



An Altar from Marton, Lincolnshire, and a Soldier of *Leg. XI Claudia* in Britain

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ABSTRACT

An altar to Mars dedicated by a soldier of legio XI Claudia is shown to have been removed from the fabric of Marton church during restoration work and, along with much of the other stone for the Romanesque tower, nave and chancel probably derived from the Roman small town of Segelocum, Littleborough on Trent. The name of the dedicator, G. IVLIVS ANTONINUS, is discussed in the context of legio XI Claudia deployment on the Lower Danube.

Keywords: *leg.* XI; altar; Lincolnshire; Mars

DISCOVERY

In May 2001, the late Pat Foster, then a research student in the archaeology department at the University of Sheffield, noted a fragmentary inscription on a limestone block in a pile of builders' rubble in the churchyard of the parish church, St Margaret of Antioch, at Marton in Lincolnshire (NGR SK 8360 8175; Lat. 53° 19' 33.6" N; Long. 00° 44' 27.3" W) during restoration work on the tower. He photographed the object (FIG. 1) and informed Lincoln Museum of the find. The item, an altar dedicated to Mars, is next recorded during August of the same year when a metal-detectorist took it into Bassetlaw Museum at Retford claiming that it had been found on the surface of a field north of Littleborough Lane, the line of the Roman road leading from Marton village to the former Trent crossing.¹ In an area subject to intensive field walking and metal-detecting, both legal and illegal,² this appeared unlikely and Tomlin,³ not knowing of its previous location in Marton churchyard and noting the absence of other records of *leg. XI Claudia* in Britain, rejected it as a recent import. It had not been noted during the revision of Pevsner's Lincolnshire volume, nor by Stocker and Everson in their meticulous dissection of Romanesque church towers in Lincolnshire.⁴

¹ The Lincolnshire sites and monuments record is more specific: 'recorded as having been found on the north side of the track that runs from Marton to the River Trent. This track follows the boundary of Marton and Gate Burton parishes.' (entry no. MLI98578, quoted in AECOM 2023).

² Worrall 1997.

³ Tomlin 2018, 460.

⁴ Pevsner and Harris 1989, 560; Stocker and Everson 2006 (based on fieldwork carried out 1984–92).



Fig. 1. Altar dedicated to Mars by C. Iulius Antoninus, a soldier of *leg. XI Claudia*, from St Margaret of Antioch church, Marton, Lincolnshire. (Photograph by the late Patrick Foster, May 2001)

LOCATION

It is probable that the altar was removed from the church fabric during restoration work on the interior during the 1990s, perhaps being left in the tower, only to be thrown out with other debris during further work in 2001. Its place in the fabric is difficult to ascertain but despite some superficial weathering, preservation would suggest that it had been internal to the church. Close examination of the interior by one of us (MJD) provides some clues. The interior of the church is essentially as it was after its extensive restoration in 1868, with pews, pulpit and wainscoting in the nave and choir and clergy furniture in the chancel. There is no position

within the nave where the altar could have been placed without being readily visible to anyone even cursorily walking through. In the chancel, however, there is one location which could have contained the altar. On the south side, there are two Victorian pews for the choir, of equal length, placed with a gap between them, too narrow to have contained a doorway, as confirmed by undisturbed herringbone masonry outside, but wide enough to accommodate the altar. Into this gap fits a Victorian upholstered stool, which could have obscured any feature on the wall behind. Although the wall here has been painted white in recent years, covering the stonework, it is uneven. It is possible that this was the location of the altar, explaining why it was not visible to previous researchers.

DESCRIPTION

The surviving inscribed surface of the altar is 270 mm wide by a maximum of 360 mm in height; the back of the block is irregular, rough where it has been trimmed from a surface with a bolster. The principal surface contains six lines of well-formed majuscule text, each 35 mm high and defined by horizontal shallow lines 12 mm apart; an overrun of the last three letters of the text is cut on the slightly projecting 60 mm deep foot of the altar. All edges appear damaged, presumably when the altar was trimmed for reuse as a building block, and it is uncertain whether there was an additional line before MARTI, although the two laying out lines might imply such; Tomlin (2018, 460) suggests the possibility of DEO.⁵ The inscription reads:

MARTI SANC
TO SACRVM
C ▶ IVL ▶ ANTO
NINVS ▶ MIL
..G ▶ XI ▶ CL
.X VOTO POSV
VIT

Marti sanc/to sacrum | G(aius) Ivl(ius) Anto | ninus mil(es) | [Le]g(ionis) XI Cl(audiae) [e]x voto posu|<u>it.

