

I

A RELIEF CARVING OF TWO FEMALE FIGURES FROM HOUSESTEADS

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A SANDSTONE relief carving of two female figures seated in a niche was found in April 1982 after clearance of the site for a National Trust Information Barn adjoining the car park at Housesteads. Later, the writer was invited to publish the carving, but sadly, before he was able to make the journey to see it, it was shattered when the Information Barn was set on fire by thieves in June 1984. The remains are now too fragile and fragmentary for restoration to be possible, and although the writer has now examined them, his study has had to depend mainly on photographs taken before the destruction.¹

The relief, as found, measured 0.59 m wide, 0.665 m high and was 0.20 m thick. The top and the right side, from the observer's view point, were broken; the heads of both figures were missing, as was the left leg of the one on the right. The left side of the stone was curved round towards the back, which was chiselled flat. The figures were carved within a round-headed niche, which was framed by a beaded moulding formed by the incision of two deep parallel grooves. On the left side there was a similar double groove, cut vertically 2 cm back from the forward edge, and several oblique incisions to the left of the grooves, perhaps a preliminary to the carving of some ornament, e.g. a cable moulding, which was never accomplished.

The quality of the workmanship was among the best which is known from the region of Hadrian's Wall. The folds of the drapery fell in swathes defined by deep grooves, giving the impression of garments made of heavy cloth. Both figures were identically dressed, in a mantle worn over one shoulder and draped across the opposite knee; a sleeved over-tunic reaching down to mid-calf with a girdle at the waist; an ankle-length under-tunic; and shoes. Both tunics had a rolled hem or fringe at the bottom.² A groove across the breast of the figure on the right, parallel with the girdle, was the result of damage from machinery at the time of discovery.

The figure on the left had her right forearm across her waist and her right hand appeared to clutch the folds of her tunic: it is possible that the hand held a small object, but if so, the weathering of the stone made it impossible to identify. She rested her left hand on her neighbour's shoulder. This other figure held a staff in her right hand: her outstretched forearm was foreshortened. Her left forearm extended across her abdomen. The wrist was damaged, and the hand rested on an oval object held above the right thigh. The staff was carved so as to project a uniform distance from its background, and this had the peculiar result that it was stepped back over the ledge or bench on which the figures were sitting, and then



Plate I. Side and frontal views of a relief carving from Housesteads.

again over the outstretched left arm of the figure on the left. Above that arm, the staff appeared to overlap a rectangular panel, which had some feature incised upon it, now indecipherable, since only the lower part of the panel survived.

In several respects the carving is comparable with that produced by the workshop of Roman sculptors at Carlisle identified by Phillips.³ The execution of the drapery, in the semi-tubular vertical folds of the tunics, the folds' close spacing and the impression of thickness which they give, are very similar to the drapery of a woman and child on a tombstone from Murrell Hill, Carlisle.⁴ On that relief and other products of the workshop, the tunics also have hemmed fringes.⁵ The relief carvings of the workshop are also set in round-headed niches, and the figures carry various attributes, most commonly small birds. The Carlisle workshop reliefs differ from the Housesteads carving in the representation of the mantles of the women, which are worn draped round the shoulders to cover them completely. Nevertheless, the other common features may be thought sufficient to suggest that the Housesteads carving may be also a product of the Carlisle workshop. Like those of that workshop which it most closely resembles it is probably Hadrianic or Antonine in date.

Most of the products most clearly attributable to that workshop are tombstones of women, and it is possible that this relief was also funerary in purpose. Although funerary reliefs normally show the deceased either standing or reclining on a couch, examples where she is shown seated include the tombstone from Murrell Hill, Carlisle, and the well-known relief of Regina from South Shields.⁶ It is not usual to find two women commemorated together, but conceivably they might be a mother and adult daughter. The figure on the right is a little taller than the other, and the staff which she carries might indicate her seniority and the infirmity of age.

It is the staff, however, which suggests the other possible interpretation, which on balance seems to the writer to be the more likely one, that the relief was religious in purpose. It is abnormal for a woman on a funerary relief to carry a staff, but in the form of a sceptre, a spear, or the shaft of a torch, it is an attribute of several goddesses. An apposite comparison is with the two seated goddesses on a relief from Corbridge, one of whom is Fortuna, the other, who holds the sceptre, possibly Ceres.⁷ The latter figure is represented in a manner very like that of the Housesteads figure with the staff, save that she holds it in the opposite hand. The oval object held in the Housesteads figure's other hand could be a patera, such as virtually any deity might have or, as on the Corbridge relief, it could be a loaf. If the staff were that of a torch, she too might be interpreted as Ceres.

