

A New Roman Distance-slab from the Antonine Wall

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In March 1969 a highly decorated and inscribed Roman building-record of the kind known as a distance-slab was ploughed up on the farm of Cleddans, Dunbartonshire, close to the line of the Antonine Wall and between the forts of Castlehill and Duntocher. The eighteenth such tablet to be found on the Wall,¹ it is the first to come to light for more than one hundred years. In addition to its considerable artistic merit it is noteworthy because it challenges one of the fundamental assumptions concerning these slabs. On the instructions of the farmer, Mr I. McIndeor, the stone was carefully raised and taken to the steading, where it was noticed some three months later by Mr G. A. Williamson of Scottish Agricultural Industries Limited, who brought it to the attention of the second-named writer. When Mr McIndeor learned of its importance, he generously agreed to present it to the Hunterian Museum, the University of Glasgow, where it is now on display.

The slab (Pl. 8) was found at the western end of Hutcheson Hill, in a small field which slopes steeply down to the Cleddans Burn and which is traversed by the Antonine Wall.² Although the field in question had not been ploughed within living memory before 1968, it must have been intensively cultivated in former times, since no trace of the Rampart is now visible hereabouts and the Ditch has been almost completely filled up. The precise find-spot may be determined by measuring along the centre of the Ditch for a distance of 294 ft. westwards from the hedge that forms the eastern boundary of the field, and then 64 ft. southwards at right angles to the Ditch. Assuming that the Ditch was its usual width of 40 ft. at this point, and the berm 20 ft. broad, the site of the discovery will have been about 10 ft. behind the back of the Rampart. To judge by the relatively unworn condition of the stone, and the fact that it was lying face downwards in what the ploughman, Mr D. McInnes, thought was a shallow pit, it can be assumed that it had been deliberately buried, presumably close to the spot where it originally stood.

Made of golden-yellow sandstone, the slab measures 37 in. wide, 30 in. high and 6 in. thick. The edges are chipped in places where they have been struck by the plough, particularly in the area of the top right-hand corner, and the heads of three of the sculptured figures have sustained some damage; but in general the carving is remarkably well preserved and shows scarcely any sign of weathering. On the top edge and mid-way down each side there are dovetail cramp-holes for securing the slab to a masonry framework. The majority of the distance-slabs exhibit similar cramp-holes, and some remains of the masonry support itself were found with No. 1 at Bridgeness.³ The inscription has been broken down into single letters, or groups of letters, which are

¹ Cf. Sir George Macdonald, *The Roman Wall in Scotland* (2nd ed. 1934), cap. x. In this edition Macdonald numbers the seventeen distance-slabs that he records from east to west, in conformity with the direction in which the Wall was built. This system of numbering (which differs from that in the

first edition of his book) has been adopted in the present paper, and in order to place it at the appropriate point in the sequence the new slab is referred to as No. 10A.

² O.S. 6-inch sheet NS 57 SW; N.G.R. 51547234.

³ Macdonald, *op. cit.*, 364.

worked skilfully into an architectural façade consisting of three bays flanked by cabled Corinthian pilasters, the upper parts of the capitals being dentilled. The central bay has a segmental arch-head, moulded and enriched on the extrados, while the flanking bays are surmounted by entablatures with triangular pediments. The probability that this façade is intended to represent a Triumphal Arch is heightened by the addition of figure-sculpture symbolising the victory of the Roman army over the native tribesmen that preceded the building of the Antonine Wall.¹ The theme is a familiar one, but here relieved from triteness by the dignity of the composition and by the high degree of technical skill displayed in the modelling of the figures. In the central bay a female figure, bare-headed and clad in a long high-waisted dress with a cloak falling gracefully across the body from the left shoulder, is shown in the act of bestowing a miniature wreath on the eagle standard borne by the *aquilifer*, the senior standard-bearer of the legion. She holds the wreath in her right hand, as though to place it in the eagle's beak,² while in her left hand she carries what appears to be a small dish or *patera*. In the absence of any of the usual distinguishing adjuncts of a goddess, the identity of this lady is uncertain. The fact that her hair is coiled on the top of her head in the style popularised by the Elder Faustina, the consort of Antoninus Pius, who died not long before the Wall was built, might suggest that the deified empress herself is here represented. On the other hand, as far as is known no other Roman relief shows a deified emperor or empress as the protagonist in a military ceremony of this kind, while imperial fashions in coiffure were sometimes conferred by artists on goddesses or female personifications. The goddess Victory on distance-slab No. 17, for example, has her hair done up in precisely the same style as the lady on the Cleddans slab. Perhaps the most likely explanation, suggested by Professor Toynbee, is that the figure may be intended to personify the Romanised province Britannia congratulating the Roman army on its victory, and on enlarging the area of the province by the addition of the territory between the two Walls. Professor Toynbee points out that on the ADVENTVI AVG BRITANNIAE coin of Hadrian (M. & S., ii, no, 882; C.28) the province is personified as a female civilian figure wearing a long robe, as on the present distance-slab.

