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Visions and Dreams in Roman Britain

Lindsay Allason-Jones

Roman religion was based on a close personal relationship between the gods and their worshippers. This relationship usually took the form of an individual or a group petitioning a deity, either with a general request for favours or with a specific request for healing, promotion or similar needs. There were, however, occasions when the gods did not wait to be approached with requests but made their own demands on their worshippers through visions, dreams and portents. This deliberate interference in the lives of their worshippers by a variety of deities is well attested in the classical literature; Julius Caesar, for example, was forewarned of his death by several portents (Suetonius *Julius Caesar* 81) and a number of emperors regularly heard voices, saw visions or had terrible dreams which were interpreted for them by augurs and priests. Whether Iron Age Britain had a similar history of portents and visions is unclear but several events were recorded soon after the Roman invasion in a way which suggests that the Celts were not entirely unfamiliar with the concept of portents. Tacitus, for example, records several which foretold the Boudiccan revolt (*Annals* XIV.30):

“At this juncture, for no visible reason, the statue of Victory at Camulodunum fell down, with its back turned as though it were fleeing from the enemy. Delirious women chanted of destruction at hand. They cried that in the local senate house outlandish yells had been heard; the theatre had echoed with shrieks; and at the mouth of the Thames a phantom settlement had been seen in ruins. A blood-red colour in the sea, too, and shapes like human corpses left by the ebb tide, were interpreted hopefully by the British and with terror by the settlers.”

From this it can be seen that portents could take many forms, from natural phenomena behaving oddly to visions and apparitions being seen or heard by large numbers of people or by individuals. The apparitions at Colchester included not only a phantom town and unearthly noises but also the appearance of ghostly bodies. Apparitions which took a human form were invariably interpreted by the Romans as the gods' messengers, as for example when Julius Caesar was standing on the banks of the Rubicon and saw “an apparition of superhuman size and beauty . . . sitting on the far bank playing a reed pipe” which he took to be “a sign from the gods” (Suetonius *Julius Caesar* 32). In Britain there is less evidence for individuals experiencing dreams and visions or noticing portents but enough survives from inscriptions, particularly in the north of England, to indicate that these played an important part in the spiritual life of the inhabitants. One such inscription, albeit an unusual example in the context of Roman Britain, takes the form of a poem and was found at Carvoran in 1816 (*RIB* 1791):

“The Virgin in her heavenly place rides upon the lion;
bearer of corn, inventor of law, founder of cities,
by whose gifts it is man's lot to know the gods;
therefore, she is the Mother of the Gods,
Peace, Virtue, Ceres, the Syrian goddess,
weighing life and laws in her balance.
Syria has sent the constellation seen in the heavens
to Libya to be worshipped;
Thence have we all learned. Thus has understood,
led by thy god head, Marcus Caecilius Dona-
tionus, serving as
tribune in the post of prefect by the Emperor's
gift.”

This dedication is ostensibly to the goddess, Virgo Caelestis, but also identifies Julia Domna, the Syrian wife of the Libyan emperor, Septimius Severus, with Caelestis. The poem is a remarkable exercise in sycophancy—Marcus Caecilius Donatianus was clearly trying to curry favour with the Emperor and Empress whilst they were in Britain. However, by using the phrase “by thy godhead” Marcus Caecilius Donatianus has indicated that this was not entirely his own idea. The implication is that a god had appeared to him in a vision or had made the request for the poem known by some other supernatural means. But which god? The only deity referred to is female and although she may have inspired him to produce the poem to her greater glory, this seems unlikely as any glory involved in the poem seems to benefit the empress rather than Caelestis. However, as will be seen, a possible link between “emperor worship” and visions is also suggested by the inscriptions on several Romano-British altars so perhaps it was the imperial family’s divine role which had encouraged Donatianus’s expression of loyalty.

