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A Roman Relief at Little Shurdington

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DAWN ENRIGHT

A ROMAN RELIEF AT LITTLE SHURDINGTON

When Mark and Helen King moved into their cottage in Little Shurdington, Badgeworth, some years ago, they were intrigued by a small sculptured figure incorporated into one of the fireplaces.¹ They discovered that a previous owner, an interior designer, had constructed the fireplace in the 1970s. Little, however, could be learnt about the relief itself, although it was thought to have been found somewhere in the vicinity. There is the possibility that it was associated with the major Roman building (usually called a villa, but perhaps of a religious nature) at Great Witcombe, c. 3 km to the south.²

The relief (Fig. 1) is carved on a block of oolitic limestone, approximately 33 cm square and with a total thickness of 12 cm. The upper part of a muscular nude, male figure occupies much of the field of the panel. From his waist to the crown of his head he measures 31 cm and the depth of the relief is c. 45 cm. The lower part of the body and the legs were presumably carved on a second block. The youth faces frontally, being very slightly turned to the left, and he looks upwards. His left arm is bent at the elbow and the hand rests on his left hip; his right forearm is held at right angles to the body and holds an object with an expanded leaf-like head. The only objection to identifying this object as spear is that the shaft only descends a short distance below the hand, below which the stone appears quite smooth. The relief would have originally been painted and it is possible that the lower shaft of the spear was added in paint. The wide, leaf-shaped head is too broad for it to represent an arrow. The head of the figure is rather battered. If the figure was helmeted, the helmet would have to be very close fitting; conversely if it was bare-headed, the hair would have been very short. The subject lifts its gaze slightly upwards. In comparison with the highly accomplished modelling of the torso, the eyes are crudely bored holes. Were they, like those on the head of a female figure from Kingsholm, Gloucester, inset with pitch or some other substance?³ The rather elongated nose is another local feature.

In many ways the closest parallel to the sculpture is a figure of Mars carved in relief on the base of a marble candelabrum from Hadrian's villa, Tivoli, near Rome. It shows the god wearing a large helmet and a military cloak and in a relaxed stance to the left, with his right arm on his right hip and a spear in his left hand.⁴ The well-known statuette of Mars from the Foss Dyke, near Lincoln, Lincolnshire, is basically of the same type, similarly helmeted but with his body nude.⁵ The Little Shurdington figure is certainly that of a warrior; its prototype was ultimately the most famous example of Greek art of the 5th century B.C., the so-called spear-bearer

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Fig. 1. Roman relief at Little Shurdington, Gloucestershire.

(*Doryphoros*) by Polycleitos.⁶ If it is not an image of Mars, it must be a hero such as Achilles or Alexander the Great.⁷

A very similar image appears on intaglios (ringstones from signet rings) including three from Britain, respectively found in the amphitheatre at Caerleon, Monmouthshire (red jasper), on Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh (sardonyx), and most recently from Borough High Street, Southwark, London (cornelian), all showing in profile the head and upper part of the body of a helmeted youth.⁸ In the case of the last a spear has been added in front of the bust by another hand.

Mars appears in niches (*aediculae*) on the fronts of small altars from the Cotswold region but is always clothed, armed and frontally facing. In all those examples the representation of the god lacks the grandeur evident in the Little Shurdington relief. The best comparable representations of young men in sculpture from Roman Britain are two relief-fragments from Stanwick, Northamptonshire. One of them is a frontal figure, perhaps Perseus rescuing Andromeda, and the other the legs of a youth, one bent behind the other in a relaxed stance close to that of the Little Shurdington figure.⁹

The Stanwick sculpture may have come from one or more funerary monuments. On the European mainland such tombs were often embellished with mythological subjects, and similar reliefs would not be unexpected on graves in the vicinity of Gloucester and Cirencester.¹⁰ Temples and religious monuments, too, were adorned with sculpture, for example those of Bath in England and those of Genainville in France.¹¹ The Little Shurdington sculpture might have

decorated a screen such as the one of which fragments have been recovered from the riverside at London, though the figures on that screen were on a rather larger scale.¹² What is undeniable is that the Little Shurdington relief is one of the best pieces of sculpture yet recovered from the Cotswold region: the body modelling is, in fact, only equalled by the fragmentary relief figure of Mercury from the Bath Gate, Cirencester.¹³

Notes

1. We are most grateful to Mr. and Mrs. King for informing us of this relief and for giving us access to it.
2. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *Ancient and Historical Monuments in the County of Gloucester. 1. Iron Age and Romano-British Monuments in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds* (London, 1976), pp. 60–1.
3. M. Henig, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani, Great Britain. I fasc. 7 Roman Sculpture from the Cotswold Region* (British Academy, Oxford, 1993), p. 10, no. 20, pl. 8.
4. E. Simon, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae II* (1984), p. 543, no. 340, pl. 407. See also W.L. MacDonald and J.A. Pinto, *Hadrian's Villa and its Legacy* (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 191, illus. 238.
5. J.M.C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain* (London, 1962), p. 131, no. 16, pl. 19.
6. J. Boardman, *Greek Sculpture: The Classical Period* (London, 1985), p. 205 and illus. 184–5 on p. 209.
7. See J.J. Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 72–4. Illus. 74 on p. 74 represents a Hellenistic ruler in a similar 'Polycleitan' stance.
8. M. Henig, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites* (BAR British Series 8, Oxford, 1978), p. 245, nos. 466 (Caerleon) and 467 (Edinburgh). See also idem, 'The "Alexander" Gem from Caerleon', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 28 (1979), pp. 317–18. Details of the Southwark intaglio (Museum of London) have not yet been published.
9. Sculpture from the Stanwick site is mentioned in *Britannia* 22 (1991), pp. 252–3. Full details of the sculpture by T.F.C. Blagg and M. Henig will be published in the final report on the excavation.
10. J.M.C. Toynbee, 'Greek Myth in Roman Stone', *Latomus* 36 (1977), pp. 343–412.
11. B. Cunliffe and P. Davenport, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath 1. The Site* (Oxford University Committee for Archaeol. Monograph 7, 1985); P.H. Mitard, *Le sanctuaire Gallo-Romain in Genainville* (Guiry-en-Vexin, 1993).
12. T.F.C. Blagg in T. Dyson (ed.), *The Roman Riverside Wall and Monumental Arch in London* (London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc. Special Paper 4, 1980), pp. 157–69.
13. M. Henig, *Roman Sculpture from the Cotswold Region*, p. 24, no. 69, pl. 20.

MARTIN HENIG AND SUSAN BYRNE

A LATE SAXON SCULPTURAL FRAGMENT FROM ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, SOMERFORD KEYNES

Introduction

The doorway on the north side of the nave in All Saints' church at Somerford Keynes provides the best known evidence for an Anglo-Saxon church on this site. Its re-opening, following removal of medieval and Victorian infilling, was a celebrated local event on 22 April 1968 and was largely the inspiration of the then rector and local historian, Geoffrey Gibbon (Gibbon 1969).

Less well known is a smaller sculptural fragment of later Saxon date preserved in the church since at least 1893 when its presence was recorded by county antiquarians (Romilly Allen 1893,