

## A ROMAN TOMBSTONE FROM LANCASTER

*David Shotter*

In November 2005, a team from the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit, working on a site at the corner of Aldcliffe Road and Henry Street, uncovered the damaged remains of the tombstone of a Roman cavalry soldier. The stone and its broken pieces were removed immediately to The Museum of Lancashire in Preston for study and restoration. Since then, the finance has been raised through a Heritage Lottery Grant and grants from the Haverfield Bequest and the Victoria and Albert Museum to purchase the tombstone and facilitate its restoration. It is hoped that the stone will shortly be on display in the Lancaster City Museum.

Despite its damaged state, the tombstone is almost complete, standing to seven feet in height, three feet across and six inches in thickness (Fig 1). It is cut from a coarse- to medium-grained sandstone, of a type which was formerly known as 'millstone grit' (P Noble, personal communication), which is available in the Lancaster area, and which would probably have been white when newly quarried. The freshness of both the sculpture and the inscription suggest that the tombstone was not exposed to the elements for long; it may have been covered by a structure of some kind, or alternatively may have fallen on to its face within a short time of erection. The stone is of a type – a *Reiter* tombstone – well known in the Roman Empire, especially in the west. Overall, nearly 150 tombstones of this type have been recorded, 23 of them in Britain (Anderson 1984; Schleiermacher 1984).

The relief-sculpture depicts a horse and rider in triumphal mode, following the slaying of a barbarian enemy, and is of fair quality. The accompanying memorial-inscription is less impressive in quality, containing at least one error, and showing signs of the mismanagement of space; further, the letters themselves are not always well-formed. Although the mason has clearly attempted to embellish his work, it falls far short of the level of accomplishment that we see, for example, in legionary sculpture and epigraphy. In view of the local provenance of the stone, it may be reasonably asserted that the sculpture and the inscription were executed in Lancaster, although not necessarily by the same hand.

The findspot was shown by the excavation to have been adjacent to the Roman road entering Lancaster from the south, which continued on to become the road which is now called Penny Street. It has been known for a considerable time that this was an area containing cemetery-material (R Newman, personal communication). As was normal in the Roman period, the burial of bodies and cremations was not permitted within a settlement, but flanked one or more of the exit-roads (Toynbee 1971, 73). It is worth noting that further cemetery-material has been reported in an area adjacent to Lower Church Street, the eastern exit-road from the Roman fort on Castle Hill (Watkin 1883, 185).

### THE INSCRIPTION

Although the inscription has suffered a little damage on its left-hand side and at its bottom right-hand corner, the missing letters can be restored with confidence to give a complete reading. It contains four lines of text, in which the letters still showed traces of vermilion paint:

Lancaster 2005

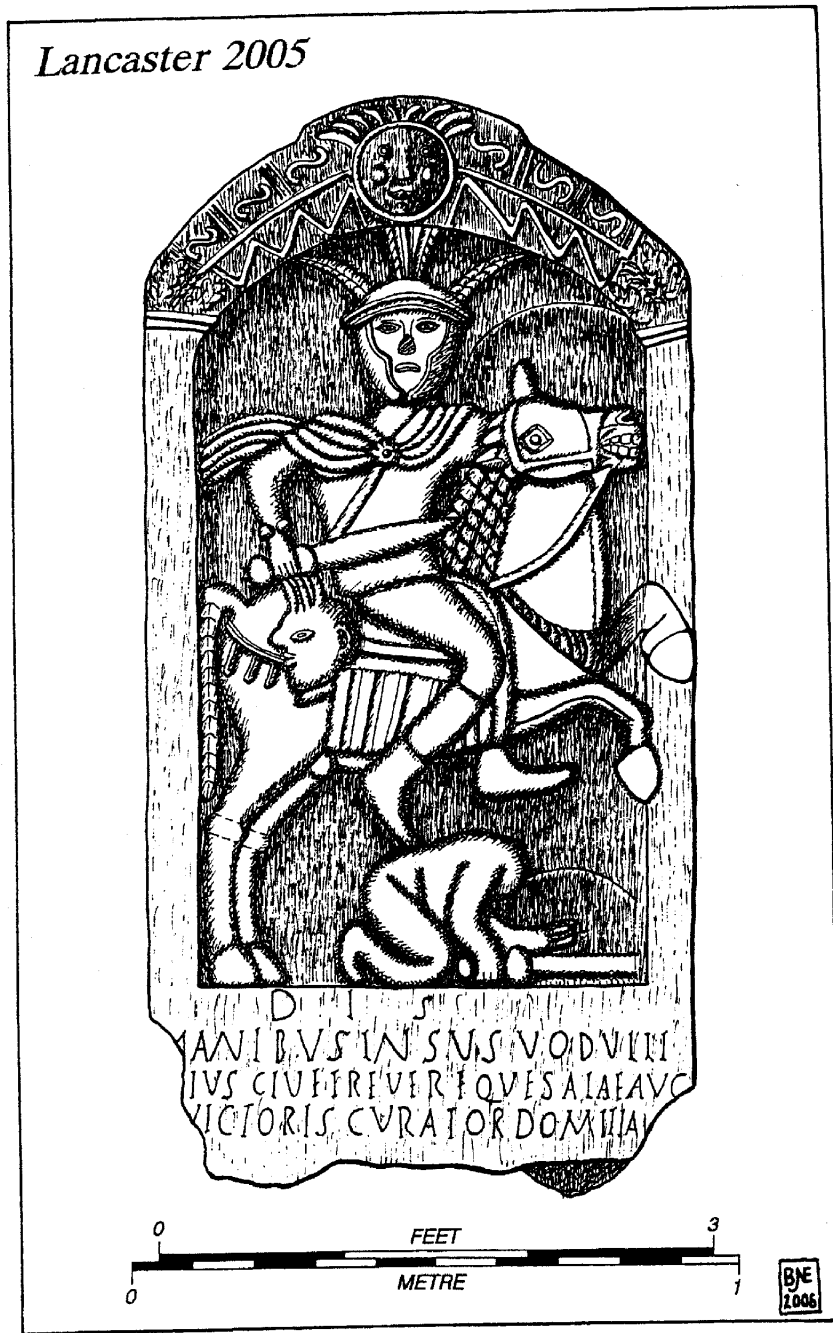


Figure 1: Illustration of the Roman Tombstone from Lancaster by BJN Edwards

DIS

[M]ANIBVS IN SVS VODVLLI

[FIL]IVS CIVE(S) TREVER EQVES ALAE AVG

[T] VICTORIS CVRATOR DOMITIA [H F C]

(Note: square brackets indicate restored letters, whilst round brackets indicate a letter omitted on the inscription).

The translation is:

'To the Gods of the Underworld: Insus, son of Vodullius, a Treveran citizen, a trooper in the *Ala Augusta*, *Curator* of the Squadron of Victor. Domitia, his heir, was responsible for the erection of this tombstone'.

A curiosity is immediately apparent in the splitting between lines of the standard invocation, **DIS MANIBVS**; the words almost always appear together to form the opening line of tombstone inscriptions (Collingwood and Wright 1965). It appears that, in this case, the mason misjudged his line, allowing too much space for **DIS**. There are faint striations in the right-hand half of line 1, indicating perhaps a failed attempt to place **MANIBVS** there.

Many Treverans of lower class were known by a single name, although neither the name, Insus, nor that of Vodullius, his father, is recorded elsewhere (Wightman 1970, 50). Both, however, contain elements which make them perfectly acceptable Treveran names. Insus, with only a single name, was definitely not a Roman citizen; the other Treveran known from Lancaster, Lucius Julius Apollinaris (*RIB* 606; Collingwood and Wright 1965), a member of the same cavalry-unit as Insus, had the three names normal for a man who had been awarded Roman citizenship. However, it has been observed (Wightman 1970, 50-51) that a number of Treverans appear to have used the triple nomenclature, even though they were not Roman citizens.

In line 3, the mason has made an error by omitting the final letter of **CIVE(S)** - 'citizen'. Insus' tribe, the *Treveri*, lived in the area around the modern German city of Trier. The unit to which both he and Apollinaris belonged is now confirmed by the new inscription to have been an *Ala Augusta* (Edwards 1971, 23-25), which is thought to have originated as the *Ala Gallorum Proculeiana* (Holder 1982, 107) and to have been awarded the honorific title, *Augusta*, by the emperor Domitian, for meritorious conduct - probably in Britain. In line 4, Insus is described as a *curator*, evidently a junior officer responsible for arranging provisions for his squadron (*turma*; Birley 2002, 80).

It can probably be assumed that the *Ala Augusta* was the first garrison-unit at Lancaster, arriving perhaps during the conquest of the area under the governorship of Quintus Petillius Cerialis (AD 71-74) and staying until early in the second century (Holder 1982, 109); after this, it is known to have been at Chesters on Hadrian's Wall in the 140s, and at Old Carlisle (Red Dial) in the 180s. The *Ala Augusta* was replaced at Lancaster, perhaps after an interval, by another Gallic unit, the *Ala Gallorum Sebosiana* (*RIB* 605; Collingwood and Wright 1965), which had originally been in garrison at Carlisle (Shotton 2001, 11-15). A date at the turn of the first and second centuries would suit the new tombstone.

At the end of line 4, we are informed that Domitia, presumably Insus' widow or another female relative, was responsible for providing the tombstone. Curiously, the mason makes no mention of a standard feature of such inscriptions, the age of the deceased and his length of service. There is no doubt, however, that the size and quality of the stone indicate the honour in which Insus was held, as well as the fact that his family must have enjoyed considerable wealth; the vast majority of military graves known in north-west England appear to have had nothing to mark them, for example at Low Borrowbridge in Cumbria (Lambert 1996).

## THE SCULPTURED RELIEF

This sculptured relief is a particularly striking example of a type of memorial that appears to have had its peak of popularity in the first and second centuries AD. There are basically two types – one showing the rider and his mount in triumph at the slaying of a barbarian foe, the other depicting the rider, his mount and a servant. The Lancaster tombstone is an example of the former and shows, as do the majority of such memorials, rider and mount proceeding from left to right (Schleiermacher 1984, no 56).

Clearly, the most arresting feature of the present tombstone is the decapitation of the fallen enemy and the triumphalism with which the rider displays the severed head, which he carries by its hair in his right hand along with his sword (a *gladius* or *spatha*). Whilst it is true that decapitated enemies are depicted elsewhere on Roman sculptures – as on Trajan's Column (Coarelli 1999, 66) and on the Bridgeness Distance Slab from the Antonine Wall in Scotland (*RIB* 2139; Collingwood and Wright 1965) – the present stone is unique in laying such a heavy emphasis on the act of decapitation itself. The fact that the rider is shown holding his unsheathed sword, rather than the almost-universal lance, points to this being a deliberate and premeditated – and perhaps, for him, ritualistic – action. The explanation of this lies presumably in the rider's Celtic origin.

The *Treveri* were strongly proud of their traditions and were noted as ferocious warriors by Caesar and Tacitus (Handford 1951, 8.25; Mattingly 1948, 28.4). To the Celts, the cult of the human head was of great significance (Ross 1974, 94ff), especially the severed head (Ross 1974, 164; Webster 1986, 39f). This was not, however, a sign of savagery so much as a demonstration of the belief that the person who performed the decapitation acquired the physical prowess of his defeated foe. This is, therefore, a reminder that, although over the years many of the *Treveri* had become Romanised, their Celtic traditions remained strongly ingrained in them; in another way, this is shown on the present stone by the fact that the rider is depicted as wearing a torque on his right wrist. Such manifestations of an ancient cultural identity may have been particularly important to individual Treverans, and may help to explain why the Romans, after recruiting such people into their army, were prepared to 'turn a blind eye' to a continuing attachment to traditional practices. The decapitated enemy is prominently portrayed still kneeling on the ground, holding his sword in his right hand and his oval shield in his left.

The emphasis on decapitation on the present tombstone gains added interest from a letter written by Caesar's contemporary, the politician and orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero (Shackleton Bailey 1978, 7. 13, 2); in it Cicero, in an elaborate piece of word-play, warns a young friend who was serving with Caesar's army in northern Gaul to beware of the *Treveri* and their practice of head-hunting. Cicero tells his friend that he should use his time in Gaul to make some money, not lose his head (Shotter 2007).

The horseman is not shown as wearing distinctive body-armour, but has a sword-belt (baldric) over his left shoulder, which hangs across his body down to his right hip. In his left hand, he carries a large oval shield. His attire appears to consist of a jerkin, leggings and boots, perhaps of leather, although the most striking item of his dress is a triumphantly-flowing cloak, fastened across his chest by a sun-ray or rosette brooch. His helmet is crowned by three sets of plumes of feathers, reminiscent of that worn by

Flavinus, a contemporary standard-bearer (*signifer*) in the *Ala Petriana* (RIB 1172; Collingwood and Wright 1965). His tombstone, which presumably originated in Corbridge, may be seen at Hexham Abbey. The helmet itself is characterised by large cheek-pieces, which were becoming more common at the turn of the first and second centuries (Dixon and Southern 1992, 35).

The mount is also strongly depicted – the excited gape of the mouth, the baring of the teeth clenched on the bit, and the flared nostrils, whilst the plaiting of the mane and tail recalls a similar decorative feature on the uninscribed cavalry tombstone from Ribchester (Edwards 2000, 49 and 73). The features of the harness are somewhat obscured by the rider, but clearly visible are a muzzle, cheekpiece and browband, although the arrangements for the bit are less obvious. There is a prominent fringed peytral to protect the chest. Finally, the horse has a fringed saddlecloth and crupper-strap to steady the saddle, although there is nothing to be seen of the saddle itself.

The horse and rider are depicted within an arcuated niche, which is not particularly remarkable in decorative terms, except for the head, which occupies its top central position. This is a depiction of what appears to be a serpent-haired Gorgon's head, recalling the legend that it was from the spilt blood of the Gorgon, Medusa, that the winged horse, Pegasus, was born (Harrison 1922, 187). This motif may, however, have been regarded as suitable for another reason, beyond the obvious equine connection: legend had it that the gaze of Medusa turned to stone all upon which it fell – in this case, the rider, his mount and the decapitated foe. One further feature of the decoration of the arch may be significant: at its springing-point, oak-leaves are shown. In the Roman world, the oak-leaf crown was awarded for bravery (Jackson Knight 1956), and might, in this case, represent a reference to the action for which Insus' unit received its honorific title, *Augusta ob virtutem appellata* ('entitled *Augusta*, for valour').

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