Seated female figures, however, inevitably call to mind the reliefs of three Mother Goddesses. Whether or not it was a loaf which the right-hand figure held in her lap, though, her companion does not have any of the attributes appropriate to a Mater (fruit, loaves, small animals, infants). Nor is there any reason to think that there were originally more than two figures: the composition seems to have been carefully designed as a pair of figures with counterbalancing variations: the mantles are worn over opposite shoulders, and draped across adjacent knees; and the right-hand figure's arm is stretched out to hold the staff, while the left-hand figure's arm reaches behind it to clasp the other's shoulder.

That gesture, admittedly, recalls that of one of the four deities on a relief reused in the Roman riverside wall at London⁸ and it is paralleled on a relief of two Mother Goddesses from Trier.⁹ The Trier relief is of some interest as a comparison, for the goddess seated on the right of it is clearly the more important: she is somewhat larger than the other figure, and carries a whole tray of fruit, whereas her companion has a single round object. Since the second figure has been given less prominence, it may perhaps be considered whether she was intended to represent, not a goddess, as Espérandieu assumed, but a worshipper; with the clasping of the shoulder indicating, not familiarity, but devotion. This would seem to be the case on a relief from Sarmizegetusa, where a standing female figure rests her hand on the shoulder of another female, seated but represented as of the same vertical dimension, and holding an infant.¹⁰ The gesture is also a feature of some funerary monuments, on which it is made by the wife to the husband.¹¹ Again, this may be interpreted as an act of deference rather than one of equality, though affection is implied. These examples are in contrast with the London Mother Goddesses relief, on which both the maker and the object of the gesture are represented in other respects as equals, and both of them carry Matronal attributes.¹² On the Housesteads relief, the staff-carrying figure appears to be the more important, but the carefully balanced composition suggests that they are not so different in status as to be goddess and worshipper. The clasping gesture might therefore be understood as a suitable expression of the relationship between a younger and an older woman, or goddess: if the figure on the right is indeed Ceres, the other may thus be her daughter Persephone.¹³

It is disappointing, in view of the quality of the carving, that it is not possible to be more conclusive in its interpretation. That is partly because of the lack of certainty in interpretation of the attributes carried by the figures, given the damaged state of the relief when found, and its subsequent fate; partly because the representation of a pair of seated female figures is in itself relatively uncommon. It is for its quality and for the unusual form of the representation that the Housesteads relief is of particular interest.

NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Dr. D. J. Smith of the Museum of Antiquities, University of Newcastle, who invited me to publish the relief and provided the photographs, which are by Mr. Geoffrey Finch of the Library Photographic Section at the University, and to Mr. J. Crow, the archaeologist engaged by the National Trust, who showed the fragments to me. I am also grateful to Dr. Smith and to Dr. Martin Henig for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of my text.

² Pace E. J. Phillips, 'A Workshop of Roman Sculptors at Carlisle', *Britannia*, vii (1976), 101–

8, who describes the similar feature on the tombstone of a woman and child from Murrell Hill, Carlisle, as being the bottoms of two calf-length tunics. On some continental reliefs, the corresponding feature is clearly a fringe: J. P. Wild, 'Clothing in the North-West Provinces of the Roman Empire', *Bonner Jahrbucher* 168 (1968), 166–240, esp. fig. 3.

³ *Op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.* 101–2, with further references, and pl. xii.

⁵ E.g. *ibid.* pls. xiii, b and xiv, a, the tomb-

stone of Vacia from Carlisle and another from Bowness on Solway.

⁶ E. J. Phillips, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani (Great Britain)* I. 1, *Hadrian's Wall East of The North Tyne* (London, 1977), no. 247.

⁷ Phillips, *op. cit.* in note 6, no. 3.

⁸ C. Hill, M. Millett and T. Blagg, *The Roman Riverside Wall and Monumental Arch in London* (London and Middlesex Archaeological Society special paper 3, 1980), 169–171 and pl. 50.

⁹ E. Espérandieu, *Receuil Générale des Bas Reliefs, Statues et Bustes de la Gaule Romaine* (Paris, 1907 *et seq.*), xiv, no. 8403.

¹⁰ D. Alicu, C. Pop and W. Wollmann, *Figured Monuments from Sarmizegetusa*, British Archaeological Reports international series 55

(1979), 163–4, no. 471 and pl. lxxxv. The carving is broken, and constitutes one end of the relief. There may have been other figures adjoining the seated female. It was found in a mausoleum near Sarmizegetusa.

¹¹ E.g. S. Deyts, *Dijon, Musée Archéologique: Sculptures Gallo-Romaines Mythologiques et Religieuses* (Paris, 1976), nos. 84, 138, 138 bis.

¹² Hill, Millett and Blagg, *op. cit.* 125, 204–6, for the interpretations offered by Toynbee and Merrifield.

¹³ I am grateful to Dr. Henig for suggesting Persephone as a suitable companion for Ceres: he preferred, however, to see the gesture as one implying equality.

