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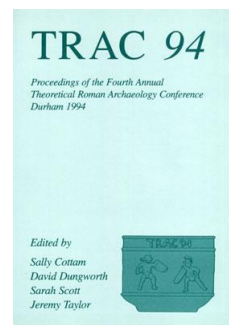
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5. An Archaeology of Brief Time: monuments and seasonality in Roman Britain

by *Raphael M.J. Isserlin*

Introduction

It is a fundamental tenet of Romano-British studies that inscriptions with Imperial or other official titles can date buildings. But to what does one assign them — the calendar year or the season? Archaeologists' perceptions of time, by and large, use **linear** (or **institutional**) time (Lewis & Weigart 1990: 84), and **cyclical** time ('a dance on one spot'; Gurvitch 1990: 71) only rarely. I would like to explore whether it is possible to relate activity at a site to a particular time of year, for I feel that recent work (Barrett 1993) has barely scratched the surface of this problem.

Seasonality and inscriptions

One specific example, arising from the building programme of Gn. Iul. Agricola, demonstrates how vital these concepts are. It is often assumed that the Verulamium forum-inscription can be dated to a particular time of year within Agricola's governorship. Certainly we are well-informed of this governor thanks to Tacitus, and to archaeology (though some doubt this: Hanson 1987). But closer scrutiny reveals no little disagreement. The inscription has been dated to autumn A.D. 79 (Frere 1983: 55), winter A.D. 79 (Frere 1987: 99), or even A.D. 81 (Eck 1970: 48–9). The reason for the inconsistency is simple: the text preserves no seasonal details! The most recent verdict, based on **institutional time**, assigns it to July – December A.D. 79 (Tomlin 1993: 137). Details of Agricola's governorship are cross-linked to the broader chronology of the regnal years of the Emperor. But the seasonal argument rests on purely external sources (*Agricola*: 21) and the premise that autumn or winter can be unfavourable to outdoor work (building, military campaigning and, all too often, archaeological excavation)!

Possibly the governor (Gn. Iul. Agricola) returned from campaigning in northern England to preside over an opening ceremony in the southern civil zone. The Gaulish *ara provinciae* at Lyon/Condate was dedicated on the 1st August, 12 B.C. (an auspicious date in the Gaulish and Roman calendars: Wightman 1985: 51). It has been suggested that Trier's 'birthday' was on this date (Heinen 1984: 41).

The one Romano-British 'historical' example of seasonal monument-dedication lacks hard epigraphic proof and rests on circumstantial textual evidence. But a more fundamental question is clear. Were there times when Romano-British monuments could be dedicated — or offerings made at them? Above all, does evidence of **cyclical time** exist? The idea that seasonal festivals might have been held in the province was put before a wider public from literary evidence and analogy (Henig 1982). Some Romano-British villa mosaics depict the seasons (Ling 1983). There is clear epigraphic evidence for seasonality at monuments (Table 5.1).

ROMAN DATE	MODERN DATE	YEAR	FESTIVAL	COMMENTS	RIB
KAL IAN	1st January	241	<i>new year</i>	altar	1983
DRS	21st April	?	<i>Parilia</i>	altar	1270
A D KAL IUN	... May	278	?? beltane	tomb	1255
(A D) XI KAL SEPTEM	22nd August	262/6	between <i>consualia</i> & <i>volcanalia</i>	dedication slab	605
A D X K SEPT	23rd August	152	1 month before equinox ; <i>volcanalia</i>	statue	309
VIII KAL OCTOB	23rd September	244	autumn equinox ; <i>mercatus</i>	door jamb	327
VIII A D K OC	23rd September	234	autumn equinox ; <i>mercatus</i>	dedication slab	328
(A D) XIII [KAL] ET XIII KAL NOV	19th, 20th October	241	<i>armilustrum</i>	altar	882
(A D) XIII [KAL] ET	19th, 20th October	241/2	<i>armilustrum</i>	altar	883
(A D) XIII KAL NOV					
(A D) III KAL NOVEM	30th October	221	day before samuim	dedication slab	1465

