
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

Title: Insignificant Others; Images of Barbarians on
Military Art from Roman Britain

Author: Iain Ferris

Pages: 24–31

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1994_24_31

Publication Date: 31 March 1995



Volume Information:

Cottam, S., Dungworth, D., Scott, S., and Taylor, J. (eds) 1994. *TRAC 94: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Durham 1994*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Oxbow Books for TRAC. Hard copy editions of this volume may still be available, and can be purchased direct from Oxbow at <http://www.oxbowbooks.com>.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access through an agreement with the publisher. Copyright remains with TRAC and the individual author(s), and all use or quotation of this paper and/or its contents must be acknowledged. This paper was released in digital Open Access format in April 2013.

3. Insignificant Others; images of barbarians on military art from Roman Britain

by Iain Ferris

From Roman Britain come two distinct groups of commemorative stones portraying soldiers of the Roman army in conflict with, or in association with, barbarians. These groups comprise a well-defined series of auxiliary cavalry tombstones of the First and Second centuries, and certain of the so-called legionary distance slabs from the Antonine Wall.

Both sets of stones are most usually discussed in terms of their epigraphic content and significance or, in the case of the auxiliary tombstones, of their often accurate depiction of military equipment and accoutrements. The central themes portrayed on all these stones are linked to ideas of conflict, conquest and commemoration.

This paper, however, will suggest that other parallel and equally valid readings can be made through the application of different frameworks of analysis, centred mainly on considerations of gender.

As has been noted by Anderson in his brief survey 'Roman Military Tombstones' very little synthetic discussion of tombstones, either military or civilian, has been published in English (1984: 38) and indeed, apart from Anderson's own study, the only works that consider aspects of the military stones are Mackintosh's paper on the sources of the horseman and fallen enemy motif (Mackintosh 1986) and, to a lesser extent, Bishop and Coulston's (1993) *Roman Military Equipment*.

Anderson identifies four main types of Roman military tombstone, one of which he terms 'Rider Reliefs', though these are more often known by the German designation of 'Reitertyp', these showing mounted auxiliary cavalrymen either portrayed on their own or in action against a barbarian enemy, either with or without the additional presence of a servant in the background. No example of the servant type is known from Roman Britain, and indeed from here portrayals of the lone cavalryman are also relatively rare.

The cavalryman and barbarian foe stones from Roman Britain differ little either in the basic composition of the scene or in the way that the relationship between the two protagonists is portrayed. The cavalryman rides down or tramples the barbarian, generally lying either prostrate and facing the rider or in a protective huddle under the horse's hooves, or the cavalryman is caught in the action of spearing the prostrate enemy. In one instance, on a fragmentary stone from Halton Chesters, the barbarian is shown trying to pull out the shaft of a spear lodged in his chest. Only a single male barbarian is ever portrayed, and he is always depicted as armed or with his arms dropped to one side.

On another stone, probably from Corbridge but now in Hexham Abbey, the barbarian is being ridden down by the standard-bearer Flavinus. In discussing this particular scene Phillips noted that the barbarian lay with his back to the cavalryman and that this indicated that 'he has tried to escape by cowardly flight, but has fallen down and is suffering an ignominious death ... The stele is one of a few which depicts barbarians in humiliating postures. Usually the Romans

showed more respect for their savage foes' (Phillips 1977: 27). It could be argued that this scene is in fact little different from the others and that it simply represents a variation on a theme; Phillips' detection of cowardice and humiliation in the portrayal of the barbarian is very debatable. This is a scene of combat and victory; to depict the enemy as an unworthy and cowardly opponent would devalue the achievement of the auxiliary soldier. The stone is meant as a celebration of a soldier's skill and career and not as a lament for his passive participation in battles whose outcomes were predetermined and against enemies whose inherent cowardice guaranteed virtually uncontested victory. As will be demonstrated later, there would also appear to be no evidence to show that Phillips is correct in his assertion that the Romans in art 'showed ... respect for their savage foes'; quite the opposite, in fact. This assertion would seem to be underpinned almost by a nostalgia for a better and more moral past in which Gauls, Celts and barbarians did, in fact, die with dignity.