When dedicating an altar it was customary to give some indication as to why the offering was being made. This was usually expressed by the formula *votum soluit libens merito*—willingly and deservedly fulfilled his/her/their vow—but occasionally this is replaced by an indication that the altar had been dedicated as a direct result of a deity’s request. At Corbridge an altar to several deities including Caelestis, although this time linked to Brigantia, hints at a somewhat peremptory invitation (*RIB* 1131):

“To the eternal Jupiter of Doliche and to Caelestis Brigantia and to Salus, Gaius Julius Apolinarius, centurion of the 6th legion, at the command of the god (set this up).”

The phrase used is *iuss(u) dei*, and once again it is not clear which god was responsible for the command. From the group listed, however, it is more likely to have been Jupiter Dolichenus, who was prone to admonish his

worshippers and appear to them in visions and dreams. Other examples from Britain include an altar from Caerleon, now lost (*RIB* 320) which, using the term *monitu*, read:

“To Jupiter Best and Greatest of Doliche ... Fronto Aemilianus ... Calpurnius ... Rufilianus, legate of the emperor (set this up) at the bidding (of the god).”

while an example from Piercebridge in County Durham includes the phrase *ex iussu ipsis posuit pro se et suis l(aetus) l(ibens) m(erito)* (*RIB* 1022):

“To Jupiter, Best and Greatest, of Doliche, Julius Valentius, centurion from Upper Germany, by the god’s order gladly, willingly, and deservedly set this up for himself and his household, in the consulship of Praesens and Extricatus for the second time.”

The worship of Jupiter Dolichenus had a special appeal for the officers of the Roman army but there was also frequent association between Jupiter Dolichenus and the health and safety of the Emperor and his family (e.g. *RIB* 815, 824, 825, 1882, 1983). Many saw Jupiter Dolichenus as the divine reflection of the earthly emperor, particularly Septimius Severus. This was not always to the advantage of the deity as the later emperors tended to look unfavourably upon the cult as a result of this link with the Severi. When the cult was at its height in the late 2nd/early 3rd century, however, Jupiter Dolichenus kept his worshippers alert with frequent appearances in dreams or by speaking to them in visions.

In the examples given so far the worshippers were claiming to be responding to a direct request from Jupiter Dolichenus but as all the dedicators are military men, dependent on the emperor for their posts and prosperity, it may well have been the link between Jupiter Dolichenus and the emperor which appeared to them in a dream. In other words, one could, cynically, consider the altars to have been erected in the spirit of political self interest rather than purely as expressions of genuine spiritual fervour.

This practice of simultaneously expressing loyalty to the emperor and dedication to the gods as a response to a divine command can also be seen at Ribchester where an altar is dedicated to a god whose name is missing (*RIB* 587). The surviving inscription translates as:

“to ... for the welfare of our Emperor Caesar Augustus and of Julia Mamaea, the mother of our Lord (the Emperor) and of the army, under the charge of Valerius Crescens Fulvianus, his propraetorian governor, Titus Floridius Natalis, legionary centurion and commandant of the contingent and of the region, restored from ground level and dedicated this temple from his own resources according to the reply of the god.”

This may be Jupiter Dolichenus again but there are no other dedications to Jupiter Dolichenus at Ribchester whilst there is evidence to suggest that the local inhabitants worshipped Apollo, who was not averse to discussing matters with his worshippers: the phrase “*ex responsu [dei]*” does give the impression of a dialogue, which is more indicative of Apollo than Jupiter Dolichenus who was more inclined to pronounce in a monologue whilst the unfortunate recipient of the message quaked silently.

At Housesteads another, possibly related, reference to Apollo (*RIB* 1579) reads.

“to the gods and goddesses according to the interpretation of the oracle of the Clarian Apollo, the First Cohort of Tungrians set this up.”

