

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 8

GODS AND GODDESSES OF ROMAN ANCASTER



Fig. 1 The Ancaster Mother-Goddesses

THE ROMAN TOWN

Eighteen miles to the south of Lincoln at the junction of the A158 and B6403, lies the village of Ancaster in the valley of the River Slea, here cutting its course eastwards to the sea through the limestone hills to the north and south. In Roman times both the strategic and economic advantages of this location at the crossing of two natural routes of communication were realized first through the foundation of a military base here in the early years of the Roman Conquest, between 43 and 54 AD, and later through the development of a Roman civilian settlement, which was to grow into an important and flourishing market town.

Through the centre of the town ran the major Roman road, Ermine Street, connecting Lincoln with London, and today lying beneath the B6403 for long stretches. The buildings on either side of Ermine Street which formed the nucleus of the town were enclosed by a defensive circuit of rampart, wall and ditch in the mid third century, and surviving stretches of these defences are still to be seen on the south and east sides of the circuit. The area of the Roman town is now protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Extensive archaeological excavation carried out here between 1962 and 1971 has given us some indication of the extent of the town, its layout and its buildings. It no doubt provided a wide range of services for the agricultural settlements in the surrounding countryside, but much of the evidence for this rarely survives in the archaeological record.

One industry, however, which is represented, and which seems to have been well developed, was that of stone quarrying. The local limestone was extensively exploited and used for buildings, coffins, milestones and sculpture. Over the years a number of important sculptures have been discovered here, and not only do they demonstrate the existence of a local school or workshop of sculptors, but they also give us a fascinating insight into the religious beliefs and practices of the inhabitants of Roman Ancaster.

DISCOVERIES

THE THREE MOTHER-GODDESSES (Fig. 1)

Perhaps the most exciting sculpture from Ancaster was discovered in 1831 while a grave was being dug in the south-eastern corner of the churchyard of the parish church of St. Martin. The sculpture which is 1ft 7 ins long and 1 ft 4 ins high, shows three seated goddesses and represents the Romano-Celtic Mother-Goddess in triple form. When it was found the sculpture was still standing upright, facing south and had been placed on top of a rough stone block at one end of a massive 6 ft x 4 ft stone slab. At the southern end of the slab was a small, elaborately carved stone altar 1 ft high and 5 ins wide, which had been set on a stone disc 9 ins in diameter placed on top of a stone column 1 ft 8 ins high. The column itself stood on a stone block 5 ins x 15 ins x 15 ins.

This somewhat curious arrangement gave the discoverers the impression that both the altar on the column, and the sculpture of the Mother-Goddesses were in their original positions and it seems possible that what the gravedigger had accidentally stumbled on was in fact the remains of a shrine or temple dedicated to the worship of the Mother-Goddess.

The Mother-Goddess is often depicted in triple form and the three Mother-Goddesses recur frequently on Romano-Celtic stone sculptures in Britain, Germany and France. The representation of three aspects of one divinity is similar to the way in which God is viewed in terms of the Holy Trinity, and is a common feature of Celtic religion and heroic literature. The Mother-Goddess was originally a Celtic deity normally associated with the cult of fertility and prosperity, whose worship continued throughout the Roman period in Britain.

The three goddesses are seen here seated on a long couch with upright sides and back. They are all apparently pregnant and wear long dresses gathered under the bust and at the neck. The two surviving heads have shoulder-length hair. The goddess on the right hand side is holding a round loaf of bread or possibly a corn measure in her right hand while the central figure holds a shallow basket of fruit, probably apples. The figure on the left holds a flat dish or tray, on which is an animal, perhaps a piglet or a lamb, in her left hand and a small 'patera' or bowl in her right hand. The Mother-Goddesses are commonly depicted holding country produce of this type, and their worship was doubtless widespread among Romano-British agricultural communities.

The sculpture and the altar are now on display in Grantham Museum (Lincolnshire Museums).

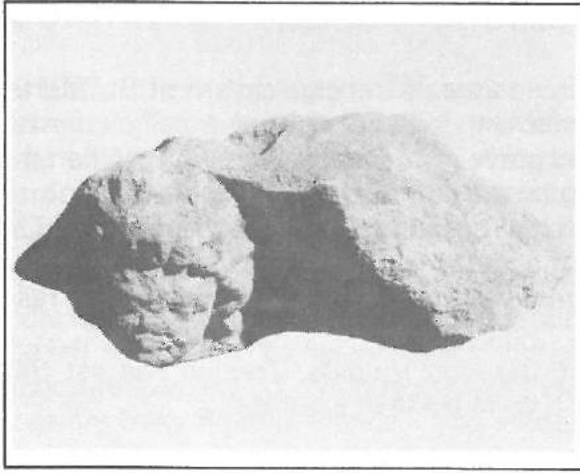


Fig. 2 Relief sculpture

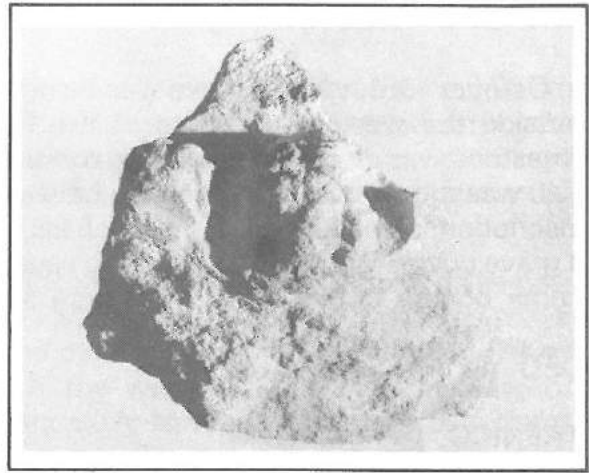


Fig. 3 Relief sculpture

TWO RELIEF SCULPTURES (Figs. 2 and 3)

In 1960 during reconstruction of the east wall of the church of St. Martin two small fragments of Roman relief sculpture were found built into the wall. They are both in the local oolitic limestone and are somewhat battered. The relief on the left (Fig. 2) is 9¼ ins x 4 ins and represents the head of a man, with a long, drooping moustache and curly hair, who is standing within a sculptured frame, the edge of which is to be seen immediately to the right of his head, slanting down to the right. The relief on the right (Fig. 3) is of two heads, this time within part of a rectangular frame, with hair centrally parted and carefully arranged. These two heads are probably female. The fragment measures 5½ ins x 8½ ins.

The nature of the sculptures suggests that they are not fragments of tombstones, but rather parts of small votive sculptures, which would have been placed in a shrine or temple. It is not possible to say exactly who is represented here, but there is at least a strong possibility that these little sculptures would have had a place within the shrine or temple of the Ancaster Mother-Goddess.

Both sculptures are in private possession and not on public view.



Fig. 4 The inscription to Viridios

THE GOD VIRIDIOS (Fig. 4).

In October 1961, while a grave was being dug in an area of the churchyard of St. Martin outside the western defences of the Roman town, a large slab of locally quarried limestone was discovered covering a stone-lined grave of the medieval period. When the slab was turned over it was seen to have writing on the surface, and was in fact a Roman inscription, some 27 ½ ins x 12 ins x 6 ins, which had been cut down in size and reused as a grave cover. But the most exciting aspect of the find was that for the very first time the name of one of the gods of Roman Ancaster was recorded. The inscription read

DEO VIRIDIO
TRENICO ARCVM
FECIT DESVODON

"To the God Viridios, Trenico has set this arch up at his own expense".

and although broken across the bottom line is likely to have consisted originally of only three lines.

Viridios, as the name of a Romano-Celtic god had never before been recorded, and although it is uncertain what the name precisely implies, it is likely that it means 'virile' or 'youthful', or perhaps even 'verdant'. The arch which this inscription records as having been set up at the expense of one Trenico would have marked the entrance into a sacred enclosure around a temple or shrine, and can be closely paralleled by another 'arch' recorded on a Roman inscription found at Nettleham in the same year. It is interesting to note the presence of such a shrine or temple so close to the discovery spot of the relief of the three goddesses. As his name implies Viridios may well have been closely associated with the worship of the Mother-Goddess in her rôle as a fertility and prosperity deity and and it is even possible that the shrine was dedicated to both Viridios and the Mother-Goddess.

The inscription is now in the City and County Museum, Lincoln (Lincolnshire Museums).

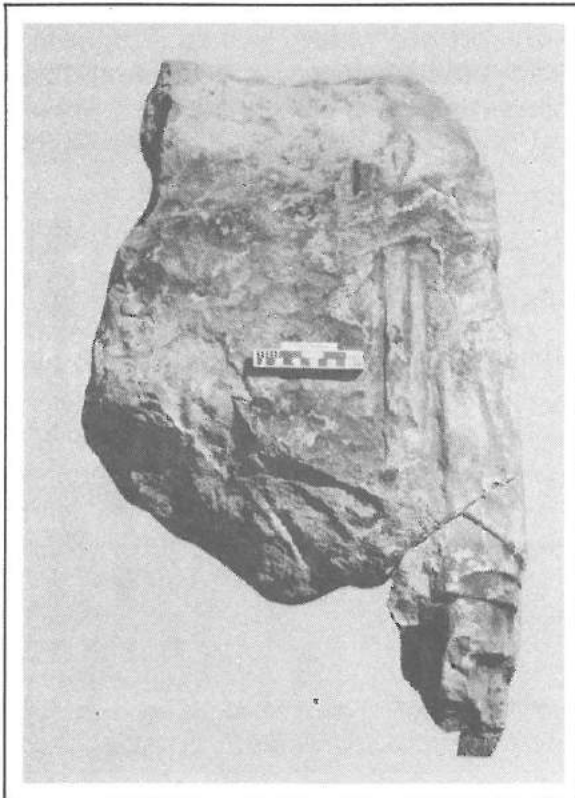


Fig. 5 Front view of statue



Fig. 6 Back view of statue

A STATUE OF VIRIDIOS (Figs. 5 and 6)

In 1963, grave-digging in the west churchyard at Ancaster again brought to light a Roman limestone sculpture which had been reused as a grave slab for a stone coffin, this time of Roman date. Inside the coffin lay a skeleton, with a pot, a bronze brooch and stud, and a fragment of leather. The brooch, which dates to the mid-second century AD, provides a broad indication of the date of the burial.

The sculpture which is 2 ft 10 ins long and 1 ft 8 ins wide, depicts the torso of a life-sized male statue, wearing a cloak draped around the lower part of the body and thrown over the left shoulder. The heavy folds of the cloak are carefully shown and the quality of the sculpture has led to the suggestion that this is the work of an immigrant sculptor, possibly from Roman France. The statue is very likely to represent a god or a heroic figure. The right arm, which is broken off at the shoulder would originally have been raised, and such a pose suggests that the god represented may well have been Jupiter. It is possible that the statue represents the Celtic Viridios, here identified with the Roman Jupiter, but the point is beyond proof. Nevertheless this sculpture is further evidence for a religious complex in this area of Roman Ancaster servicing the needs of the townspeople.

The statue is now in the City and County Museum, Lincoln (Lincolnshire Museums).

THE FUTURE

Taken together these stone sculptures demonstrate the presence of an important ritual, or religious complex within the Roman town, and also point to the existence of a competent and active school of sculptors. Other Roman stone sculptures of a religious nature found in the area around Ancaster may well have been produced by the Ancaster craftsmen, and sold to customers in the houses and villages in the surrounding countryside.

Little work has yet been carried out on the geological analysis of Roman stone sculptures found in Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. But it may well be that the Ancaster sculptors, using the local limestone for their work, were marketing their sculptures over a very wide area indeed. Future work in the laboratory and new discoveries in the field will doubtless help to fill in the details of what is one of the more interesting aspects of Romano-British life.

SOURCES

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2. 'Ancaster, the Roman Causennae' by E. Trollope in *Archaeological Journal* vol. XXVII (1870) pp. 8-9.
3. 'Some Romano-British Sculptures from Ancaster and Wilsford, Lincolnshire' by S.S. Frere in *Antiquaries' Journal* vol. XLI (1961) pp. 229-31.
4. 'A Roman Inscription, Ancaster' by D.F. Petch in *Lincs. Architectural and Archaeological Society Reports and Papers* vol. 9 (1962) pp. 97-9.
5. 'Torso of life-sized statue.....Ancaster' by J.B. Whitwell in *Lincs. Architectural and Archaeological Society Reports and Papers* vol. II (1964) pp. 6-8.

