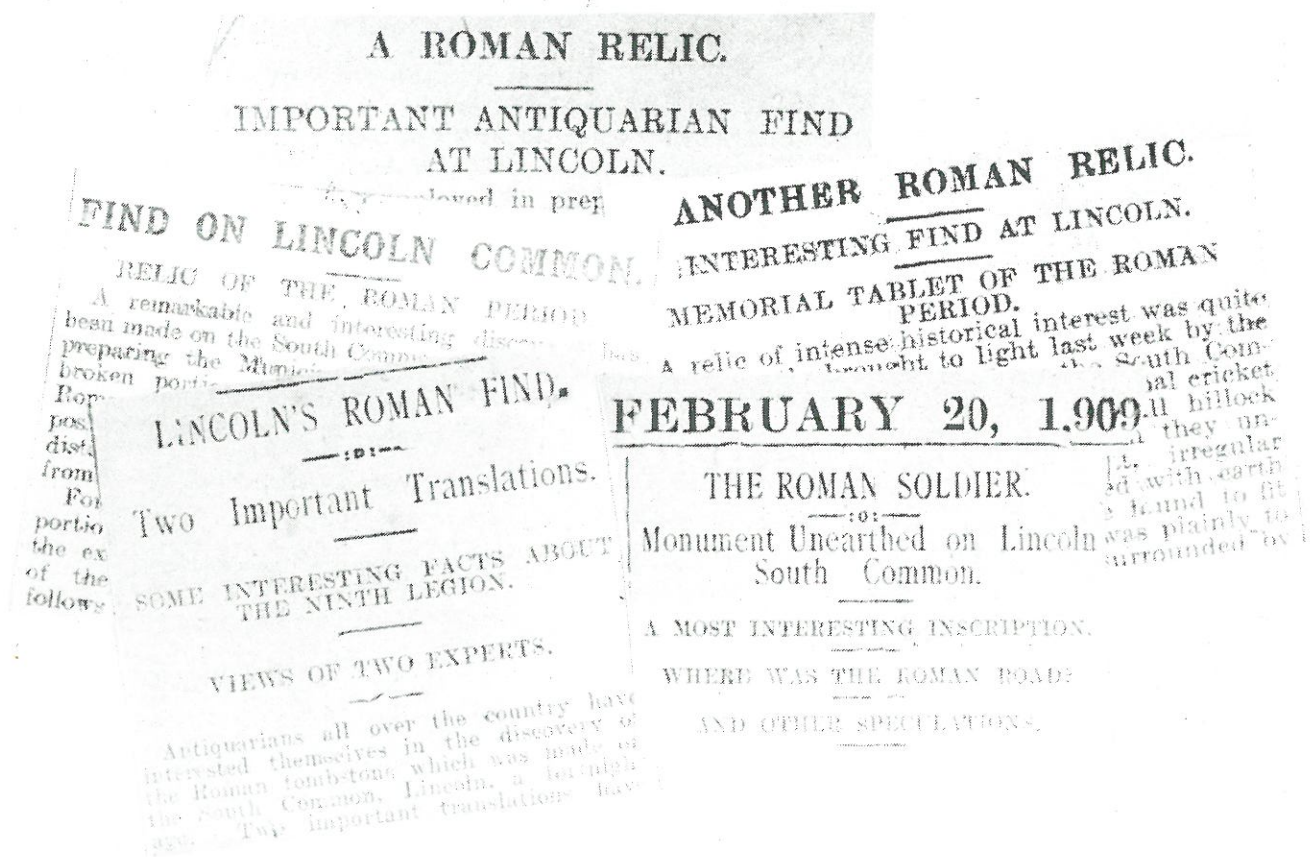


Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No.1

GAIUS VALERIUS – A ROMAN SOLDIER IN LINCOLN



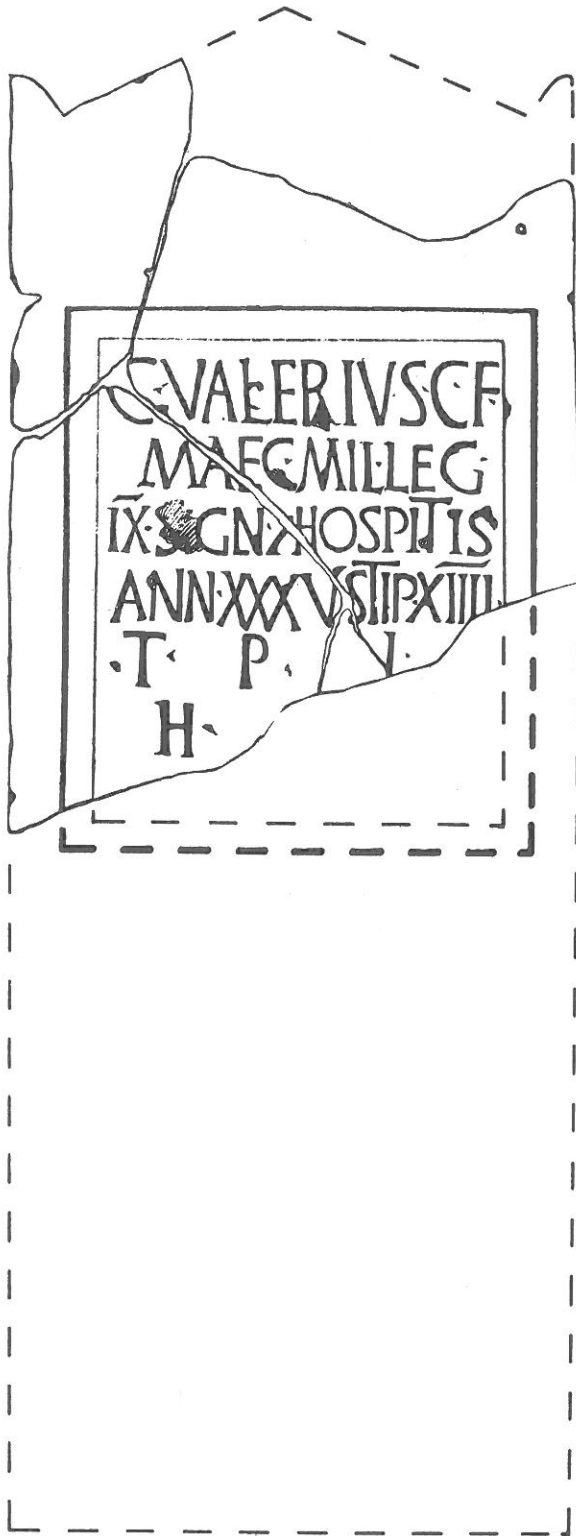
Headlines of contemporary newspaper accounts of the discovery of the tombstone

DISCOVERY

In February 1909, workmen were busy preparing municipal cricket pitches for the coming season on South Common in Lincoln. They were in the process of levelling a small mound at the north end of the Common near one of the new pitches when they discovered three large, flat stone slabs. After they had cleaned the earth and sand from the stones, they realized that the slabs fitted together; but more excitingly after turning over the slabs, they found that there was writing on them.

The news of their discovery was reported by their foreman, a Mr. T. Kennington to the then curator of the City and County Museum, Arthur Smith. Smith visited the site and at once realised that what the workmen had found was in fact part of a Roman tombstone. The tombstone was brought back to the museum, and there Smith, with the aid of Professor F. Haverfield and A.H. Smith of the British Museum, began to examine the new find.

It was immediately obvious that the tombstone was not complete — the surviving part measured about 4 feet by 3 feet (1.22 x 0.91 m), and it was clear that the top and bottom parts of the stone were broken off and missing. In its original form the tombstone would have had a 'gabled' top (see reconstruction drawing) and have been some 3ft 6ins (1.08m) taller. Nevertheless the inscription was virtually intact — only the bottom right hand corner of the text was missing.



The inscription reads as follows:—

Text:

G(AIUS) VALERIUS G(AII) F(ILIIUS)
 MAEC(IA TRIBU) MIL(ES) LEG(IONIS)
 IX SIGN(IFER) C(ENTURIAE) HOSPITIS
 ANN(ORUM) XXXV STIP(ENDIORUM) XIII
 T(ESTAMENTO) P(ONI) I(USSIT)
 H(IC) [S(ITUS) E(ST)]

Translation:

'Gaius Valerius, son of Gaius,
 of the Maecian voting-tribe, soldier of the
 Ninth Legion,
 standard-bearer of the century of Hospes,
 aged 35, with 14 years' service,
 left instructions in his will for this [tombstone]
 to be set up.
 Here he lies.'

Reconstruction drawing of the tombstone

Source: Roman Inscriptions of Britain p. 85

R.I.B. 257

Accession number 252.09

Smith and Haverfield set about the task of translating the Latin text of the inscription. Translation of Latin inscriptions has to take into account the Roman mason's habit of shortening words to their first letter or first few letters. Abbreviations of this kind are common on Roman tombstones and need to be expanded. In the transcript, the letters in round brackets have been left out by the mason on purpose, partly to save space and partly because a Roman reading the inscription would automatically understand what the abbreviation stood for; in much the same way as we understand what R.I.P. means on grave stones today. The letters in square brackets at the end of the text are missing altogether. We can, however, supply all the missing letters in this inscription by comparison with other complete Roman tombstone inscriptions from Britain and from other parts of the Roman world. Inscriptions of this sort used standardized words and phrases time and time again, and it is often possible to restore words even if only a fragment of a single letter survives.

THE INSCRIPTION

The inscription follows a standard pattern widely found on legionary tombstones. The name of the dead man is given in the first line, Gaius Valerius. His first name or **praenomen**, Gaius, is the equivalent of our modern Christian name. His second name or **nomen**, Valerius, was his family name. After about AD70 legionary soldiers almost always took a third name or **cognomen**. The fact that Gaius Valerius has no **cognomen** is a strong indication that he died before AD70.