Table 5.1: Seasonality and Festivals as reflected in inscriptions on British monuments
 [Celtic festivals: **bold type**; Roman festivals: *Italics*]
 (Sources: RIB 1; Burl 1983: 34; Ross 1967: 83; Scullard 1981)

Seven out of ten inscriptions fall within a three-month period; only two are definitely not 3rd-century. Particularly significant according to the Roman (Julian, solar) Calendar was the 1st January (New Year's Day: RIB 1983), when new consuls were appointed, temples dedicated (Scullard 1981: 52ff.), gifts given, and, from Augustus onwards, statues erected in and out of Rome (Millar 1992: 142–3). On that day the Roman army renewed its vows, set up new altars and buried old ones (the Maryport altars indicate this: Wenham 1939); in A.D. 69, the army threw stones at, and demolished, statues (Tacitus: *Hist.*, 1, 55). One inscription (DRS: Day Sacred to Rome) is Rome's Official Birthday — an occasion so obvious, it did not need stating that it was the 21st April (RIB 1270; Risingham; Scullard 1981: 101 ff). The *volcanalia* was a festival dedicated to Vulcan in August, and had to be treated with particular care; another festival, the *consualia* fell two days earlier and RIB 605 was dedicated in between these dates (Scullard 1981: 178ff.). Other astronomically-derived dates were significant to an agrarian society (23rd September, the autumn equinox; the date appears twice, on one site, ten years apart — RIB 327 & 328). It was also the end of the 3-day festival of *mercatus*, when fairs could be held (Scullard 1981: 188). Most auspiciously, it was the emperor Augustus' Birthday — surely commemorated by the Leg. II Augusta. October saw the festival of *armilustrum*, when weapons were ritually purified (Scullard 1981: 197–8). One date is very close to the date of a Celtic festival (Samuin is actually on the 1st of November: RIB 1465).

No doubt it was important to inaugurate a monument at the right time, and here there appears to have been a synthesis of things Roman and Celtic. The significance of others is at present unclear (RIB 882 and 883), though we can guess that some monuments were inaugurated a month before the supposed date of the equinox (RIB 605; 309). This could indicate a lunar calendar operating, but the dates being commemorated in Roman fashion, i.e.,

cyclical and institutional times in conjunction. Operating with two calendars is known in Judaea only 22 years after the incorporation of the province in A.D. 106 (a marriage contract from the Babatha archive uses the Latin and the Greek calendar dates, but not the Hebrew: *P. Yadin* 18; Lewis 1989). There is no reason why the North-Western provinces should have operated with only one chronology.

A more general trend?

Concern to do the right thing at the right time appears have been particularly prominent in the 3rd century. But is it a phenomenon confined specifically to Britain or to the 3rd century? The most obvious way to check this is to examine the material from the neighbouring provinces of Gallia Belgica and Germany, to be found in CIL XIII (Table 5.2).

ROMAN DATE	MODERN DATE	YEAR	FESTIVAL	COMMENTS	CIL XIII No
PRI KAL MAI	29 April	198	<i>ludi floriae</i>	building slab	4132
V ID MAI	11 May	?			
D D III KAL IUN	30 May	232		altar	4679
I . . IDUS [IU]LIAS	13 July	245	<i>ludi apollinares</i>	building slab	4131
VII K(ALENDAS) SEPTEM[BRES]	24 August	?	<i>mundus patet</i>	bronze tablet	3498
VIII K OCTOB	23 September	44	autumn equinox: <i>mercatus</i>	building slab	4565
III NON OCT	5 October	124	<i>mundus patet</i>	building slab	4149

Table 5.2: Seasonality and festivals as reflected in inscriptions on Gaulish Monuments

[Celtic festivals: **bold** type; Roman festivals: *Italics*]

(Sources: CIL XIII; Burl 1983: 34; Ross 1967: 83; Scullard 1981)

