

VULCAN ON A ROMAN GOLD RELIEF FROM BRUNSWICK STREET, LEICESTER

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In 1943, during the Second World War, a small gold relief was unearthed in the garden of St Matthew's Vicarage, 150 Brunswick Street, Leicester.¹ The finder was the Rev. J. W. Burford, a local antiquary not afraid of getting his hands dirty.² He duly reported his find to the Keeper of Antiquities at Leicester City Museum, where it has remained ever since. The object has never been fully published and the writer has taken the opportunity to discuss it now in light of similar objects which have been found recently in the East Midlands.

The relief (Fig. 1) is oval in form, measures 12mm × 9mm, and is made of embossed sheet gold, less than 1mm thick, which has been bent over at the edges to give the appearance of a solid piece of gold 2mm thick. Originally the relief would have been slightly larger, as the folded section is missing on the left side. There is also damage to the surface of the relief, with a diagonal crack and a perforation just above the left knee of the figure. The embossed motif shows a male figure standing frontally but facing left. He wears a cap and a short tunic which covers only one shoulder. In his outstretched right hand he holds up a linear object – with a head interpreted here as a hammer – and in his left he holds a downturned linear object with a penannular, pincer-shaped terminal, interpreted here as a pair of tongs. In the left corner, at the feet of the figure, is a horizontal bar supported at one end on a stand, interpreted here as a stemmed anvil of beaked form.³ A simple raised linear border encircles the scene.

The iconography of the relief has been interpreted in a variety of ways since its discovery. After the war the new Keeper, David Clarke, must have been curious about the object, since he sent a photograph of it to Jocelyn Toynbee who had just been appointed Laurence Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. Toynbee was cautious about 'definite pronouncements...without

¹ Much of the St Matthew's district of Leicester was levelled to make way for new housing estates after the war; number 150 was located in a part of the road that has survived. However, it is possible that the relief may have been deposited originally within the Roman town itself, since unpublished records in the museum state that the find was said to have been made 'with other Roman oddments (sherds)... and was probably part of a tip to level site from rubbish dug out of Old City'.

² Burford participated in the excavations at Breedon-on-the-Hill in 1941, Potters Marston in 1945 and of the Leicester town wall between 1950 and 1951, and had been a member of this Society since 1937. *Leicester Museum and Art Gallery Annual Report to the City Council* 38 (1942), p. 2; D. T. D. Clarke, 'Archaeology in Leicestershire 1939–51', *TLAHS* 28 (1952), p. 17; J. Haynes, 'A Thirteenth Century Kiln Site at Potters Marston', *TLAHS* 28 (1952), p. 56; *TLAHS* 20, p. xlvii.

³ For parallels of the metal working tools depicted, see W. H. Manning, *Catalogue of the Romano-British Iron Tools, Fittings and Weapons in the British Museum*, London: British Museum 1985, for the hammer 5 Pl.2 A7–A8, for the pair of tongs Pl.4 A12–A15, and for the anvil 3–4, Fig. 2.1 and Pl.1 A2–A3.



Fig. 1. Roman gold relief showing Vulcan from St Matthew's, Leicester.
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seeing the original', but suggested that it might show *Virtus* (the personification of courage), Mars or a warrior.⁴ It is not recorded what Clarke thought of the motif, but a typewritten note in the museum may indicate that he thought the relief showed Vulcan. Clarke also tried unsuccessfully to convince Toynbee that the relief had been made by copying the reverse of a coin, as he believed parts of the design were actually the remains of the letters of a legend. In the 1960s, Martin Henig studied the object and suggested that it showed a different personification, *Bonus Eventus* (good outcome), interpreting the object in the right hand as a *patera* (libation bowl) and the object in the left as a pair of corn ears.⁵

When the relief was found it was correctly identified as an inset for a late Roman finger ring, but the identity of its subject remained a puzzle as its attributes are indistinct and there were few parallels for comparison. Ring reliefs of this form are uncommon and usually restricted to depictions of the *dextrarum iunctio* (handshake) that was emblematic of Roman marriage,⁶ and consequently scholars like Toynbee and Henig looked to coins and engraved gemstones for comparanda. Since that time several other gold and silver reliefs depicting Vulcan have been recovered in the East Midlands. The first was found in a small fourth-century AD jewellery hoard at Owmbly-by-Spital in Lincolnshire, again as a slightly damaged gold relief without

⁴ Unpublished letter dated 12 February 1951, in Jewry Wall Museum.

⁵ No. 764 in M. Henig, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites*, Oxford: BAR, British Series No. 8, 1974.

⁶ See 62–4 in C. Johns, *The Jewellery of Roman Britain: Celtic and Classical Traditions*, London: Routledge, 1996.

its ring.⁷ A gold relief in a much better preserved state was found at Lincoln, in the Newport area north of the walls of the Roman town, which clearly showed Vulcan standing at his anvil, holding hammer and tongs.⁸ Another gold relief was found at Brant Broughton, Lincolnshire, set in a silver finger ring of Henig Type V form.⁹ The work of the Portable Antiquities Scheme has also led to the reporting of several more examples found by metal detectorists, including a loose gold relief found near Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire.¹⁰ Three have been found on the Roman temple site at Rothwell Top, near Nettleton, Lincolnshire.¹¹ The latter included two silver reliefs set in silver rings similar to that from Brant Broughton, and a much more finely detailed relief set in a gold ring of Henig Type VIII form.