The respect due from a mortal to an immortal being is charmingly conveyed by the deferential attitude of the *aquilifer*, who is portrayed as a somewhat smaller, slightly stooping figure, with eyes down-cast. Bare-headed and clean-shaven, he wears a short military cloak, beneath which is a kilted garment worn over knee-length trousers. Regularly spaced vertical lines on the kilt could represent either pleats or a reinforcement of leather or metal-plated strips. The legs appear to be protected by greaves and ankle-length boots cover the feet. At his right hip he carries a dagger similar to that depicted on the effigy of the centurion Facilis at Colchester.³

No Roman triumph would be complete without its quota of vanquished tribesmen, and in each of the two side bays there is a kneeling Caledonian warrior with hands bound behind the back; the one on the left is clean-shaven and naked, while his companion is bearded and moustached and wears a belt at the waist with a sporran-like attachment. At the foot of the stone, forming as it were the podium of the Arch, there are two inscribed panels flanked by *peltae*, and between them a spirited representation of a charging wild boar, the emblem of the Twentieth Legion.

The letters of the inscription are generally 1½ in. to 1¾ in. high and triangular stops are usually employed between words. Two of the letters have been destroyed but the text can be restored to read:

¹ Capitolinus, *Historia Augusta, Vit. Ant. Pii*, 5, 4.

² Professor Jocelyn Toynbee reminds us that an eagle on a standard on one of the Marcus Aurelius reliefs on the Arch of Constantine holds a little bag or purse in its beak.

³ M. R. Hull, *Roman Colchester* (1958), pl. 1A; G. Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army* (1969), pl. 1.

Im[p](eratori) [C]t(aesari) T(ito) · Ae(lio) · Hadriano Antonino Aug(usto) · Pio · p(atri) · p(atriciae) · vex(illaio) · leg(ionis) XX · V(aleriae) · V(ictricis) · fec(it) · p(er) · p(edum) III (milia)

'For the Emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius, father of his country, a detachment of the Twentieth Legion Valeria Victrix built 3,000 feet (of the Wall).'

From a study of eight tablets (Nos. 9-12 and 14-17) found between the fort of Castlehill and the River Clyde, Macdonald concluded that the construction of this last 4 miles of the Wall was allocated to six working-parties, two from each of the legions then in Britain, and that on the completion of a given sector the squad responsible 'signed' the work by erecting a distance-slab at either end. The details of the individual lengths are tabulated in his book as follows.¹

Sector	Legion	Roman feet (pedes)
Castlehill—Hutcheson Hill	XX	3,000
Hutcheson Hill—Braidfield	VI	3,240
Braidfield—Duntocher Burn	II	4,140
Duntocher Burn—Carleith	II	3,271
Carleith—Dalnotter Burn	VI	4,141
Dalnotter Burn—The Clyde	XX	4,411
		22,203

For the first of these sectors Macdonald was able to call in evidence a duplicate pair of distance-slabs. One (No. 9) was turned up by the plough in 1847 roughly half-way down the field that lies between the fort of Castlehill and the Peel Glen, while the other (No. 10) was found during drainage operations in 1865 on the 'southern slope' of Hutcheson Hill and about 6 yds. south of the Wall. Both tablets record the construction of 3,000 *pedes* of the Wall by a draft of the Twentieth Legion, and Macdonald argues convincingly that No. 10 must have come from the westernmost field on Hutcheson Hill. As this is the same field which has produced the latest slab there can be no doubt that Nos. 10 and 10A originally stood at the same point of junction between two sectors; but the newcomer does not fall neatly into place in Macdonald's system since it also records the construction of 3,000 *pedes* by the Twentieth Legion, and not (as the system requires in order to match No. 11 from Braidfield) 3,240 *pedes* by the Sixth Legion. One possible solution to the problem would be to suppose that Nos. 10 and 10A relate not to the same but to different sectors, one of them marking the end of the first sector west of Castlehill and the other the start of a sector of similar length, also constructed by the Twentieth Legion. On this basis No. 11 would have been erected at the beginning of the third sector, and not, as Macdonald assumed, the end of the second. This explanation, however, will not serve. Measured on the map the distance from the fort of Castlehill to the Clyde is 22,660 English feet, whereas the table given above shows that the distance on the tablets, excluding No. 10A, is 22,203 *pedes* or 21,555 English feet.² The difference is on the wrong side, for owing to undulations in the ground the sum of the

¹ op. cit., 395.