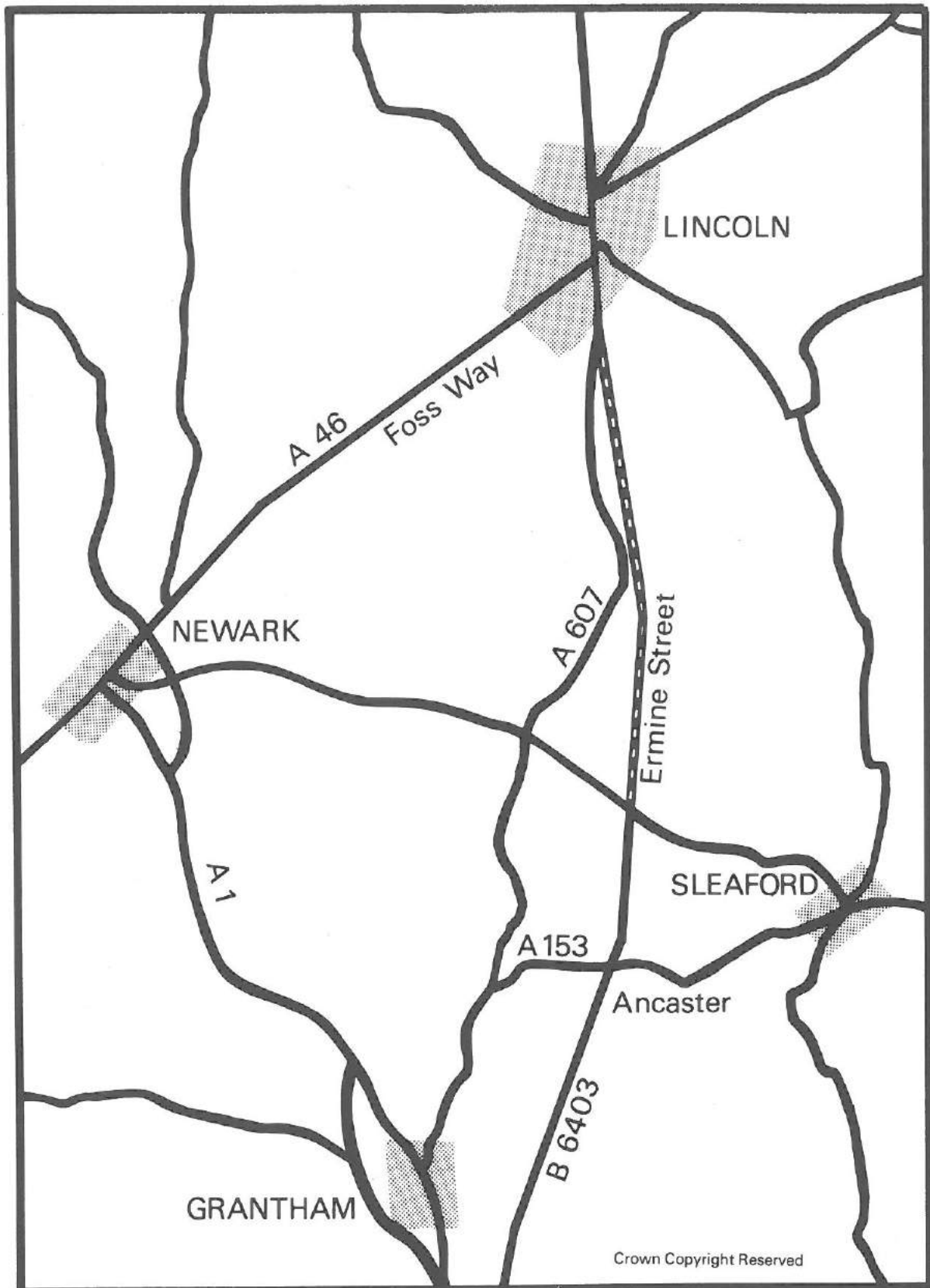


Fig. 7 Location map

COMPILED AND WRITTEN BY

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