

The Roman distance slab from Bridgeness

by E J Phillips

The Roman distance slab, which was found at Bridgeness in 1868 and commemorates the construction of the easternmost section of the Antonine Wall by the Second Legion, is one of the largest and most elaborately carved Roman building records to have been found in Britain (Smith 1868, 763; Lefroy 1869, 178–9; Cadell 1869, 109–10; *CIL* vii, 1088; *Catalogue of the National Museum of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh* (1892), FV 27; Macdonald 1921, 3; 1934, 362–5; Toynbee 1963, 166, no. 97; 1964, 148–9; *RIB* 2139; Bandinelli 1971, 199–205; Robertson 1973, 17). Its design falls into three main sections (pl 9). In the centre is the inscription, which reads: *Imp(eratori) Caes(ari) Tito Aelio | Hadri(ano) Antonino | Aug(usto) Pio p(atr) p(atriciae) leg(io) II | Aug(usta) per m(ilia) p(assuum) IIII DCLII | fec(it)*. It is cut on an oblong panel edged with a cyma moulding and flanked by griffin-headed *peltae*, above and below which are rosettes. At the top of the stone is a palmette border. On either side of this central section is an aedicula, which contains a figured scene, that on the left being separated from the left-hand *pelta* by a spirally-fluted engaged column. The Tuscan order is used both for this column and for the engaged columns of the aediculae.

Although the overall design of the slab is basically symmetrical, the detailing contains several irregularities. The engaged column between the left-hand aedicula and *pelta* is not balanced by a similar column on the right. The left-hand aedicula has a low, segmental arch, while that on the right is surmounted by a pediment without a horizontal cornice and a small column projects above the lower end of its left raking cornice. These differences show that the sculptor had already executed the left end of the slab as far as the left-hand aedicula and possibly as far as the spirally fluted engaged column in sufficient detail to make alteration of this part impossible, when he realised that he would have to revise his design. As will become clear below, the unusual form of the *peltae* makes it unlikely that he had carved any more of the slab. The alterations to the design were intended to compensate for the lack of space remaining on the slab to accommodate both the inscription panel and an area of carving to its right as wide as that on the left. Clearly something had gone wrong. It may be simply that the sculptor miscalculated when roughing out the design on the stone. Errors of this kind are not infrequent, even on quite ambitious sculptures.¹ There are, however, other possible explanations. The sculptor may have found it necessary to widen the inscription panel. Or he may have had to shorten the stone, either because it had somehow been damaged at the right end, or because it turned out to be too long to fit the position for which it was intended. Blocks of sandstone, which were found with the slab, show that it was built into some form of masonry support and it is possible that this masonry had been intended for a smaller slab, like those set up elsewhere along the Wall, and that no allowance had been made for the slab which marked the beginning of the Wall being considerably larger than the rest. It may be noted that the slab is approximately three Roman feet high and between nine and ten Roman feet long. Perhaps the original intention had been to make it

ten Roman feet long. If this could be assumed to be the case, the alterations to the design must have been made because the slab had to be shortened, not because the sculptor had made an error in laying out the design on the stone. But Romano-British building stones seldom have precise measurements and attempts to establish a simple ratio between the height and width were rare.

The reason for the revision of the design must, therefore, remain uncertain. But the sculptor's solution to the problem facing him was ingenious. Since the left-hand aedicula could not be altered and the spirally-fluted column could not be omitted (or removed, if already carved), because this would leave the right side of the aedicula partly open, he had to economise on the width of the central and right-hand sections. It would have been a simple matter to skim the *peltae* or leave them out altogether, but he did not do so and they have the short, plump proportions that are typical of the *peltae* on the Second Legion distance slabs along the Antonine Wall (RIB 2180, 2203–4). He did, however, save a little space by bending over the griffins' heads in a most unusual way.² More space was saved by the omission of the spirally-fluted engaged column which should have been placed to the right of the central section. To compensate for this, a small engaged column was added above the left end of the right-hand aedicula. Owing to the cramped space and to the proportions of the aedicula below it, this column had to be on a much smaller scale than the spirally-fluted engaged column which it replaced. Because the capital of this column had to be in proportion to the shaft, its lower edge is noticeably higher than the bottom of the capital of the spirally-fluted engaged column on the left. The lower edge of the palmette border above the inscription is made to touch both capitals at the same point and, therefore, instead of being horizontal, it slopes up towards the right. Consequently the plain edging above the palmettes gradually diminishes towards the right until it disappears altogether. As a result, there was more space to be filled above the right-hand aedicula than above the left and it may be that, in order to fill this space, the sculptor gave this aedicula a pediment, instead of a low, segmental arch. But, in spite of these changes, there was still not enough room to make the right-hand aedicula as wide as it should have been and it is about ten centimetres narrower than that on the left.

In the right-hand aedicula (pl 9c) is a representation of the Suovetaurilia, the sacrifice of a pig, sheep and bull, which normally preceded a campaign or other military enterprise (Ryberg 1955, 104) and must have taken place before work was begun on the Antonine Wall. The sculptor has adopted a high view-point for this scene and also for the scene in the left-hand aedicula so that the further a figure is from the spectator, the higher it is placed in the niche. The altar is set close to the left edge of the aedicula. Behind it are five frontal figures. The sacrificant is the second from the left. He is dressed in a toga, but is apparently not veiled, and stands a little to the right of the altar, over which he pours a libation from a *patera*, which he holds in his right hand. By his right side a bearded man clad in a tunic and cloak stands immediately behind the altar. On the other side of the sacrificant and slightly behind him are three soldiers, who are also dressed in cloaks. The two whose faces survive undamaged are clean-shaven. Although the wearing of beards came into fashion during the reign of Hadrian, some soldiers were clean-shaven as late as the time of Marcus Aurelius.³ Above and behind the row of soldiers a standard with the inscription *leg(io) | II | Aug(usta)* on its banner projects into the gable of the niche. In front of them and to the right of the altar a musician wearing a tunic plays the double pipes. The three sacrificial animals cluster together in the foreground. Although they are not arranged in a line, as is customary, they are clearly in the correct order, the pig being the furthest to the left, then the sheep and finally the bull. Thus this relief is more accurate in this respect than some sacrificial reliefs, on which artistic licence is exercised to vary the order of the animals (Ryberg 1955, 105 ff). In front of the left column of the aedicula is a man dressed in a cloak and tunic. He has been

described as seated but is in fact crouching down. Since he faces towards the animals, he is probably the sacrificial attendant responsible for bringing them to the altar. Although sacrificial attendants are often naked down to the waist, they are sometimes shown wearing cloaks and tunics (Ryberg 1955, 110). It has been claimed that the columns and pediment indicate that the sacrifice took place in front of a building (Bandinelli 1971, 205), but they are merely the architectural framework of the aedicula.

The left-hand aedicula contains a battle scene (pl 9b). In the upper part of the niche a horseman wearing a plumed helmet, billowing cloak, cuirass and boots rides towards the right. He has an oval shield in his left hand and a short sword hangs by his right side. In his raised right hand he holds a spear, which he points diagonally downwards. Beneath his horse are two naked barbarians. The one on the left, who has collapsed in flight, lies on his back with his legs bent and tries to protect himself with a rectangular shield, which he is holding over his body. To the right the second barbarian falls to the ground under the forelegs of the horse. He has been struck down by a *pilum*, the head of which protrudes from his back. He has fallen down on to his left knee with his right leg stretched out behind him. The impact of the *pilum* has caused him to spin round so that his torso is partly frontal and his face is turned slightly towards the rear. In the foreground are two more naked barbarians, both of whom are seated. The left-hand barbarian, whose arms are bound, has been decapitated and his head lies on the ground behind him. Since he is unlikely to have remained upright after execution, it is probable that his pose has been derived from that of seated and bound captives such as those on the distance slab from Summerston near Balmuildy which appears to have been the work of the same sculptor (*RIB* 2193). To the right is a barbarian seated in the sorrowful pose typical of captives with his left arm held across his body and his right hand raised to his chin. Not only was it customary in Roman art for captives to be used as symbols of victory, but the execution of prisoners would take place after, not during, the fighting. But the weapons lying on the ground around these two barbarians show that the scene is still the field of battle. Thus it is apparent that episodes, which are chronologically different but share the same setting, have been welded together to form a single artistic composition.

The identity of the sacrificant and the horseman is problematical. On official monuments, both military and civil, it is the emperor who normally acts as the sacrificant (Ryberg 1955). The horseman is shown by his dress to be an officer, not an ordinary soldier, and the emperor is sometimes represented in official art as a horseman armed with a spear.⁴ Moreover, the falling barbarian under the forelegs of the horse is so similar to the barbarian under the emperor's horse on coins of Domitian and Trajan (Mattingly 1930, pls 73, no. 2, 77, no. 6; 1936, pls 13, no. 15, 31, nos 2-3, 34, nos 8-9, 36, no. 11) that the group shown on these coins would appear to have furnished, directly or indirectly, the model for the horseman and falling barbarian on this distance slab. But the sacrificant and the horseman on this slab cannot be the emperor, since Antoninus Pius took no active part in the building of the Antonine Wall, which he left entirely to his governor, Lollius Urbicus and, although he was credited by Fronto with the successes won by Lollius Urbicus against the Britons (Eumenius, 14), the possibility that a similar fiction was used to justify his inclusion on this slab is ruled out by the fact that his hairstyle did not resemble that of the sacrificant and he wore a beard while the horseman is clean-shaven. Nor is it likely that these figures represent Lollius Urbicus, since he would probably have been bearded and it would, in any case, have been most unwise for him to indulge in this kind of self-advertisement, given the jealousy with which emperors guarded their monopoly of military glory. It may therefore be concluded that the sacrificant and the horseman were not intended to represent a particular person. The subjects of the two reliefs were chosen not to glorify an individual but

because they were standard themes from the repertory of Roman military art which were particularly suitable for commemorating both the fighting involved in the establishment of the new frontier and the important religious ritual which preceded the building of the Wall itself. Thus the role of these themes is somewhat different on this slab from what it was in most official art. A parallel may be provided by a similar group of a horseman riding over a barbarian on the Tropaeum Traiani at Adamklissi (Florescu 1960, fig 185). The horseman has usually been identified as Trajan, but Richmond rejects this identification and certainly the horseman's armour differs from that worn by another officer on the monument, who has been more convincingly identified as the emperor (Richmond 1967, 34. The figure of Trajan is on metope 10, Florescu 1960, fig 189).

Stylistic eclecticism is a characteristic of Roman provincial sculpture and this relief combines elements drawn from three different artistic traditions, the classical, popular and Celtic. The architectural framework, the *peltae*, rosettes and palmette border are all taken from classical art. So too is the horseman. His antecedents in imperial art have already been mentioned, but the figure type is much older in origin. It occurs, for example, on the mid second-century BC monument of L. Aemilius Paullus at Delphi and on the pediment of the 'Alexander' sarcophagus, which is of late fourth-century BC date (Strong 1961, pl 13; Richter 1950, fig 400). But of particular importance is the Athenian stele of Dexileos (Richter 1950, fig 215), who fell in battle at Corinth in 394 BC, in that not only does the figure type of the horseman occur, but the pose of the fallen enemy under the horse is similar to that of the barbarian under the forelegs of the horse on this distance slab. This type of fallen enemy is found at an even earlier date, on Athenian Black Figure vase-painting of the sixth century BC (Arias and Hirmer 1960, fig 48). The recumbent figure with his knees raised off the ground also has a long history, which goes back to archaic Greek art (Richter 1950, fig 418). The pose of the mourning captive, who is seated in the lower right corner of the left-hand aedicula, is likewise Greek in origin and had been used for sepulchral figures of the so-called Penelope type (Richter 1950, fig 68) as well as for grave reliefs of the fifth century BC and later before being adapted for prisoners. The combination of separate scenes in the left-hand aedicula to form a single, unified composition is an example of the mode of representation dubbed by Wickhoff the 'complementary method' (1900, 13 ff). This too had been used by the Greeks and occurs on vase painting in the sixth century BC. A feature which is found on Trajan's column is the device of chiselling out a groove or furrow round figures or parts of figures in order to give an impression of depth without actually increasing the overall depth of the carving. This was very important on Trajan's column, since deep carving would have spoilt the profile of the column shaft, but it was found to be useful on other monuments as well. In the left-hand aedicula the cloak and plume of the horseman and the horse's hindlegs and tail have been treated in this way. Similarly the body of the horse is slightly concave so as to accommodate the rider's leg, although there are no grooves round the leg. In the other aedicula the furrows round the heads and shoulders of the soldiers to the right of the sacrificant enabled the sculptor to carve these figures in lower relief than the sacrificant himself. Furrowing also permitted him to recess the head of the musician into the bodies of the soldiers behind him. The high viewpoint had been used at various times in Greek and Roman art but above all on Trajan's column.

The popular style of art, which originated in Italy and spread into the northern provinces, was extremely varied in character, sometimes being no more than a simplification of classical art, but frequently diverging from the classical tradition in its spirit, motifs and representational devices. Its influence is apparent on this slab not only in the stylised, linear treatment of the drapery, but also in the distorted proportions of the figures. The prominent use of frontality and isocephaly for the five figures behind the altar on the Suovetaurilia relief is also derived from the popular tradition (e.g. Ryberg 1955, fig 51. Isocephaly is occasionally found, however, on Trajan's

column, Ryberg 1955, fig 57). So too is the small scale of the sacrificial animals (e.g. Ryberg 1955, figs 30, 32, 43, 51). The general coarseness of execution would have been unacceptable by classical standards, but it is common in popular art. Several inaccuracies of detail are apparent. The right *pelta* is lopsided and the left *pelta* does not have a horizontal line across its centre; there are minor differences in the forms of the rosettes, and the execution of the architectural elements is uneven. On the left-hand aedicula the capitals are not at the same height, the left column of the right-hand aedicula is slightly tilted and the two column-bases of the aediculae are not on the same level. This lack of precision in the treatment of classical motifs could be due to lack of skill and could be blamed on an assistant sculptor, but it is also symptomatic of the weakening of the classical tradition in popular art. The arrangement of the spiral fluting on the large column so that it winds down towards the outer edge of the slab, instead of towards the centre, is another popular deviation from classicism. Moreover, the scene in the left-hand aedicula has a brutality which is contrary to the spirit of classical art and which appears to have originated in popular military art. For, although the reliefs on Trajan's column include plenty of corpses and wounded figures, with the exception of the scene showing Dacian women torturing Roman prisoners, which was obviously included to emphasise the enemy's savagery and barbarism, the horrors of warfare are to some extent moderated by a spirit of idealisation which pervades the column. The general concept is heroic and there is nothing comparable to the barbarian transfixed by the *pilum* and the decapitated corpse in the foreground. Closest in spirit are some of the figures of barbarians lying or crouching beneath the horses of Roman cavalymen on military gravestones and the dead and wounded barbarians on the Tropaeum Traiani at Adamklissi (esp. *RIB* 109, 201, 1172; Florescu 1960, figs 186, 195, 201, 203, 210, 216). It was not until the column of Marcus Aurelius was erected that warfare was represented in official metropolitan art with a brutal realism akin to that which had already occurred in popular provincial art (e.g. Caprino, Colini, Gatti, Pallottino and Romanelli 1955, figs 30, 37, 64, 76, 78, 85, 88, 116, 123, 129).

