

The Bridgeness distance slab

Joanna Close-Brooks*

The Roman distance slab from Bridgeness at the eastern end of the Antonine Wall, found in 1868, has been repeatedly published, and has recently been discussed in detail by Phillips (1974) and Keppie (1979). The slab has been displayed in the National Museum since its discovery. In the winter of 1979/80 it was taken down from the wall of the Roman gallery and cleaned and repaired by the staff of the Museum's Conservation Laboratory under the direction of Miss Mary MacQueen, in preparation for a new display.

Washing the accumulated dust and grime from the front of the stone revealed faint traces of red paint in parts of the carving, traces which now appear pink, and which showed up most clearly when the stone was wet. The traces of red paint are confined to specific areas, in particular to the lettering and the incised grooves defining the pelta ornament to either side of the inscription. In the left-hand panel, red paint traces can be seen on the neck of the beheaded Briton and at the base of his severed head, and also curiously in the groove forming the division between the bottom edge of the horseman's cloak and the back of his horse. In the right-hand panel red paint can be seen only on the cloak of the soldier farthest to the right against the pillar of the *aedicula*, and in this case the entire cloak appears to have been painted red. This rather sporadic use of red paint may suggest other more fugitive colours were used as well. Indeed, further study of the left-hand panel under new display lights has shown that the horse's body, and the rider's face and arm, now appear slightly greyer and darker than either the background or the rider's dress, suggesting that these darker areas were originally painted some colour such as dark blue or grey.

The only other stone in the Museum's collection with traces of red paint is the tombstone of a Brigantian from Mumrills (Collingwood & Wright 1965, 2142). The letters of this inscription appear pale pink. Traces of red paint have recently been noted on the sculpture and lettering of another distance slab of the II Legion from the Antonine Wall, found at Summerston farm, near Balmuildy, before 1694, and now in the Hunterian Museum (Keppie 1979, 14).

The red paint of the Bridgeness slab is considered to be of Roman date, for it seems unlikely that the slab was painted after it was found in 1868 but before it was given to the Museum in 1869. An altar from Castlecary, found before 1848 and given to the Museum in 1892, does have modern black paint in the lettering, but this also had 'Castlecary' written on the plinth in the same black paint, and the paint is far more obvious than the faint traces on the Bridgeness slab.

While the stone was off the wall the opportunity was taken to record the back and sides, not visible when the stone is on display. Miss Helen Jackson prepared the drawing (fig 1), showing the back, all the edges, and a cross-section taken obliquely along the break. There are three cramp holes in the top edge of the stone, and a single cramp hole in each side edge. The back has been fairly roughly dressed, and one large area to the right has since been damaged; the back also bears a series of plough scratches (not shown on fig 1). The edges have been carefully dressed, but the edge on the right in the drawing appears to have been cut down since the slab was discovered. The cramp holes are of the same design as those on the Roman building stones found in a quarry at Easter Langlee, near Galashiels, Roxburghshire (Steer 1966, pl 44; Wright 1965, 218-19).

The problem of how the distance slabs were set up has been discussed by Keppie (1975, 62-4). The provision of cramp holes on all but five of 19 recorded distance slabs implies they were not set directly into the sloping face of the turf Wall, but into a masonry backing.

* National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh

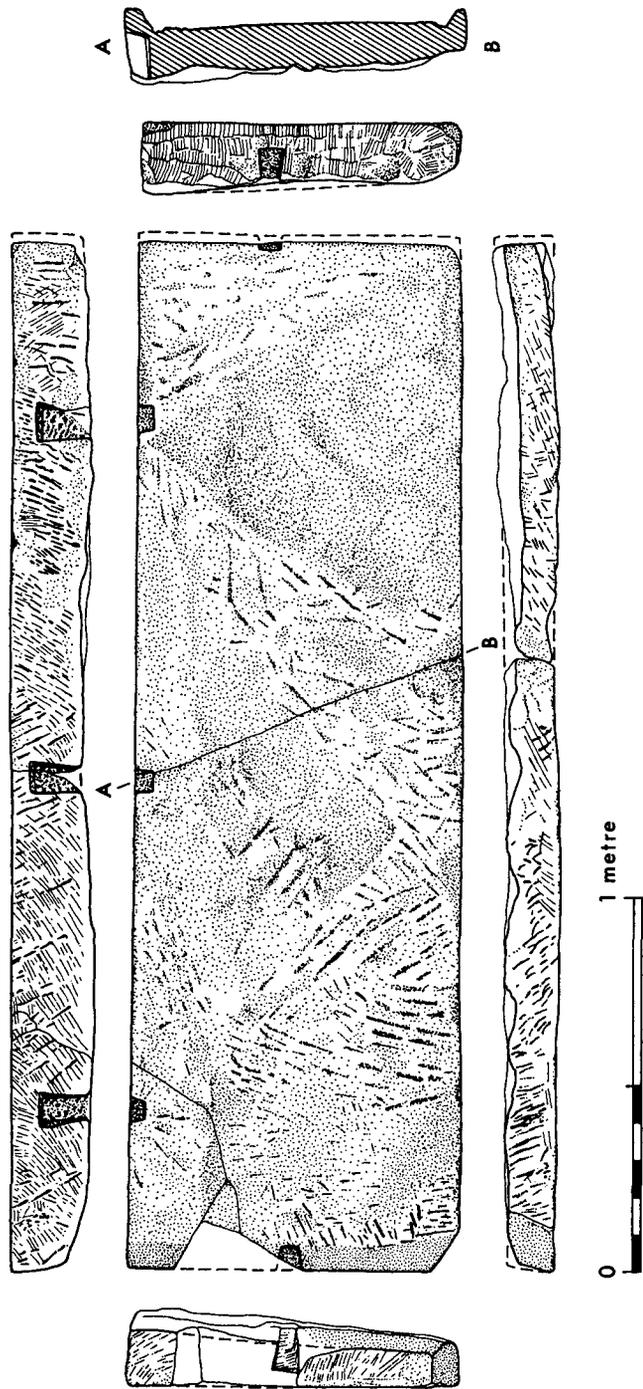


FIG 1 The back and the edges of the distance slab from Bridgeness, West Lothian (1 : 20)

It may finally be noted that a small repair has been made to the damaged area in the right-hand front panel. A fragment of stone projecting at the back of the slab was found by Miss MacQueen to have been used front to back. On reversing the fragment, the mouth from the missing face of the right-hand soldier was discovered.

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