The Oracle of Apollo at Claros in Asia Minor was one of the more important religious centres of the Graeco-Roman world. Supplicants would travel to the shrine and ask the god questions which were answered in verse by a *thespiodes*, who interpreted the prose responses of the god's prophet. This was more a Greek habit than Roman and Martin Henig has offered the opinion that individuals in the Roman provinces were less likely to consult an oracle as to their fate.¹ This particular inscription, however, was set up by a whole unit and it may have been as a response to an official

directive to the army to seek divine aid when the Emperor Caracalla fell ill in A.D. 213. Possibly one of their number was dispatched to Asia Minor to solicit the Oracle on behalf of the whole unit although this seems a little odd when one considers the time involved in travelling from Housesteads to Claros and back. Alternatively, a representative of the army as a whole may have been dispatched from Rome and the instructions of the Oracle relayed to various units throughout the Empire; similar dedications found in Dalmatia (*CIL* iii.2880), Numidia (*CIL* viii.8351), and Sardinia (*AE* 1929, no. 156) would appear to support this latter view.

That the use of oracles by individuals was not unknown in Roman Britain is clear from the story, recorded by the satirist Lucian, of the fraudulent oracle of Alexander of Abonuteichos, one of whose dupes was Rutilianus, legate of the 6th legion in York in the 2nd century A.D. Lucian says that although Rutilianus was “a man of birth and breeding ... in all that concerned the gods he was very infirm and held strange beliefs about them. If he but saw a stone smeared with oil or adorned with a wreath he would fall on his face forthwith, kiss his hand ... and crave blessings from it” (*Lucian Alex.* 30). Obviously a man who was bound to be taken in by a false oracle.

Something on similar lines to an oracle was involved in Romano-British shrines where there was an interpreter of dreams, such as at the Temple of Nodens at Lydney. The temple complex included a bath suite and a guest house for visitors as well as a long narrow building, which has been identified as an *abaton* in which patients slept overnight in the hope of being visited by the god and healed, or at least given a prescription in the form of a dream message—either *ex visu* (by a vision) or *monitu* (by a divine warning)—which could be interpreted by the priests. A mosaic floor at Lydney includes an inscription referring to someone called Victorinus, who is described as an interpreter (*RIB* 2448.3). This is taken to mean an interpreter of dreams rather than a language specialist (cf. *CIL* vi.33864). In these

shrines, however, it was the worshipper who solicited the aid of the god who passively waited to be asked and this was very much part of mainstream Roman religion, even if it involved dreams. Healing by oracles and dreams could also be seen as a very personal form of religion with a clearly defined objective; visions were less focused and more likely to involve other people.

At Carvoran an altar set up by Titus Flavius Secundus links emperor worship with an hallucinatory experience (*RIB* 1778) but in this instance there is no reference to either Jupiter Dolichenus or Apollo. The inscription reads:

“To the Emperor’s Fortune for the welfare of Lucius Aelius Caesar Titus Flavius Secundus, prefect of the First Cohort of Hamian Archers, because of a vision willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow”.

Here there is no implication that the deity appeared personally in the vision. Indeed this would be improbable; the Emperor’s Fortune was a rather shadowy genius who appears on coins in female guise and there seems to have been an accepted code that this was artistic licence and that there was no “real” female goddess with this role. The cult of the Deified Emperor did not recognize the living emperor himself as a god—although some emperors appear to have made this mistake—instead it was the virtues which made a good emperor which were recognized. Dedications were made to the Emperor’s Virtue, the Emperor’s Discipline, the Emperor’s Victory, and the Emperor’s Fortune and whilst these virtues are personified to some extent, it is unlikely that the average Roman would have anticipated a visit in a dream from a being calling herself the Emperor’s Fortune. Quite what Secundus thought he saw in his vision is left to the imagination but it is interesting that in this case, and in the others discussed so far, the dedicators made it known publicly that they had been picked out by the gods for special attention.

These indications of special attention were not confined to the military, but on the occasions when apparent civilians have visions they

seem to have been very wary about giving their names. At Bath the “son of Novantius” set up something “for himself and his family as the result of a vision”—*ex uisu* (*RIB* 153). This inscription is on a building stone and as the building it came from is unknown it is unclear if the dedicator was claiming to have paid for the whole building or merely the inscription.