Sacred to holy Mars, Gaius Iulius Antoninus, soldier of the Eleventh Legion Claudia placed (this) according to (his) vow.

Although Stocker and Everson did not record any evident reuse of Roman material at Marton, the presence of a single inscribed block and no other evident pieces would be unusual.⁶ The problem of recognition of re-used material is accentuated by the use in the church construction of a ragstone from the ‘White Lias’,⁷ a thin-bedded porcellaneous limestone which is unlikely to show evidence of its working, either directly from the outcrop or in subsequent use and reuse. The rock, which outcrops at Marton, breaks into similar-sized irregular blocks and could be extracted and simply trimmed with a pick. It was used for the one partially excavated structure on the Roman site at Littleborough, *Segelocum*, on the west bank of the Trent, 3 km from Marton, and aerial photographs indicate an extensive settlement which may have included a walled enclosure in its later phases.⁸ It is possible therefore that the church at Marton was constructed at least in part of materials brought directly by river from the ruins of *Segelocum* and that the altar was

⁵ Tomlin 2018, 460.

⁶ Stocker and Everson 2006.

⁷ = Langport Member of current BGS taxonomy (Swift 1995).

⁸ Riley *et al.* 1995.

included in the recycled stone. Stocker and Everson note that before post-medieval changes to the drainage and embankment, the River Trent included a shallow embayment which extended much closer to the village, which would have facilitated transport of materials.⁹

Although Tomlin¹⁰ accepts the altar as genuine, in the absence of the detail of its findspot, in builder's rubble during 'restoration work' on the church in 2001, he dismisses it as a recent import from elsewhere in the Empire being passed off as a British find, an all-too-frequent occurrence for articles sold on the antiquities market.¹¹ Tomlin reasons that in the absence of other evidence for soldiers of *leg. XI Claudia* in Britain, it is unlikely to have been a local find. Foster had tentatively identified the stone as a fine-grained yellowish-white limestone, probably from the local Jurassic, but no more specific diagnosis was attempted and he left the altar in the churchyard at Marton, expecting someone from Lincoln Museum to collect it. The recent history of the item is unfortunate. Sold at auction to a Mr Brian Riley of Wakefield in 2011,¹² its present whereabouts is unknown. If the altar can be located, then a sample for microfossil content should provide a more definitive source; it should at least be possible to exclude a source on the Lower Danube, where *leg. XI* was stationed for much of its existence.

DISCUSSION

The nature of the lettering gives no clear indication of date beyond a late first- to early third-century bracket, although the absence of reference to voting tribe or father's name should exclude a pre-Flavian origin. This is not, however, conclusive.

Leg. XI Claudia was raised by Caesar in 58 B.C. and fought in both Gaul and the ensuing civil wars before being posted to Dalmatia. In A.D. 42, it sided with Claudius during the short-lived revolt of Scribonianus and was awarded the honorific title *Pia fidelis*, an epithet missing from the Marton altar. After the civil war of 69, the legion formed part of the army of Petillius Cerialis in the suppression of the Batavian Revolt, being based at *Vindonissa*, Windisch, from 70, before being moved eastwards to *Brigetio* in *Pannonia* in 101 as part of the redeployment before Trajan's Dacian Wars. Sometime before 114, it was moved to *Durostorum*, Silistra, in *Moesia Inferior*, towards the mouth of the Danube, where it remained for at least the next 300 years. Vexillations are recorded as fighting in Trajan's Parthian campaign of 117 and again under Hadrian in Palestine during the Bar Kokhba revolt. Individuals, serving as *Beneficiarii Consularis*, members of the provincial governor's staff and other specialist details, are recorded from both *Moesia* provinces,¹³ *Dalmatia*,¹⁴ and a *Strator consularis* occurs in *Moesia Inferior*.¹⁵ A second-century tombstone of a centurion from an auxiliary unit whose name *Cohors II Flavia Brittonum* indicates that it was at least initially raised in Britain is recorded at *Durostorum*,¹⁶ where he may have been similarly seconded.¹⁷

Unlike most auxiliary units during the first and second centuries, legions were largely recruited from individuals who were already full Roman citizens. Initially these would have been from Italy, but from the late first century recruitment became increasingly from *Gallia Narbonensis* and *Hispania* and from the sons of veterans who had settled in the *coloniae*.¹⁸ A centurion, Marcus

⁹ Stocker and Everson 2006, fig. 4-131, 220.