There is the potential for misrepresenting the cultural significance of this group of tombstones by referring to them as Roman military tombstones, when more properly they are auxiliary and thus non-Roman. It is generally accepted that the origins of this tombstone type lie in the Rhineland where it first appeared in the first half of the First Century. Later examples, of the Third Century, are known from the Danubian region and from memorials of the *Equites Singulares Augusti* in Rome (Coulston 1987: 145; Bishop & Coulston 1993: 26).

There is no direct Roman or Italian prototype for the horseman tombstone, and while Toynbee and, following her, Anderson have noted the possibility that the Hellenic stele of Dexileos, who was killed in the battle of Corinth in 394 BC, could be a forerunner, they note that this seems unlikely. Mackintosh has demonstrated that there are sources for the horseman and fallen enemy motif lying 'ultimately [in] archaic and classical Greece, [and] more immediately in Hellenistic and late Etruscan art' (Mackintosh 1986: 1).

However, a Thracian origin seems more likely, perhaps somehow connected to a local rider-god cult, and a tombstone dating to the First Century BC, from Abdera in southern Thrace, depicts a horseman and his servant, though no defeated enemy or scene of combat is here present. Toynbee also suggested that possible influences could have come from 'the figures of mounted and charging huntsmen on Roman and Italian tomb-monuments or by mounted and charging warriors in large-scale early-imperial battle-scenes' (Toynbee 1962: 158). Certainly, two of the British examples of auxiliary tombstones betray a knowledge of classical funerary symbolism; both the memorials to Rufus Sita at Gloucester and that to Longinus at Colchester are topped by pairs of guardian lions and sphinxes.

The second group of images to be discussed as the central theme of this paper comprises the four, out of twenty, Antonine Wall legionary-dedicated distance slabs on which barbarians appear.

The first slab is from Bridgeness, West Lothian and consists of a central inscription flanked by two sculptured scenes, one of which portrays a cavalryman and four barbarians. The mounted soldier rides at a gallop with his spear raised, while in the foreground of the scene, and obviously not intended as the victims of this one man's charge, are the barbarian men, one seemingly ridden down by the horseman, a second falling with a broken-off spear shaft in his back, a third seated and bound and beheaded, his severed head on the ground next to him, and the fourth seated and staring away from the scene of battle and towards the viewer. The pose of this fourth man has been described by Keppie as being 'resigned and contemplative' (Keppie 1979: 9) and as 'stunned by the onslaught, or resigned to his fate ... cradling his head in his hands' (Keppie & Arnold 1984: 28).

The second slab, from Hag Knowe, Dumbartonshire survives only in part, the surviving fragment showing a kneeling and bound male barbarian captive.

On the third slab, from Summerston Farm, Lanarkshire in one sculptured scene a winged Victory is shown crowning a cavalryman who, with spear raised, is about to ride down two male barbarians, both of whom are seated and with their hands bound behind their backs. In the other scene another bound captive sits beneath the emblems of the victorious army.

The fourth and final slab, from Hutcheson Hill, Bearsden, portrays two kneeling and trussed male barbarian captives looking towards and flanking a central scene which shows a representative of the army receiving thanks from a female deity.

There is no sense on any of these slabs of a poised struggle or of a victory having been achieved by individual skill and resourcefulness, as might be construed from a reading of the auxiliary cavalry tombstones, nor does there appear to be any magnanimity displayed towards the enemy in defeat nor any residual respect for the humanity or individuality of the foe.

On all four slabs barbarians appear as bound captives, while on the Bridgeness stone one of these captives is shown as having been subsequently beheaded. It must be asked, given the significance of the cult of the head in Celtic society, if this particular portrayal was not intended to be deliberately and especially provocative. Certainly, on the Antonine distance slabs there would appear to be little evidence of Phillips' assertion that the Romans usually displayed a marked and decent respect for their foes.

But, perhaps, these military images, while obviously first and foremost images of victory and triumph, cannot be understood in isolation. To tender further interpretation of these images of barbarians some consideration needs to be given to what is not depicted; that is, female barbarians, whose portrayal is entirely absent from the art of Roman Britain.

