.D. 255–60	barrack blocks
Chesterholm	RIB	1706	223	gate
Risingham	RIB	1243	—	—

Inscriptions, from sites thought on archaeological evidence to have been destroyed, presumably recording the rebuilding after that destruction.

a. Forts in the Pennines thought by Mr. B. R. Hartley to have been destroyed in the late second century A.D.

Bowes	RIB	730	A.D. 197–8	bath-house
Bowes	RIB	740	205–8	—
Brough-by-Bainbridge	JRS	1961 no. 4	205	—
Brough-by-Bainbridge	RIB	722	205–8	—
Brough-by-Bainbridge	RIB	723	205–8	—
Brough-under-Stainmore	RIB	757	197	—
Ilkley	RIB	637	197–8	—

b. If Corbridge was destroyed c. A.D. 180 no building inscriptions are likely to have survived the *damnatio memoriae* of Commodus. If dated to c. A.D. 197 the following may be relevant:

Corbridge	RIB	1151	c. A.D. 205–8	granary
Corbridge	RIB	1163	197–202	—

c. Destruction dating to c. A.D. 155.

Bar Hill	RIB	2170	c. A.D. 155–63	—
Birrens	RIB	2110	157–8	—

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