A LONDON MYSTERY SOLVED

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Generations of visitors to the beautiful 15th century eastern crypt of Guildhall have been puzzled by a huge granite column-base which lay, unlabelled, in the north-west corner of the crypt. It was clearly of Roman date, but there was apparently no record of its discovery or of its arrival at Guildhall. This great mass of stone is about 2 ft. 6 in. in height and nearly 6 ft. across at its base, and as it was merely an undecorated architectural feature, it seemed unlikely that anyone would have taken the trouble to move it far from the place where it was originally used. It was therefore commonly accepted as a genuine relic of Roman London.

Mr. Gordon Home, in his book on Roman London, published in 1926, suggested that it originally supported an interior column of the great basilica on Cornhill, and drew a reconstruction of the column, 3 ft. 9 in. in diameter and more than 40 ft. high.[1] Mr. W. C. Edwards, however, raised the question of the difficulty of getting the stone into the crypt, estimating (on the basis of the stone being quite solid) that it weighed more than five tons. He therefore suggested that the column-base might be occupying its original site and that the mediaeval crypt was built round it! He also mentioned a tradition that it was one of a series of twelve.[2]

The stone was originally thought to be granite from Shap in Westmoreland, but a detailed petrographical analysis by Dr. H. H. Thomas, Petrographer to the Geological Survey, in 1928, showed conclusively that it was identical in mineral constituents and microscopic structure with the red granite of Assouan, in Egypt, and had undoubtedly come from that source.[3] Egyptian granite was exported for use in Roman settlements in the Mediterranean, so there seemed no reason why it should not have reached Roman London. If anything, the discovery that the stone was of Egyptian origin seemed to strengthen the case for its arrival in London in Roman times, since it seemed incredible that anyone would have considered it worth the trouble and cost of transport except for actual use. It was therefore provisionally accepted as a remnant of Roman London in the scholarly survey made by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments in 1928. The suggestion was made that it might even have been part of a memorial column, such as might possibly have supported the great bronze statue of Hadrian, the head of which was found in the Thames.[4]

A few years ago, however, Mr. Martin Henig, then a member of Guildhall Museum staff, found a significant reference in John Timbs's *Curiosities of London*, published in 1855. Describing Guildhall Crypt, the author said (p. 301), '. . . Opposite the north entrance is a large antique bowl of Egyptian red granite, which was presented to the Corporation by Major Cookson in 1802 as a memorial of the British achievements in Egypt.'

Further investigation brought to light a similar reference four years earlier in the *Illustrated London News*, and this gave the additional information that the bowl had been sent to England in the ship *Anacreon* from Alexandria, with a letter dated 1st September, 1802.[5]

Major George Cookson (later a General) commanded the Artillery in Egypt under Abercrombie, and was evidently a man who let no difficulties stand in his way. The technical problems of removing and shipping a great piece of stone to England may even have attracted him as a means of demonstrating his prowess and that of his men.

It seemed clear that the column base of Egyptian granite by the north entrance to the crypt, and the 'bowl' of the same material, said to have been in the same place in the mid-nineteenth century, must be one and the same object. But why should an obvious column-base have been described in two separate accounts as a 'bowl'? The only possible explanation seemed to be that it was hollow underneath, and if turned the other way up would appear to be a bowl. The great stone had never been moved in living memory, and could not of course be raised merely to satisfy antiquarian curiosity. I was sufficiently certain that this must be the explanation, however, to commit myself to it in print last year.[6] At that time it seemed unlikely that the question could be finally settled in the foreseeable future.

Within months, however, the decision had been taken by the Guildhall Reconstruction Committee to clear the whole of the crypt, and with considerable difficulty the great stone block was lifted and removed to the open area west of Guildhall—not without some anxious moments when it seemed that the floor of the crypt might not be able to bear the strain. It was with some trepidation, on more than one account, that I slipped my hand under the base as soon as it had been raised a few inches—and felt, to my relief, the under surface curving upwards, leaving a central void.

The suggestion that the base was hollow had met with some scepticism, as the only advantage of hollowing it seemed to be that it would make it lighter to transport and handle, while there would be the corresponding disadvantage of weakening it. When it was lifted on to its side, however, it was at once clear that Major Cookson had been quite right, and that it *was* a bowl. It had been made, and no doubt used, as a column-base, but had subsequently been converted into a bowl or basin—evidently after the building in which it stood had been destroyed.