However, from Aphrodisias, in south-west Turkey, comes a relief that portrays Claudius and Britannia, according to its accompanying inscription (Erim 1982; Smith 1987). This is, however, just one of a series of sculptures from a large temple complex 'dedicated to Aphrodite and the Julio-Claudian emperors' (Smith 1987: 88). For instance, another panel, found nearby, shows Nero seizing a woman symbolising Armenia. Discussion of the Claudius and Britannia panel on its own, out of its complex iconographic context and its eastern cultural milieu, must be tentative. The scene may though be particularly valid to the present study in that it can be read as an almost unique view of Roman imperialism from outside the core and structure of that ideology.

The emperor Claudius, perhaps not surprisingly, dominates the relief scene under consideration and is shown, according to Erim, 'in heroic nudity' towering over Britannia. The scene is generally described by him in this art-historical manner, from which I will choose to depart in my own reading. With one hand Claudius grasps or pulls on Britannia's hair. He pulls her head up in this manner seemingly to deliver a blow to her head, though Claudius' right forearm is now missing and so his original stance and attitude cannot be satisfactorily reconstructed. One of his legs is hidden by Britannia's body, though his stance suggests that he could be bracing her body against it and driving it into the small of her back. With his other leg he is kneeling on her thigh in an attempt to hold her lower body down.

Britannia, who according to Erim is here represented as an Amazon, though Smith does not follow this interpretation, lies partially sprawled on the ground, overwhelmed by the ferocity of the attack upon her but still trying to force Claudius away with her raised right arm. Her right breast is exposed. Erim noted what he saw as the contrast between 'the decided,

almost cruel expression of Claudius' and Britannia's look of 'pain and anguish' (Erim 1982: 280), but he offered little more analysis of the scene.

It would seem that in the published accounts there is a certain discomfort with the nature of the subject matter. I would suggest that no matter how many layers of allegorical meaning are assigned to this scene, once they are stripped away there remains a profoundly disturbing event caught in stasis.

A woman's bared breast can be used to suggest a lack of constraint, of unfettered wildness, of otherness, as Marina Warner has pointed out (Warner 1985: 280–281), and perhaps such a state outside the framework of Roman society was itself seen as a considerable threat. The 'imaginary overlap between sexual difference and non-humanity' (Warner 1985: 281) gives rise to the ambiguity of women's positions as perceived polluters or perceived nurturers, and this ambiguity can also be reflected in the image of the bared breast, at once comforting and yet at the same time potentially threatening in its depiction of otherness.

The basic theme of the Aphrodisias relief is Roman male violence towards a barbarian woman. The nudity of the Emperor is here, amongst the full range of sculptures at Aphrodisias, not out of place nor is the medium for the message anything but part of a local artistic style. However, given the actuality of the event being portrayed, the nudity now becomes anything other than 'heroic', the adjective used by Erim to describe Claudius' state of undress. The woman's perceived threatening otherness at this moment is stressed by her bared breast, rather than it being merely a conventional way to portray an Amazon. The man's nakedness may be in preparation for what is to come next. The hair pulling, the pinioning with the knee, and the blow about to be struck all suggest that the woman may be about to be raped. Even without the certainty of this perhaps pending act the relief already shows a scene of sexual assault and of humiliation.

Similar representations of brutalisation are not common in Roman art, as Natalie Boymel Kampen has pointed out (Kampen 1991: 245 n. 5). She also noted that the barbarian woman and woman captive is the most common mortal woman on Roman historical reliefs and that her portrayal must therefore be seen as having been of some particular significance in terms of both political and gender ideology.

A scene on the Gemma Augustea, in the bottom register of the design and below that portraying the imperial triumph, shows barbarian captives, one of whom, a woman, is being pulled or dragged by the hair by a Roman soldier.

On the Column of Marcus Aurelius, amidst numerous scenes of battle, slaughter and retribution, a number of examples of violence directed against women can also be isolated. For instance, during the destruction of a native village a soldier pursues a fleeing woman who drags a child along behind her. She is in evident terror and her garment has fallen away or has been torn away to reveal her right breast. The soldier reaches out as if to grab her by the hair.