That eight of these unusual reliefs depicting Vulcan have been found in the East Midlands calls for comment. It should be noted that Vulcan, compared with other Roman deities, is an extremely uncommon subject on objects of personal adornment.¹² Interestingly, Leicester has also produced one of only a few sculptural depictions of Vulcan from Britain, which portrays the god in a similar composition.¹³ Although this fragment probably represents only a small part of a larger Jupiter Column, it does support the idea that Vulcan, or his indigenous alter ego (since he is not named), was significant in local religious practices.¹⁴ In Britain formal worship of Vulcan is best attested at Barkway, Hertfordshire, where he is depicted in repoussé on two third-century AD silver votive leaves. Again Vulcan appears to have taken a secondary role, with the primary dedication of the temple being to *Mars Toutatis/Alator*, who is depicted on a bronze statuette and also on several of the other votive leaves, as well as being named in their dedicatory inscriptions.¹⁵

Given this association between Vulcan and *Toutatis* at the Barkway temple, it may be significant that the rings with Vulcan reliefs are broadly contemporary with and share the same distribution centred on Lincoln, as the *ToT* rings (thought to have been dedicated to the indigenous god *Toutatis*) catalogued by Daubney.¹⁶ The Vulcan rings also share a rough and ready quality about their production, for

⁷ C. Johns, 'A Group of Late Roman Jewellery from Owmbly-by-Spital, Lincs', *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology* 15 (1980), pp. 87–8. Held at The Collection, Lincoln accession No. LCNCC: 1978.215.2.

⁸ Unpublished, held at The Collection, Lincoln accession No. LCNCC: 1981.114.

⁹ C. Johns, 'Some Unpublished Jewellery from Roman Britain', *Jewellery Studies* 5 (1991), pp. 55–64. Held at The Collection, Lincoln accession No. LCNCC: 1984.1.

¹⁰ Recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme Database as DENO-C7EA54 at www.finds.org.uk.

¹¹ I. J. Marshman, 'Four Finger Rings and an Intaglio from East Field', Nettleton, in S. Willis (ed.) *The Roman Roadside Settlement and Multi-Period Ritual Complex at Nettleton and Rothwell, Lincolnshire. The Central Lincolnshire Wolds Research Project Volume I*, Canterbury: Pre-Construct Archaeology and University of Kent, 2013.

¹² As n. 9 p. 62.

¹³ Catalogue entry No. 75 in J. Huskinson, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani: Corpus of Sculpture of the Roman World: Great Britain Volume 1: Roman Sculpture from Eastern England*, London: British Academy, 1994.

¹⁴ For depictions of the 'celtic' equivalent of Vulcan, see 24 in M. J. Green, *A Corpus of Religious Material from Civilian Areas in Roman Britain*, Oxford: BAR, British Series No. 24, 1976.

¹⁵ For the votive leaves see 171, 177 and Pl. 77 in T. W. Potter and C. Johns, *Roman Britain*, London: British Museum Press, 1992.

¹⁶ A. Daubney, 'The Cult of Totatis: evidence for tribal identity in mid Roman Britain', pp. 105–16, in S. Worrell, *A Decade of Discovery: Proceedings of the Portable Antiquities Scheme Conference 2007*, Oxford: BAR, British Series No. 520, 2010.

although both types are often made in precious metal there is often a lack of care taken in their finish. Mistakes are commonly found in the engravings on *ToT* (this is how they are inscribed) rings, and misalignments of the embossing dies can be seen on several Vulcan rings, including this Leicester example. In the case of *ToT* rings, Daubney has suggested that this demonstrates that the rings were produced by more than one workshop and perhaps may have been engraved with the god's name by their wearers.¹⁷ Although there are a smaller number of known Vulcan rings, there is evidence that these were also not the work of a single artisan since at least five different embossing tools appear to have been used in their production.¹⁸ Perhaps those purchasing such rings were able to strike their own reliefs at the anvil to invoke the smith god's protection? If the two types of ring are related it is also interesting to note that, whilst the *ToT* rings do not appear to have included depictions of *Toutatis*, the Vulcan rings portray the god in a Roman manner but do not carry inscriptions, a contrast that perhaps reflects the unease felt by those who wore them about the syncretising of local and Roman deities.¹⁹

Whilst Vulcan and *Toutatis* were worshipped across Roman Britain, people living within the *civitas* of the *Corieltavi* in the mid to late Roman period seem to have had a special relationship with these two gods. The reason they chose to produce and use finger rings with dedications to these gods requires further study. However, it is interesting to note that these objects represent the complex interplay between local and imported beliefs, as well as an intriguing use of finger rings, which were after all a type of personal adornment that was not worn in pre-Roman Britain. The gold relief from Leicester is a welcome addition to this small but growing corpus, offering the potential to shed new light on how we understand the religious practices of the region.

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.

¹⁸ Webster has argued that although indigenous rural communities sometimes inscribed the names of their own gods in Latin script, they may deliberately have avoided pairing the names of their own gods with those of the foreign (Roman) ones. J. Webster, 'Interpretatio': Roman World Power and the Celtic Gods', *Britannia* 26 (1995), pp. 153–61. See also pp. 226–32 in D. J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: experiencing the Roman Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

¹⁹ See fn. 11.