We are next told that he is the son (**filius**) of Gaius. Sons were commonly given the same **praenomen** as their fathers. In line 2 the name of his **tribus** or citizens' voting-group is then given. The City of Rome was split up into different wards for voting, in much the same way as London is today, and Roman citizens belonged to one or other of these wards. Valerius belonged to the so-called Maecian voting-group.

Details of Valerius' military rank are now listed — he was **miles legionis IX**, a soldier of the Ninth Legion, and also a **signifer centuriae Hospitis**, a standard-bearer in the century of Hospes. The Roman Ninth Legion was a force of between 5,000 and 6,000 men. Nicknamed **Hispana** or 'Spanish', after the Roman province in which it had gained distinction, the legion had built a military fortress in Lincoln, sometime in the mid-late 60sAD, some 25 years after the beginning of the Roman conquest of Britain in AD43. The Ninth Legion had been part of the Roman invasion force in AD43 and had been on service in Britain ever since. The legion, as with all Roman legions, was divided up into ten units known as **cohorts**, each consisting of 480 men, except for the First Cohort which had a complement of 800 men. Each Cohort, except the first, was further subdivided into 6 **centuries** of 80 men, the smallest units in the legion. The first cohort was made up of five double centuries and was the most senior cohort in the legion.

Gaius Valerius acted as standard-bearer in the century commanded by the **centurion** Hospes. Which cohort Hospes' century belonged to we do not know. Nevertheless as a standard-bearer Gaius held a considerable degree of responsibility within his century.

The standards played an important part in Roman military life. They acted in similar ways to the nineteenth-century regimental colours, serving as a rallying point for men in the mêlée of battle and as a method of transmitting orders. In the absence of modern methods of army communication such as wireless telegraphy, they could be used to relay commands from the general staff by movements side to side or up and down and acted as a useful indication of troop deployments. There were various types of standard within a legion and each century appears to have had its own. In form they consisted of long staffs or poles with various symbols attached to them such as discs, crescents or wreaths.

We are next told that Gaius Valerius was 35 years old, and that he had served in the army for fourteen years. This tells us that he was about 21 years old when he joined up. Gaius Valerius almost certainly died in Lincoln after the legionary fortress was established here in the mid-late 60s and before it moved to Chester in about AD77. We have already seen that it is likely

Gaius died before AD70 as he lacks a **cognomen**. Therefore the earliest date at which he is likely to have joined up is about AD51 — the latest date is about AD56. It does not follow, however, that he is unlikely to have seen active service in another part of the Roman Empire. We are fairly certain that the Ninth Legion was deployed in various fortresses in the east midlands before being brought together at the new fortress at Lincoln. In AD60-61 we know that the Legion suffered a serious defeat at the hands of Queen Boudicca and her British rebels as it advanced to the rescue of the Roman town of Camulodunum (modern Colchester). After Boudicca's rebellion had been put down by the army, reinforcements totalling some 2,000 men were sent over from the Roman army on the Rhine frontier. From these men the full complement of the Ninth Legion was made up. It is possible that Gaius Valerius accompanied them and joined the Ninth Legion then, but the point is beyond proof.

Why Gaius Valerius died, we cannot say. He may have died in battle — standard-bearers in the forefront of the action were after all more than usually vulnerable. He may have died of disease, although the Roman army was extremely aware of health and hygiene, each legionary fortress having its own hospital and a staff of doctors and orderlies. He left instructions in his will that a tombstone should be set up and as we know his instructions were carried out. The last line of the inscription probably read **hic situs est**, here he lies.

The tombstone would have marked the site of his grave, which in this case would have been a cremation burial, rather than an inhumation. Inhumation was only reintroduced as a mode of burial in the later second century in Britain. Under Roman law burial had to take place outside a town or a settlement and we find cemeteries most commonly flanking the approach roads to towns or villages. Whether the find spot of Gaius Valerius' tombstone marks the site of his burial is not known. Tombstones were often used in later centuries for building materials and it may be that the slab was brought to the spot where it was discovered rather than have been originally set up there. The fact that several other early Roman burials have been found in the same area of Lincoln does suggest however that a cemetery existed in the vicinity.

Altogether twelve military tombstones have been found in Lincoln. Five of these including that of Gaius Valerius are of soldiers belonging to the Ninth Legion.

SOURCES

1. Press-cuttings book 1 (1906-1912) City and County Museum, Lincoln pp. 18-20.
2. *Roman Antiquities in the City and County Museum, Lincoln* A. Smith (Lincoln, 1909) pp. 12-13.
3. 'The Roman city of Lincoln' I.A. Richmond in *Archaeological Journal* CIII (1947) pp. 48-49.
4. *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* vol.1 eds. R.G. Collingwood and R.P. Wright (Oxford, 1965) p. 85.
5. *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* R.G. Collingwood and I.A. Richmond (London, 1969).
6. 'The Roman fortress at Longthorpe' S.S. Frere and J.K. St. Joseph in *Britannia*, vol. V (1974) pp. 1-130.

Timothy Ambrose 26.6.78
City and County Museum,
Lincoln.



Lincolnshire