All three of these scenes with the hair pulling motif, though chronologically of different periods, could have a common explanation in that they define the lack of any perceived moral and sexual barriers between the men of the army of conquest and the conquered barbarian women. The whole issue of the proprietorial male and military attitude towards sex and the display of sexual and political power is part of the overall context of imperialism as it has sometimes been experienced by the conquered. In any situation it is true to say that relations between men and women so often involve questions of power and oppression, something that would inevitably be exaggerated or heightened at a time of crisis, war or upheaval, when divisions between the public and private worlds become blurred.

There is also a need to briefly consider the relatively few portrayals of barbarian children in Roman art, for in these too can be read a message that could potentially throw light upon the understanding of the adult representations.

On the Ara Pacis there appear the two so-called 'barbarian princes', one shown wearing a torque to indicate that he represents a western barbarian and the other wearing a Phrygian cap to show that he is from the east (Rose 1990). The presence of the two, along with their adoptive Roman Imperial family, in scenes that determine to show harmony in both family and state, seems at first consoling and comforting. Their presence, however, implies the end result of a process of dislocation and enforced exile for these children. For their parents, their wider family, and their tribe, their enforced absence would have constituted the denial and negation of their reproductive future.

On the Boscoreale silver cups is found a scene in which a number of barbarian chiefs present themselves before the Emperor Augustus in the company of their children; in fact, the portrayal would imply that they are actually delivering their sons up to the Emperor (Rose 1990: 60). While this scene may be of a single specific historically-attested incident, Augustus' visit to inaugurate a temple at Lugdunum in Gaul in 8BC, such surrendering of children as hostages may have been a more regular event in conquered territories. The western barbarian child on the Ara Pacis may in fact be one of the same youths handed over in the Lugdunum scene.

E.S. Gruen, in the paper 'Augustus and the Ideology of War and Peace' (1986), suggested that the theme of Augustan art was not, as might be thought at first sight, peace but rather 'Augustus ... as guarantor of a world order — but one that he had acquired by force of arms and retained through display of might and authority' (Gruen 1986: 72).

Indeed, the same notion of the incorporation of both the east and west barbarians into the empire can be seen differently represented on the more-or-less contemporary statue of Augustus from Prima Porta. The emperor's decorated breastplate is particularly elaborate and includes scenes such as the surrender of the captured Roman standards by the Parthians, 'emblematic of Roman supremacy in the East', while the figures of two dejected and submissive female barbarians attest to the ascendancy of Roman power in the West (Gruen 1986: 61). Here the image of the women, rather than one of barbarian men defeated in battle, is surely intended to illustrate the comprehensiveness of the Roman victory in terms of its total alteration of the barbarian status quo in both the public and private spheres.

The taking away of children is a symbolic act on many levels, instantly negating and calling into question as it does the very memory of the act of giving birth to a child in the first place. While we have no idea about the regularity of such institutionalised pedaphoric acts, their implications for understanding attitudes towards the sexuality of the barbarians are obvious.

If the use of images of Roman women and children, of families in other words, can be accepted as signifying 'the whole' and that this therefore implies 'a happy future as well as the benefits of romanitas to both public and private realms', as Natalie Boymel Kampen has suggested, then conversely, again in her words, 'the barbarian family could be a sign for a community in defeat', and barbarian women could be symbolic of a reproductive sexuality that can be affected through military and political actions. Male violence against women circumscribes women's social position in some situations and allows their sexuality and thus their reproductive potential to be controlled. The barbarian women, in often being objectified in this way, are tamed; the appropriation of the new province on the Aphrodisias sculpture is

shown by the objectification of a woman, representing Britannia, as a sexualised, eroticised and ravaged body.

Thus it can be argued that while at first sight the two groups of sculptured stones from Britain forming the subject of this paper portray the same theme, that is the victory of the Roman army over barbarian foes, their messages are in fact quite different.

The auxiliary tombstones represent, by way of a culturally-defined motif that probably has its origins outside the Roman world, a record of an individual's life and achievements within the military world. The scenes of combat do not portray the barbarian foes as anything other than worthy opponents overcome by skill and guile. The cavalymen often proudly wear and display their armour, weapons and accoutrements, represented in such significant detail as to be a signifier itself of pride felt in their role. This is, nevertheless, a representation of a non-Roman, a member of a tribe which was itself only recently classed as barbarian, slaying a non-Roman on Rome's behalf. While the rider motif may have been non-Roman in origin, its use here has doubtless been sanctioned in that it fits well with a Roman pattern of portraying and glorifying victories over barbarian tribes. The use of such an image could only have been allowed on official sculpture outside the conquered province or on relatively small-scale art within the closed and inward-looking world of the army.