Where in Egypt the bowl/base was found we do not know, but it seems on the whole most likely that it was in Alexandria. Dr. John Harris has suggested[7] that it might have been either the site of the great Serapeum, or more probably a site by the sea-shore where massive ruins have been found, and near the place where Cleopatra's Needle then lay. An unsuccessful attempt to remove the Needle was made by men of Abercrombie's force in 1801, and Cookson may well have been concerned with this. Dr. Harris informed me that a portion of a royal statue presented by Cookson is in the Bristol Museum, with its provenance variously stated as 'near Cairo' and 'at the base of the Needle'. It seems likely that the 'Needle' mentioned is Cleopatra's Needle, and that the former provenance is incorrect. If so, Cookson was hunting antiquities on his own account on the shores of Alexandria, and may well have found the column-base at this time.

It had evidently already been converted into a bowl, either in later Roman or post-Roman times, apparently for use as an ornamental basin, presumably containing water. There are the remains of an iron inset, probably a dowel, in the centre of the bowl on the underside of the column-base, and this does not penetrate to the surface of the base. It seems clear that a central ornamental feature was fixed in the bowl—probably a statue if the conversion took place in Roman times. It would have looked well, rising from the water and reflected in its surface. It seems unlikely that it was a fountain, as there was no provision for an entry pipe.

The major problem of the origin of the great column-base has therefore been solved, but a minor mystery remains. Timbs and the contributor to the *Illustrated London News* presumably obtained their information from a label or notice that was still in the crypt in the

Column-base after removal from Guildhall crypt, showing under-surface hollowed to form bowl, with remains of central iron dowel.

mid-19th century, and there is no reason to doubt its accuracy. The fact remains that it has so far proved impossible to confirm it from any official record in the Corporation archives. No Committee Report seems to mention the arrival of the great stone; there is no word of official thanks to Major Cookson; even the cost of getting it from the *Anacreon* into the crypt—and this must have been considerable—does not seem to appear in the financial records. Perhaps Cookson paid for the whole thing, and the Corporation may have been understandably embarrassed by an unwanted gift.

What is to happen to it now? It has never formed part of the collection of Guildhall Museum, and since its connection with the history of London is limited to its association with Guildhall, it would not be acceptable for exhibition in the future Museum of London, which is to incorporate the existing Guildhall and London Museums. Yet it is a noble piece of stone, and not only worthy of preservation as a genuine antiquity of Roman Egypt, but as a testimony to the extraordinary endeavour of 19th century Englishmen. It is also of great interest as an awful example of the sort of misconception that can arise, quite logically, from insufficient information and failure to take into account the strange vagaries of human behaviour. A point of particular interest in a City of so many traditions, well-based and otherwise, is that the column-base acquired the completely imaginary legend that it had originally belonged to a series of twelve. This cannot have originated with Cookson, who found the base after its conversion into a bowl.

Clearly the column-base must be preserved—but where? Its weight—less than the five tons originally estimated, but probably between three and four tons—demands a position on solid ground. Fortunately it will not deteriorate through exposure, so can be kept out-of-doors. It could be used as an ornamental bowl containing soil or water, if drilled for drainage—or, shown as a column base, as it lay in Guildhall crypt for 165 years, could be used as a pedestal, perhaps for a piece of modern sculpture, or even as a seat. It has been deposited temporarily by the City Architect near the bastions south of St. Giles' Cripplegate, and it is understood that it will probably be used in that area, no doubt with a suitable notice giving its extraordinary history.

NOTES

1 Gordon Home, *Roman London*, 1926, p. 201.
2 L.A.M.A.S. Trans., (N.S.) vol. 5, 1923–6, p. 337.
3 *Ibid*, pp. 337–9.
4 R.C.H.M. Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, vol. III, *Roman London*, pp. 42–3.
5 *Illustrated London News*, 24th May, 1851, pp. 467–8.
6 R. Merrifield, *Roman London* (Cassell, 1969), pp. 108–9.
7 In a letter to the writer dated 30.1.66.