¹⁰ Tomlin 2018, 460.

¹¹ Yates and Smith 2019.

¹² Anon. 2012.

¹³ *CIL* III.8727; 12401.

¹⁴ *CIL* III.9790; 13231; 14219.4; 14703.

¹⁵ *AE* 1919, 15.

¹⁶ *CIL* III.6152.

¹⁷ Ivleva 2012, 134.

¹⁸ Dobson and Mann 1973.

Minicius Marcellinus, who gives his origin as *Lindum*, Lincoln, served in *leg. XX Primigenia* at *Moguntiacum*, Mainz.¹⁹ In times of stress, other sources of manpower would be utilised and heavy losses in battle or the exigencies of civil war might lead to soldiers from auxiliary units being drafted into legions. Ivleva²⁰ has examined the evidence for Britons serving in the army elsewhere in the Empire, noting at least 14 units²¹ which appear to have been raised in Britain. Tracking the origins of individual names, she indicates that such units as *Ala I Britannica* and *Cohors I Britannica*, if this is the correct expansion of the names, would have been recruiting entirely locally to where they were based by the second century. Kennedy²² has also cast doubt on the primary ethnic credentials of these units, although including a rider from Sheppard Frere²³ that at least *Cohors I Britannica* may have been raised in Britain for the army contingent despatched in support of Vitellius' claim to the Empire in 69; even this possibility, however, still has a *caveat* that it may have been drawn from existing garrisons. Legionary detachments moving in the opposite direction during times of warfare in Britain are also evident. A vexillation of *leg. XXII Primigenia* is attested both in a fragmentary inscription,²⁴ now at Abbotsford but probably from the Antonine Wall near Falkirk and an inscription from Birrens also refers to a vexillation of this legion as well as one from *leg. VIII Augusta*.²⁵ On the basis of an altar dedicated by an individual soldier, however, it would be going beyond the evidence to suggest the presence of either the legion or a vexillation drawn from it, particularly at a site remote from the frontier, although that possibility remains.²⁶

The possible pathways for the dedicator of the altar to Littleborough (if that is indeed its origin) divide into two groups: one in which he is in the province as a specialist member of the governor's staff, and the other as a veteran returning to his homeland. Both explanations have problems. There is no reason to assume that the dedicator of an altar had any long-term association with the region in which the item was found and the dedication to Mars is perhaps indicative of a serving soldier rather than a veteran. If the attribution to Littleborough is correct, the excavated and artefactual evidence is insufficient to prove a military origin for the site, although there is sufficient material to indicate activity beginning in the pre-Flavian period and continuing throughout the Roman period.²⁷ The occurrence of *Segelocum* in the Antonine Itinerary²⁸ would suggest that a *mansio* or other way-station existed so presence of individuals attached to the Governor's staff after the abandonment of any fort is possible. Membership of this corps as a *Beneficiarius consularis*,²⁹ often abbreviated to B F in inscriptions, conferred status and soldiers conscious of this seem unlikely to have omitted it from a dedication. In the case of the Marton altar, the spaces between the letters of LEG seem large, and although the stone is damaged in this area, there would have been space for additional letters. Particular skills did exist amongst the *milites*: witness the altar from Montana in Bulgaria dedicated to Jupiter by a *miles* of *leg. XI Claudia*, who describes himself as an *agrimensor*,³⁰ essentially a land surveyor, or the altar from Iversheim erected by M. Sabinianus Quietus who was a *miles medicus*.³¹ It is possible, however, that the particular skill that this soldier possessed was essential but did not confer

¹⁹ *CIL* XIII.6679.

²⁰ Ivleva 2012; 2014.

²¹ 13 in Tacoma *et al.* 2016.

²² Kennedy 1977.

²³ Kennedy 1977, 255.