The whole question of the iconography of war memorials of all periods has received little scholarly attention. Some considerable insight is thrown on the creation of memorial imagery in a short collection of papers produced by the Imperial War Museum to accompany an exhibition on the works of Charles Sargeant Jagger, best known for the Royal Artillery Memorial at Hyde Park Corner (Compton 1985). Jagger's post-First World War memorials have either been ignored or criticised for what many have taken as the literalness of his work. His early attempts at symbolic themes were later abandoned for solid and often vividly accurate portrayals of soldiers 'performing specific duties and equipped exactly as they would have been at the front ... [indeed] ... Jagger borrowed guns and uniforms from the Imperial War Museum to ensure accuracy' (Compton 1985: 21). As an ex-soldier himself Jagger was aware of how his uniform and equipment at the time completely defined his existence and how they were crucial to his experience of the war (Glaves-Smith 1985: 58-59; Curl 1985: 84-85). Jagger's literalness here was not the result of artistic impotence but rather a reflection of a change in public attitude towards the war, away from the romanticised view of the soldier as being a catalyst for reconstruction and social change and towards a more cynical view of the war's aftermath, though not one which negated admiration of the achievements, bravery and sacrifice of the individual soldier. The soldier would be able to recognise himself in Jagger's work and to take pride in his individual role and achievement. It could be suggested that the same need to see themselves in their memorials dictated the nature of the auxiliary cavalry tombstones, with their general wealth of detailing, while the motif signalling the relationship between the soldier and the barbarian was intended as secondary to their main purpose, though the sanction of the army for the use of this motif may have placed principal emphasis on the importance of the latter in terms of political ideology.

As to the images on the distance slabs, they are altogether of a different nature, showing as they do not only scenes of combat and victory but also of the humiliation and, in one case, the execution of barbarian prisoners. These captives are afforded no element of dignity; they have become less than men, objectified and exposed naked in their indignity. It could be argued that the curiously-posed barbarian at the forefront of the scene on the Bridgeness slab, the one described by Keppie as being in a resigned and contemplative pose, is, in fact, attempting to

cover his nakedness and somehow, though inevitably ineffectually, to hide his shame and vulnerability. The creation in this way of a visual narrative which objectifies the barbarian men through the depiction of their dead, bound or mutilated bodies exiles them to a space also occupied by objectified women. Imperial power relations are here being written on the bodies of both men and women.

The distance slabs are very much of their time, and the scenes portrayed are reflections of the same social and artistic trends that allowed for the even more harrowing scenes of warfare on the Column of Marcus Aurelius. Natalie Boymel Kampen, in her paper 'Biographical Narration and Roman Funerary Art' (1981), traced the move away in this form of art from the narrative framework towards the use of abstract representations of concepts of virtue, which themselves became less and less relevant from the later Second Century onwards and which were replaced by what she has called 'a new and transcendent ideal of spiritual superiority' (Kampen 1981: 49). Amongst the abstract virtues were 'virtus', represented usually by a battle motif, and 'clementia', represented by a scene of submission by a barbarian family. Changes in attitude brought about by political crises and the perception of the breaking down of traditional roles in society are considered by Boymel Kampen as factors in the questioning of the relevance of the old perceptions of virtue. In art, these changes are best seen reflected in the Portonaccio sarcophagus, usually dated to c AD 190–200, on which small scenes of what may still be called biography are relegated to the lid and the sarcophagus itself is dominated by a complex and harrowing battle scene, of an entirely symbolic value. Representations of the old virtues are nowhere to be seen and in the battle it may be surmised that victory may be won at any cost and that this is now seen as an end in itself.