² Macdonald (op. cit., 399) makes the equivalent distance 21,834 English feet, but throughout his calculations he consistently exaggerates the value of the *pes* in terms of the English foot. The approximate value of the Roman foot has been established by the measurement of it on the tombstone of T. Statilius Aper, a *mentor aedificiorum* in Rome (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vi, 1975) and by the discovery of several foot-measures. The most commonly accepted figure is 11.65 in. or 296 mm,

giving the length of the Roman mile (1,000 *passus* = 5,000 *pedes*) as 1,618 yds. or 1,480 m. This has been confirmed in practice by Goodchild who measured 1,480 m due south from his zero in Cyrene and found a milestone of Claudius, and then a further 1,480 m to find the remains of a second milestone (*Papers of the British School at Rome*, xviii (1900), 83 ff.). On this basis 3,000 *pedes* are the equivalent of 2,912 English feet, and not, as Macdonald states (op. cit., 384), 2,950 English feet.

opus valli should always be more than the dead-level reckoning on the map, but as Macdonald observed the combined lengths (720 ft.) of the northern ramparts of the forts of Duntocher and Old Kilpatrick, which were constructed before the Wall-builders arrived on the scene, should presumably be deducted from the map measurement. Although the resultant difference of 385 ft. is still on the wrong side, and it is not clear how to account for it, the addition of a further 3,000 *pedes* or 2,912 English feet to the total already given on the slabs would mean that irregularities in the ground had absorbed more than 2,500 ft. – an impossibly high figure. Moreover, to credit the Twentieth Legion with an extra 3,000 *pedes* would be to destroy the balance that exists at present in the apportionment of the work between the three legions westwards from No. 9, and which is so precise that it cannot be regarded as being purely the result of chance.¹

Since neither No. 10 nor 10A can be regarded as a 'waster',² we are, therefore driven to the conclusion that Nos. 9, 10 and 10A all refer to the same sector, in which case it must be supposed that each length of the wall was 'signed' not by two slabs but by four – one perhaps being placed in front of the Wall and one behind at each end. It is worth noting that on Hadrian's Wall two pairs of centurial stones were used to mark each length of the Vallum, the members of each pair being set opposite to one another in the inner faces of the north and south mounds,³ although the centurial stones on the Wall itself appear to have been restricted to the south face. At one time Macdonald was convinced that four of the Antonine Wall tablets found east of Castlehill (Nos. 5–8) relate to the same sector, since they all bear the same awkward number of units (3,666½ paces). In this case, however, two different legions are involved, and on reconsideration Macdonald preferred to think that the two squads concerned had build adjacent lengths of the Wall, rather than that they had worked side by side on the same sector – one squad perhaps digging the Ditch while the other erected the Rampart.⁴ In the light of this latest discovery it would seem wisest to leave the options open for the time being.

To conclude this brief paper attention may be drawn to three points. First, the Cleddans slab provides welcome confirmation that the unit of measurement in those inscriptions where P and not MP is used is the Roman foot. In order to check this, the distance between its find-spot and that of No. 9, as indicated on the O.S. map, was measured on the ground, and including the Peel Glen was found to be 2,666 English feet. As already stated, the equivalent measurement on the slabs is 2,912 English feet, but it must be remembered that No. 9 was not lying flat when found, and the right-hand side had been broken off. It is probable, therefore, that it had subsequently been moved from the place where it was originally buried, and if this was some 80 yds. further uphill, as the measurement on the inscription requires, the stone will have been erected initially close to the outer defences of Castlehill fort – an appropriate point at which to begin a new sector of the Wall. Second, the architectural detail on No. 10A enables us to recognise the hand of the same carver in No. 17, a rather less ambitious work which was set up, also by a draft of the Twentieth Legion, at the western end of the Wall. But at least two other sculptors were employed on these tablets by the Twentieth Legion, one of whom was responsible for Nos. 9 and 13, and the other for Nos. 10 and 16. Lastly, unless it was protected by some form of canopy, the relatively unweathered condition of the Cleddans stone is inconsistent with Macdonald's view that the distance-slabs remained *in situ* until 185; as the first-named writer has already suggested,⁵ it is more likely that they were taken down and concealed at an earlier date, possibly at

¹ The totals in Roman feet for each of the three legions in the table on p. 124 are: Second Legion 7,411, Sixth Legion 7,381, and Twentieth Legion 7,411.

² Like No. 10A, No. 10 is equipped with cramp-holes, presumptive evidence that it was actually erected.

³ *Archaeol. Aeliana*, 4th series, xiv (1937), 227 ff.

⁴ *op. cit.*, 377, n. 3.

⁵ *Archaeol. Aeliana*, 4th series, xlii (1964), 22.

the time when the Antonine Wall was evacuated for a short period during the Brigantian rising of 155-8.

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Roman distance-slab from Cleddans Farm, Dunbartonshire.
Photo: Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow