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Carrickstone Roman Altar - Cumbernauld, The Antonine Wall





Frontiers of the Roman Empire

1 provinces and frontiers in the middle of the 2nd century AD

A rare survivor

The Roman altar known as the Carrick Stone is one of the less well-known Roman sites in Scotland, but it is unusual in that it may still stand in its original location after nearly 2000 years, albeit in the surroundings of a housing estate. Standing about 150m above sea level, the site once commanded a fine view over the surrounding countryside and, to the north, the Roman forts of Castlecary and Westerwood, and the route of the Antonine Wall (one of Scotland's World Heritage Sites). Like other altars along the route of the Wall, it may have been erected by a soldier stationed at one of the many forts or fortlets along its length.

Other better-preserved altars bear inscriptions, often in the form of a dedication to a Roman (or more exotic) deity. Some have a slight depression on their surface where offerings of wine, oil or flowers would have been placed. At Carrickstone, wind and rain have weathered the surface to such extent that neither feature survives, although the mouldings still visible on the base and top bear ready comparison with other examples. It is unusual in that there are several deep 'cup-marks' in the top which are not readily explained. They may be prehistoric markings, which attracted Roman re-use of the stone, or they may date to a much later period. One local story, that Robert the Bruce erected his standard here before Bannockburn, may prove impossible to substantiate and no ready explanation has been found for the significant wear around the stone's waist.



Religious belief on the Antonine Wall

As many as 7000 soldiers were stationed along the Antonine Wall (built around AD 142), from countries as far away as modern Algeria, Spain and Syria. Some were legionaries with Roman citizenship but the majority were auxiliaries: men drawn into the army from across the Empire, sometimes by force. The altars that they erected along the line of the Wall help to tell the story of their lives, travel and beliefs and, where the inscriptions survive, tell us something of the daily life of the men (and women) at the Wall.

The inscription on the altar uncovered in 1963 at nearby Westerwood tells us that it was dedicated to Silvanus (a deity of woods and fields) by Vibia Pacata, the wife of the commanding officer Flavius Verecundas. This dedication is the most northerly record of the names of a married couple in the Roman Empire. More is known of Flavius' career: before being stationed on the Antonine Wall he served in the province of Pannonia which extended across modern-day Austria and Hungary. Dedications to Silvanus, while rare in Scotland, are more common in this region.

Altars have been found at several other locations along the Antonine Wall, most commonly as isolated finds. In one remarkable discovery at Auchendavy, a group of four (and part of a fifth) were discovered by workmen constructing a canal in 1771. Four of the altars were dedicated by the same centurion, Marcus Cocceius Firmus. Marcus chose a wide range of gods and goddesses to appease at the four altars: Jupiter the Best and Greatest, and Victorious Victory; Apollo and Diana; the Genius of the Land of Britain; Mars, Minerva, the Campetres, Hercules, Epona and Victory. By including both Roman and local gods, he strove to cover all the bases.

Other examples include regimental altars that were housed in a shrine within the fort itself. These would have had pride of place, flanked by the regimental insignia and standards, all elements of an elaborate symbolic and religious practice which ensured the regiments' good fortune. When forts were abandoned, altars seem to have been too heavy to take, but too important to leave in the open, although an outlier like Carrick may simply have been abandoned. The recovery of altars from pits, as at Auchendavy, or wells suggests that they may have been hidden to prevent them falling into enemy hands. That was the case with an altar recovered from a well outside the headquarters building at Bar Hill during excavation between 1902 and 1905. The dedication is by the 'The First Cohort of the Baetasii, Roman citizens', and the crisp carving has been well-preserved by its long rest in the well!

The Carrick Stone stands just to the south of the Antonine Wall. For more information about the Wall, visit the website (<http://www.antoninewall.org>) or download the interactive app.

Sources:

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/45818/>

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Patricia Weeks - Antonine Wall World Heritage Site Co-ordinator



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