Annalina Levi, in her study, 'Barbarians on Roman Imperial Coins and Sculpture' (1952), discussed the trend towards the growing abasement of the position of barbarians in Roman art. She described there the process whereby on coinage 'the small physical size of the barbarian is a device which emphasizes his abject position in contrast to the victorious emperor or divinity', and noted how from the time of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus onwards the barbarian became, to all intents and purposes, simply an attribute of the emperor or of Victory (Levi 1952: 27–28). This trend could also be seen as part of the general process of dehumanisation of the barbarian.

The graphic depiction of the defeat and humiliation of the barbarian men was also, leaving aside the military and political issues at stake, in many respects the end result of sexual competition between Roman and barbarian men. The neutering of the barbarian men through their defeat and humiliation was part of a more extended process that also involved the mistreatment of barbarian women — something that would again allude to the impotence of the barbarian men — and through the less well-defined but none-the-less attested taking away of barbarian children, in itself an act of anti-fertility.

In conclusion, it has been argued that depictions of elements of the Roman army in conflict with barbarians in Roman Britain are too generally accepted as being linked solely to ideas of victory and triumph, and that contextualisation within a wider framework suggests that images of barbarian men, women and children can have multi-layered meanings as dictated by the political and social ideologies of the Empire. To ignore the issue of sexual power and competition is to miss a vital avenue of research that would appear to raise uneasy questions about the process of conquest and assimilation, and about Roman perceptions of empire. Recent history has shown us that the objectifying process of war has a numbing effect on the maintenance of sexual codes and barriers; our present time would not appear to have a

monopoly on the resulting suffering brought about by the breaking down of such vital social constructions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lynne Bevan for commenting on a first draft of this paper.

Bibliography

- Anderson, A.S. 1984. *Roman Military Tombstones*. Aylesbury.
- Bishop, M.C. & Coulston, J.C.N. 1993. *Roman Military Equipment*. London.
- Compton, A. (ed) 1985. *Charles Sargeant Jagger. War and Peace Sculpture*. Imperial War Museum, London.
- Coulston, J.N.C. 1987. Roman Military Equipment on Third Century Tombstones. In Dawson (ed) 1987, 141–156.
- Curl, J.S. 1985. The Royal Artillery Memorial at Hyde Park Corner. In Compton (ed) 1985, 81–99.
- Dawson, M. (ed) 1987. *Roman Military Equipment. The Accoutrements of War*. BAR International Series 336. Oxford.
- Erim, K.T. 1982. A New Relief Showing Claudius and Britannia from Aphrodisias, *Britannia* XIII, 277–281.
- Glaves-Smith, J. 1985. Realism and Propaganda in the Work of Charles Sargeant Jagger and their Relationship to Artistic Tradition. In Compton (ed) 1985, 51–80.
- Gruen, E. 1985. Augustus and the Ideology of War and Peace. In Winckes (ed) 1985, 51–72.
- Kampen, N.B. 1981. Biographical Narration and Roman Funerary Art. *American Journal of Archaeology* 85, 47–58.
- Kampen, N.B. 1991. Between Public and Private: Women as Historical Subjects in Roman Art. In Pomeroy (ed) 1991, 218–248.
- Keppie, L.J.F. 1979. *Roman Distance Slabs from the Antonine Wall. A Brief Guide*. Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.
- Keppie, L.J.F. & Arnold, B.J. 1984. *Scotland. Volume 1 Fascicule 4, Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*. Great Britain. Oxford.
- Levi, A.C. 1952. *Barbarians on Roman Imperial Coins and Sculpture*. American Numismatic Society, Numismatic Notes and Monographs 123.
- Mackintosh, M. 1986. The sources of the horseman and fallen enemy motif on the tombstones of the western Empire, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* CXXXIX, 1–21.
- Phillips, E.J. 1977. *Corbridge, Hadrian's Wall East of the North Tyne. Volume 1 Fascicule 1, Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*. Great Britain. Oxford.
- Pomeroy, S.B. (ed) 1991. *Women's History and Ancient History*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Rose, C.B. 1990. 'Princes' and Barbarians on the Ara Pacis. *American Journal of Archaeology* 94: 453–467.
- Smith, R.R.R. 1987. The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias. *Journal of Roman Studies* LXXVII: 88–138.
- Toynbee, J.M.C. 1962. *Art in Roman Britain*. London.
- Warner, M. 1985. *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form*. London.