One item (not discussed further) falls outside the bulk of the pattern observed so far — CIL XIII.390, *III id martii* — and so it should, for on purely epigraphic grounds it may be *falsum*. But on the whole, the range is tight. A bronze tablet, states the constitution of a *collegium*, from near Amiens (CIL XIII. 3498) including an ‘annual general meeting’. Such a fixed event is precisely what one might expect of behaviour-patterns associated with monuments — cyclical activity. The date, 24th August, is one of two days in the year when the sacred shaft in Rome was opened — the *mundus* (Scullard 1981: 180–1). The other was the 5th of October (Scullard 1980: 180, 191) — represented by CIL XIII.4149 from Jünkerath. It commemorates the impermanent action as well as stating the nature of the permanent monument — a building was *dedicatum*. Not surprisingly, the building was a *templum*! The *collegia*, mentioned in the bronze tablet from Amiens, probably met in such a building. It would not be surprising to find a ritual shaft anywhere in Picardy. One of the main features of deposits in ritual shafts is the repetitive — almost cyclical — structuring of their deposits (see below pages 50–53).

A building-inscription from Bitburg ushers in the 3rd-century (CIL XIII 4132). It says a tribunal and proscenium were erected and *ludi* (games) were given. It falls on the date of the *ludi floriae* (Scullard 1980: 110–1: 270), related to fertility. Another set of games was the *ludi Apollinares* (Scullard 1980: 164), and their date is mentioned on a rebuilding inscription, also

from Bitburg (CIL XIII.4131). This has the name of the emperor Philip erased, and commemorates the rebuilding of a *farator*. Presumably this was a particularly harmonious day to hold such an event, with the games part of the opening-ceremony.

Of the 2314 inscriptions in RIB 1, ten are inscribed thus — under 0.004%. Of those 1487 from Gallia Belgica in CIL XIII: 2.1 (nos. 3253–4740) only seven — under 0.005% are thus inscribed. There are apparently none in the latest volumes of R.I.G. The percentages — if the low numbers have any meaning — are almost identical. But what do they mean as social indicators? What lies behind these expressions of concern — such cuckoo-clock timing? For there is a clear desire to mark time far more in the 3rd century than there was before, when the seasonal dates appear only sporadically. Equally, why was this not so much the practice in earlier times?

In a way, it was. But not so publicly, for it was, initially, performance of the deed, not the display of the time it was done at, that mattered. Such things were governed by long-standing tradition. Our knowledge of Gaulish festivals derives from the calendars of Villards d'Hèria and above all, Coligny, bronze plaques set up on a wall of some monument to advise of what the right times to do things was. These were designed to be displayed to a literate audience. The latest research suggests that according to the style of lettering employed, Coligny may be 2nd century or later. Gaulish (or Celtic) time-keeping, based on a lunar calendar, is recorded here, a century and a half after the Julian Calendar reforms (Duval & Pinaut 1986: 35). Tradition died hard. Some festivals were shifted — the *floralia* from 1st May to 30th April (CIL III: 4132; Wightman 1985: 187). British timekeeping may have operated in the later Iron Age on an astronomically-derived system too: Diodorus Siculus (50–30 BC) preserves a passage of Hecateus, on a tradition that, some think, refers to Britain:

It is said that the god [Apollo] returns to the island every 19 years, the period in which the return of the stars to the same place in the heavens is accomplished

(*Histories*: V).

Did a lunar calendar operate in the Roman period? How did it relate to the Gaulish one?

Checking through the other volumes of CIL, or IGRR, may reveal other patterns, or the same low numbers of such inscriptions. Conjectures of time and action in other provinces depended on non-local calendars. An altar from Lectoure in Gaul depended on a non-Gaulish, and non-Roman calendar (CIL XIII 525). On March 24, 239 (the 3rd-century again!)

a lady 'received the potency' (*vires*) of one Eutyches. The words described emasculation, and as the day was the 'Day of Blood' in the cult of Attis, the occasion was presumably the castration of Eutyches, a priest in the service of the god. The woman received the pieces

(Lane Fox 1986: 348).

The timing is the cyclical timing of an Eastern religion, in a Western province. A ritual castration-clamp used in the cult of Cybele was recovered from the Thames (Francis 1926). Castrations were probably carried out in *Londinium* (it 'shows signs of much usage and had been carefully repaired in Roman times' (Marsden 1980: 137)) and probably at specified times.

Identifying seasonality through archaeology

We may summarise the information from these inscriptions by arranging the dates sequentially. A cumulative diagram shows the range (Table 5.3).

				? B			23B	23B	19/20B		
			21B	11G			23B	23B	19/20B		
1B			29G	30G		13G	24G	23G	30B		
Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

Table 5.3: Cumulative patterns of monument dedication, in Britain and Gallia Belgica, sorted by date and province

(Sources: RIB 1; CIL XIII) [B=Britannia; G= Gallia Belgica/Germania].

Some times of year seem to be avoided, and excavated environmental evidence too may reflect this: were sites used all year round, or only at specific times of year? A glance at works dealing with many ritual shafts for instance, suggests that they yield evidence for season-specific activity: nuts, berries, etc. seem to suggest autumnal activity. Twigs with evidence of budscale (or not!) could be equally informative (perhaps it is worth looking at the vast collection of ex-votos in wood from the source of the Seine once more; most of them are twigs or branches). And there are the animals for sacrifices, represented by animal bones. Do we reasonably infer springtime sacrifices of lambs from the immature ovicaprids? And what about that matter of 'autumn killing' — does that only occur in agricultural contexts? A glance at the votive bone-deposit from Uley suggests not — perhaps 80% of the sheep and goats found, were killed, some 150 each month, over the autumn months, every year for 50 years (Levitan 1993: 283; Woodward & Leach 1993: 300–1), and the rest perhaps on the Ides of every month — the practice of *ovis idulis* (Fraysn 1984: 39). The same pattern may hold good for the sacrifices at Harlow (Legge & Dorrington 1985: 132). The Vindolanda tablets record sacrifice on the *dies Kalendarum* — a term often used without specifying a particular month to refer to New Years Day (*Tab. Vindol.* II 265). They also mention at least one summer-based festival (*Tab. Vindol.* II 190; Bowman 1994: 115–7) involving the use of wine for a goddess (which one?) on or around the 25th June, a date absent from our inscriptions but within this seasonal span.

With this in mind, let us take two published examples — Jordan Hill, near Weymouth, Dorset, and Ashill, Norfolk. Material was deposited during the 3rd/4th century in a ritual shaft in the temple courtyard at Jordan Hill. After the shaft was dug, a stone cist was built at its base around iron objects and pots. This primary deposit was sealed by a succession of 16 sets of deposits (Table 4). Each set of deposits commenced with a layer of stone slabs, on top of which ash, containing bird-skeletons, was dumped. The deposit was sealed by a further stone slab, on top of which a coin and a bird was placed. Subsequently another set of deposits would be dumped (consisting of slab, ash, bone, slab, and a further coin and bird). When the shaft was half-full, another cist was constructed containing a sword, spearhead and pots. Thereafter the sequence of slabs and dumping resumed.

Stone slabs	Serving-vessels pottery	Bronze 500 coins
Animal bones raven crow buzzard starling	Iron sword spear-head knife steelyard iron bar-fragments	Other organic (Wood?) — ash

Table 5.4: The Jordan Hill deposit, sorted by category
 (Sources: Drew 1931; Wait 1985: 328, 410)