Specifically Celtic influence is restricted to the heads of the figures. The low foreheads, the shape of the eyebrows, the straight noses and mouths and the angular jaws can all be paralleled in Celtic art (e.g. Ross 1967, pls 14*b*, 20*d*, 32*b*, 33*a*).

Thus it can be seen that this relief provides a good illustration of the great variety of elements from different traditions which contributed to the formation of provincial art. But it is more than a pastiche of ill-assorted stylistic motifs and devices. The various constituents have been blended together, sometimes undergoing modification in the process, to form a harmonious whole. The sculptor has shown great skill in exploiting the traditional elements at his disposal. His ingenuity in revising the design of the relief has already been mentioned. He has made effective use of the 'complementary method' for the battle scene, successfully combining together long-established figure types. His design for the sacrifice, on the other hand, is largely original. The sacrificant stands in the conventional position to the right of the altar, but it is most unusual for the musician to be to one side of the altar, instead of behind it, and for the sacrificial animals to be bunched together in a small group, rather than stretched out in a line, with the attendant, who normally escorts them, crouching down in front. It was because the sculptor wanted to create a centripetal effect, drawing the gaze of the spectator towards the middle of the slab, that he not only showed the horseman in the other aedicula riding towards the right, as was usual, but placed the altar in this aedicula close to the left edge of the niche. This was such an unusual arrangement for a sacrificial scene that he had to devise a design which was mainly his own, deploying the figures to suit the position of the altar and using frontality and isocephaly to impart dignity to the scene.

When seen close to, some details appear to be incompetently handled. The barbarian

falling under the horse's forelegs seems to put one foot on the neck of the decapitated barbarian. It appears also that the right column of the left aedicula rests on top of the horse's foreleg, that the left column of the other aedicula stands on the head of the crouching attendant and that the altar balances on his left knee and the pig's snout. But these peculiarities would probably all disappear if the slab was seen in its original position, which must have been well above the head of the spectator, and when it was painted. It is likely that the sculptor took these factors into consideration, since, as his use of the grooving technique and high viewpoint shows, he was particularly concerned with the representation of depth. Moreover, he aimed at clarity of design and, to achieve this, omitted parts of figures in both niches. In the battle scene only one arm, the right, of the falling barbarian and only one leg of each of the other barbarians are shown. In the other aedicula the feet of all the men, except for the sacrificial attendant, are omitted.

Clearly this slab cannot be dismissed as a piece of naive hackwork. On the contrary, it is the product of a capable and experienced legionary sculptor, who has made excellent use of the varied resources available to him through the stylistic eclecticism which contributes much to the interest and vitality of many pieces of Roman provincial sculpture. Indeed, it may be accounted as a work of art worthy of its important position at the beginning of the Antonine Wall.

NOTES

- 1 The examples are numerous. For a British example see *RIB* 973, which, although exquisitely carved, has sloping, instead of horizontal mouldings on the sides of the capital.
- 2 On Romano-British *peltae* in general see Thompson 1968, 47–58.
- 3 See e.g. the *decursio* scenes on the base of the posthumous column of Antoninus Pius at Rome (Bandinelli 1970, 322–3).
- 4 As on the Great Trajanic Frieze at Rome (Strong 1961, pl 75). The figure of a horseman on top of Claudius' triumphal arch at Rome may also have represented the emperor (Mattingly 1923, pls 34, no. 10, 36, no. 2). Occasionally other persons were similarly portrayed on honorific monuments (e.g. Mendel 1914, no. 1155), but a distinction must be drawn between such monuments and the official art of the government at Rome.

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a Roman distance slab, Bridgeness



b Left-hand aedicula



c Right-hand aedicula

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