Ex uiso is also the formula used on an altar from Kirkby Thore which reads (*RIB* 760):

“To Fortune the Preserver, Antonia daughter (or slave) of Strato, following a vision.”

as well as on another altar, probably from Bath, which reads (*Britannia*: XXVI, 1995, 379, no. 5):

“The son of Clementius set (this) up for himself and his (family) as the result of a vision.”

The most fascinating of this group of altars which use the formula *ex uisu* was found at Risingham in 1825 (*RIB* 1228) and is now in the Museum of Antiquities:

“Forewarned in a dream, the soldier bade her who is married to Fabius to set up this altar to the Nymphs who are to be worshipped.”

This inscription contains several points of interest—firstly, it was not considered necessary for the gods to contact their worshippers direct; it was apparently quite permissible for a third party to be involved. Secondly, it reveals the depth of religious or superstitious fear in the average inhabitant of Roman Britain if the soldier could, as it appears, feel no qualms about delivering his message whilst Fabius’s wife felt obliged to act on the advice of this third party, also apparently without question. The last phrase: “the Nymphs who are to be worshipped” may suggest some backsliding. Perhaps Fabius’ wife had worshipped the Nymphs but had ceased to do so, so the goddesses had provided a gentle reminder to bring her back into line. Finally, there is a noticeable lack of names: neither the soldier nor dedicator are directly named. Married women

could adopt their husband's name on marriage but it was more usual for them to keep their own names, particularly when dedicating a religious offering in their own right.

Many cultures, both past and present, consider there to be great magic in names and, by avoiding the use of both her name and that of the soldier, Fabius's wife may have been trying to deflect ill luck. This nervousness about revealing one's name is noticeable on both the Bath altars; Antonia from Kirkby Thore is the only known civilian recipient of a vision who was willing to give her name on her dedication. The magic of names has been revealed on some of the curse tablets which have been found in recent years: at London, for example, a tablet reads: "I curse Tretia Maria and her life and mind, and memory and liver and lungs mixed together, and her words, thoughts and memory, thus may she be unable to speak what things are concealed"; in this example the names Tretia and Maria are reversed (*RIB* 7) to make the curse more powerful. In another curse from London Bridge a petitioner asks Neptune for vengeance but gives the god's name in anagram form in order to gain the maximum magical benefit (*Britannia* XVIII (1987) 360, no. 1). It is, therefore, particularly noticeable that the military dedicators who admit to having had a direct command from a deity are punctilious in giving their full name and rank.

Although only a small number of inscriptions from Roman Britain imply that deities made requests directly to worshippers through unusual experiences, noticeable differences can be seen between those dedicated by military personnel and those from the civilian population. Firstly, all the civilian examples use the phrase *ex visu*—by a vision—whilst the military use a variety of terms which tend to suggest a verbal command rather than a visual

instruction: "at the bidding of the god", "by the god's order", "according to the reply of the god", and so on. A verbal exchange was also involved in the First Cohort of Tungrians' dedication to Apollo but as this was in response to a recommendation by the oracle of the Clarian Apollo, this may not fall into the same category; in this case it was not the deity who opened the conversation.

The second noticeable difference is that the military are careful to give their full name and rank whilst the civilians seem to go out of their way to conceal their personal names. This may suggest that the military were following a Roman tradition of religious interaction whilst the civilians were working to the more magical practices of Celtic worship but may also be connected to the third difference, which is to be seen in the deities themselves. The military seem to have been more likely to have acted under the direction of Jupiter Dolichenus or Apollo whilst the civilians either do not reveal the deity's name or appear to have preferred Fortune or the Nymphs. It is hard not to avoid the conclusion that an ambitious military officer might consider it advantageous, given the links between the cult of the Deified Emperor and Jupiter Dolichenus and Apollo, to be seen to be a fervent worshipper of those deities and a loyal adherent of the Cult of the Deified Emperor, and in these circumstances it would be important to ensure that one was clearly identified. The civilians, on the other hand, may have been more afraid of the anger of the gods and thus would have been eager to avoid being identified too precisely.

NOTE

¹ Henig, M., 1984, *Religion in Roman Britain*, 154.