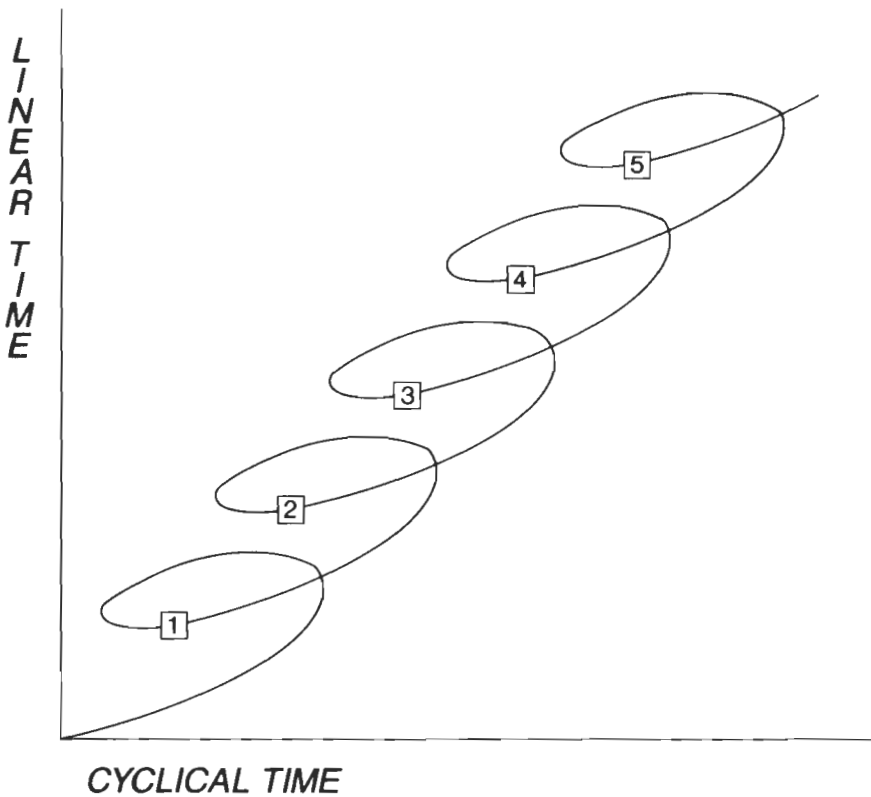


Fig 5.1. The relationship between Linear and Cyclical time as they affect the accumulation of deposits, displayed on a 2-dimensional graph. (Source: author).

The structured nature of the artefact-deposition is readily apparent. Equally clear is the regular, cyclical, activity reflected in the stratigraphic sequence. It may reflect a ritual purpose such as sacrifice or cleaning of the temple precinct; it surely reflects cyclical time. The construction of the second cist, half-way down the shaft, may reflect some process of reinvigoration (rededication?) perhaps connected to a rebuilding of the main temple building. Almost 5,000 more coins and other finds have come from other dry-land 'hoards' from Jordan Hill (Barrett 1909; O'Neill 1936; Salisbury 1930). Only full re-examination of this material will help set the timing of the depositions of these sets of material in the ritual shaft in a broader chronological context. Here is another example of cyclical time, here mingled with the linear time of the stratigraphic record. The interrelationship is displayed in Fig 5.1.

The other example comes from within the (1st century) square enclosure at Ashill, Norfolk,