²⁴ *RIB* 2216.

²⁵ Hassall and Tomlin 1992, 318.

²⁶ The authors are grateful for the comments of a referee who raised this possibility.

²⁷ Riley *et al.* 1995.

²⁸ Rivet 1970.

²⁹ Rankov 1999.

³⁰ Boyanov 2014.

³¹ *CIL* XIII.7943.

status; interpreter, for example, a vital and ubiquitous role rarely recorded on inscriptions, seems an obvious candidate.³²

Upon discharge from their unit, veterans appear rarely to have returned to where they had been initially recruited; after 25 years' service, roots were likely to have been put down locally either in legionary *canabae* or an adjacent *vicus* to their unit's fort.³³ Perhaps more significantly, there was no state provision to fund any such journey home,³⁴ which in the case of C. Julius Antoninus would have involved a distance of some 1,500 km if the discharge occurred when the legion was based at Windisch or over twice that distance if at Silistra. Such journeys in an official capacity, particular transfers and promotions between legions, were not infrequent and geographic mobility in the ancient world has perhaps tended to be underestimated.³⁵ *RIB* 509 from Chester, for example, records a centurion of *leg. XX Valeria Victrix*, who had previously served with *leg. V Macedonica* in either Dacia or Moesia and then *leg. VIII Augusta* at *Argentoratum*, Strasbourg, in *Germania Superior* whilst the centurion Aelius Antoninus of *leg. VI Victrix*, in command of Sarmatians at Ribchester, gives his place of birth as *Melitene*,³⁶ close to the Euphrates in eastern Turkey, where he may have been initially recruited into *leg. XII Fulminata*. Moving in the opposite direction, Tacoma, Ivleva and Breeze note that a centurion of *leg. III Cyrenaica*, T. Quintius Petrus, who died at Bostra in Arabia, modern southern Syria, gives his *origo* as *domo Britannia*.³⁷

Inevitably, the nomen Julius and cognomen Antoninus are widespread in the Empire from the first century onwards. A G. Iulius Antoninus, centurion in *leg. XI*, set up a tombstone to his daughter, Iulia Urbica, at *Troesmis*, near modern Turcoaia in Romania³⁸ sometime in the late second or third century and the name Julius Antoninus, with no praenomen, occurs on another family tombstone from near *Tomii* in *Moesia Inferior*, modern Constanta.³⁹ These would accord with local legionary recruitment in the second and third centuries. However, not surprisingly, the name occurs elsewhere in the Empire. A tombstone, now in the University of Michigan,⁴⁰ USA, from Puzzuoli (Puteoli) in Italy, commemorates a veteran of the same name from the Praetorian fleet at Misenum; Tuck⁴¹ suggests a late first-century date for the inscription, while d'Arms⁴² preferred a second-century one. In Egypt, a decurion with the name C. Julius Antoninus set up an inscription in Greek at Luxor commemorating his restoration of the Serapeum in 127⁴³ and the name, again in Greek, occurs in the early second century at Oenoanda in Lycia, modern southwest Turkey.⁴⁴ Westwards, it occurs at *Augusta Vindelicorum* in Raetia, modern Augsburg in Germany.⁴⁵

On balance, it seems more probable that G. Julius Antoninus came from the eastern part of the Empire and was attached to the governate of the British province, but one can still entertain the slight possibility that he had managed to traverse successfully more than half the Empire to return to his *origo*, where his vow to dedicate an altar to Mars may have been duly fulfilled.

³² cf. Mairs 2012.

³³ Mann 2002; Roselaar 2016.

³⁴ Dobson and Mann 1973.

³⁵ cf. Ivleva 2016; Woolf 2016.

³⁶ *RIB* 583.

³⁷ Tacoma *et al.* 2016.

³⁸ *CIL* III.6191.

³⁹ *CIL* III.7567.

⁴⁰ MI.AA.UM.KM. L.937.

⁴¹ Tuck 2005, 56.

⁴² d'Arms 1973.

⁴³ Leclant 1951.

⁴⁴ Milner and Mitchell 1995, 101.

⁴⁵ *Epigraphic Database Heidelberg* HD 058019. <https://edh.uni-heidelberg.de/home?lang=eng> (accessed 7 March 2023).

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