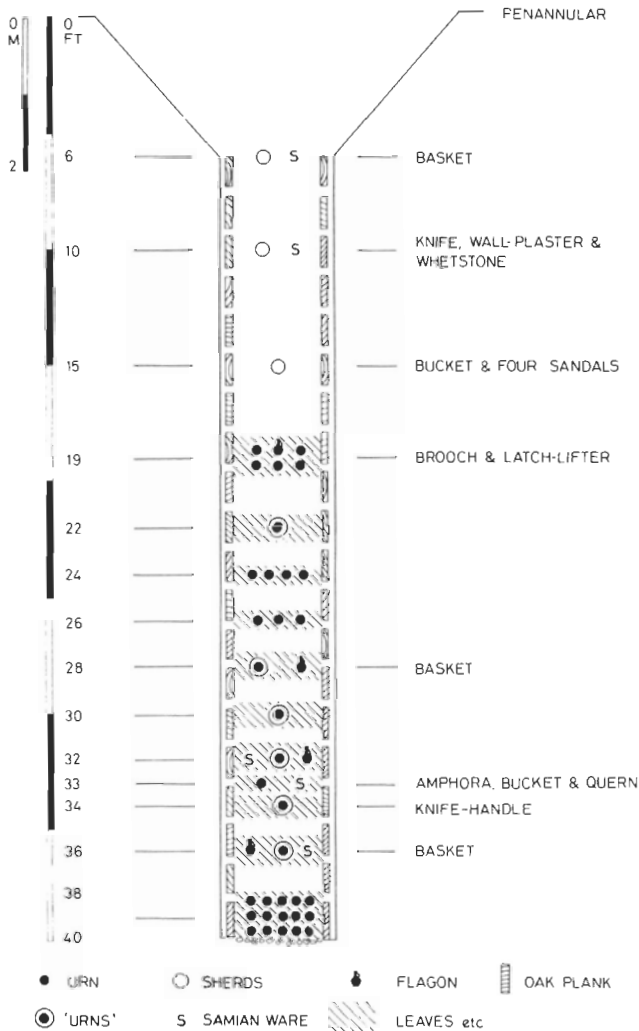


Fig 5.2. Reconstructed schematic section of shaft no. 3 at Ashill, Norfolk.
(Source: Gregory 1977: fig. 5)

excavated in 1874 and 1961 (Gregory 1977). Opinion is divided as to whether or not it contained ritual shafts or merely wells; it has certainly been suggested that the site is a *Viereckschanze*, so a ritual interpretation is a possibility for the deposits in these features. The (reconstructed) sequence of deposition of fills and artefacts for shaft no. 3 is given in Fig 5.2. The primary deposit included a haunch of venison; thereafter a sequence of 11 deposits of pottery vessels embedded within apparently separate, distinctive organic fills, including material from hazel trees. At least 50 complete vessels were deposited, occasionally within basketry (Table 5.5).

Animal bone	Iron	Copper alloy	Leather
deer	bucket	brooches x2	sandals x4
pig	knife		
goat	latch-lifter		
cattle			
frog			
toad			
Stone	Other organic	Pottery	
whetstone	leaves	50–100 (?) vessels	
	twigs	including 19 jars,	
	nuts	4 bowls, 3 flagons,	
		1 urn & 1 amphora	

Table 5.5: *The Ashill deposit, sorted by category (Source: Gregory 1977).*

The original accounts make it clear that the vessels were deposited with some care (Gregory 1977: 13ff. for details). It is clear that there is some sort of cyclical repetition of elements, though not so well defined as at Jordan Hill. Activity was carried out in autumn, for,

it is worthy of remark that the nuts were in different stages of growth; those at the bottom had nuts just formed, whilst a few feet higher they were more matured; and higher still they were perfect

(Barton 1879: 228).

One modern opinion is that these deposits were deposited 'between late spring and autumn of a single year at intervals of several weeks' (Gregory 1977: 13) — in effect, an extended single deposit. If however the shaft were covered and uncovered (ie., on the festivals of *mundus patet*) then no deposits would accumulate while the shaft was closed and the various strata would develop separately. In that case it would be possible to envisage successive, cyclical deposits in Autumn — perhaps in August or October (Table 2 for festival dates).

There is plenty of organic material to go at there! It might be, with modern techniques of excavation, that environmental material might be recovered, in greater quantities, and be rather more susceptible along the lines of analysis indicated above. There are problems and, in the case of ritual shafts, quite literally pitfalls. Nevertheless, it would be nice to see what results a judicious and sympathetic programme of sampling of organic material might bring. Alas, we

lack super-accurate dating — to calibrate rates of seasonal accumulation within the microstratigraphy. Though we may begin to understand context-formation processes, giving them a linear chronology eludes us still.

Nor was the Roman period the only occasion when changing attitudes to time affected the fabric of communal religious monuments. In English churches, bells were erected during the 12th–14th centuries (Thrift 1988: 66), while dates were increasingly specified in documents; in public places such as markets and the 14th century court, timekeeping devices appeared (Thrift 1988: 74). They marked out units of labour (as urbanisation and industry increased) for the convenience of those at the top, the managers (Thrift 1988: 78–82). How very different from the increasingly over-bureaucratised, and privatised top-heavy society of the Later Roman Empire! Something like time-and-motion-studies were undertaken at the *fabricae* [arms factories] of Egypt, Antioch and Constantinople. In A.D. 374 a specific production-rate per worker per month of helmet shells and inlaid decoration was noted at Antioch, and an identical quota demanded of the workers at Constantinople (Jones 1964: 835). In Egypt a 2nd/3rd century papyrus records the output of *just two days* (Bruckner & Marichal 1979: no. 49)! In Britain various tile-graffiti record production-rates too (not all necessarily 3rd century, however; I hope to return to the topic of production another time).

Twenty years before the management of the *fabricae* was put in hand, someone wished to codify and communicate festivals in a way not practised for several centuries. The result was the Codex-Calendar of A.D. 354 (Salzman 1993) — not the first of its kind, but quite possibly one of the last to mention pagan ones. British (and other) inscriptions discussed in the first part of this paper are merely part of a trend. They are statements of meticulous observance, and more explicit, with regard to timing, than anything that had gone before. Stating a mere regnal year no longer sufficed. These were proclamations of serenity, in the midst of the '3rd century crisis'. The very denial speaks volumes. Were they statements of personal faith, routine acts of ritual — or symptoms of religious revival? In Rome, mentions of the Arval brethren become increasingly more detailed at this time (Beard 1985: 131ff.; Scheid 1990; see Smith: this volume, p. 60). Trier's birthday seems to have been instituted in the late 3rd century (Wightman 1985: 235). The same trend towards a precise relation of deeds can be seen in rebuilding inscriptions. They often date, a recent Empire-wide survey has shown, to that same 3rd century (Thomas & Witschel 1992). They portray spurious or vastly over-exaggerated major reconstructions. Such perfection of planning is a symptom of decay through centralization, paralysis and intrigue (Northcote Parkinson 1986: 77, 86ff.). Perhaps these reflect the belief of individuals that they needed to validate their positions through display.

Belief was, indeed, the key. One interpretation of part of Book II of St Augustine's *Confessions* is that he broke the circle of Roman time — the same sort of time as we have seen in Diodorus Siculus — and replaced it with linear time (Hassard 1990: 11). Whether or not one chooses to believe this reading, in the smashing and burial of the bronze calendar at Coligny this was almost literally the case. Critics agree that it was deliberately shattered before it was buried with a statue of Mars, also broken (cf. Duval & Pinault 1986: 37). If one were to give it an historical context, it would be to see this as more than an ordinary rite of termination, for the new order was to use a Christian calendar. There was no need of such things as pagan calendars, except for their decorative motifs.

Postscript

This paper arose out of a desire to arrange a limited amount of information along certain lines, and see if any pattern resulted. Undoubtedly, the methodology adopted here is open to two major criticisms — neither made at the Conference. Constructing festivals from dates on inscriptions is risky, for there were so many Roman festivals — to resume the analogy with mediaeval England, every day was a Saint's day or festival (Hutton 1994). But this is to miss the point — it was a date which was important to some people to cause an action to be performed — be it the Saint's namesake causing a Mass to be said, or a Roman who put up a monument causing the inscription to be cut. It therefore is designed to let performers make a point to an audience, to show that they were doing the right thing at the right time, building monuments in the summer-autumn months, and making major sacrifices at them in the late autumn and other ones in between.

The other major criticism concerns the size of the sample — under 1% of inscriptions. Why are the other 99% of inscriptions 'date-less'? I can offer no answer to that at present. Trier's birthday may have been shared by other cities. It is possible that this date, Rome's birthday, that of the reigning emperor or perhaps the Augustus' birthday is when many inscriptions were cut and monuments erected. But that is to propose another myth, based on no real proof — just like the one at the beginning of this paper.

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