
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

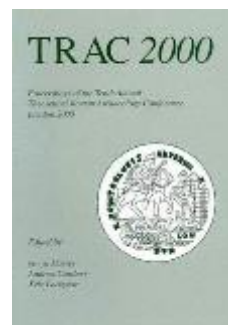
Title: Representing the Romans in the Museum of Scotland

Author(s): David Clarke and Fraser Hunter

Pages: 1–11

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2000_1_11

Publication Date: 29 March 2001



Volume Information:

Davies, G., Gardner, A., and Lockyear, K. (eds) 2001. *TRAC 2000: Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, London 2000*. 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.

1

Representing the Romans in the Museum of Scotland

David Clarke and Fraser Hunter
National Museums of Scotland

1.1 Introduction

Despite the growing challenges to orthodox interpretations of Roman Britain, there has been surprisingly little commentary on the impact these may have on the presentations of the subject offered to a wider public by museums. Beard and Henderson's study of some of the issues is a notable exception, but their discussion of *displaying Roman Britain in the museum* is concerned only with the example of the Museum of London (Beard & Henderson 1999). Presumably the British Museum's latest gallery on the topic was seen as too traditional to merit serious comment. Beard and Henderson's remarks are fine as far as they go, but London is hardly typical of Roman Britain as a whole, either in terms of its history or the objects that illustrate it. Most museums face an altogether different set of problems in seeking to present Roman Britain. For instance, many of them in the north and west are portraying life in a military zone where the messages are more rooted in the operation and consequences of imperialism than they are in delineating the development of urban life. Nevertheless, the agendas have remained dominated by the perceived separateness and superiority of the Romans, even in Scotland where they were present on only three occasions for a total of some fifty years. Here we would like to present the rationale behind our treatment of the Romans in the context of a major new display of Scotland's past.

In the former National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland on Queen Street, Edinburgh, the Roman collections occupied a separate gallery at the top of the building. Admittedly, this was not the product of conscious intention but an *ad hoc* solution in the face of the flood of spectacular finds from Curle's excavations at Newstead in the first decade of the 20th century (Curle 1911). With the ground floor full of historical material and the first floor packed with prehistoric and early historic objects, the only solution was to clear the comparative displays of material from other countries that occupied the Second Floor. Certainly, this solution enabled the Newstead finds, and indeed Roman material from other sites, to be displayed in considerable quantity.

While all this is just an example of the expedient approaches that every major museum has to adopt in the face of major new acquisitions, it did nevertheless have the important effect of conferring on the Roman collections a sense of otherness. As this arrangement became effectively permanent, and particularly as the main first floor gallery struggled towards achieving a chronological arrangement for its contents, the feeling of otherness increased rather than diminished. Here were Romans represented by antiquities found in Roman forts or as stray finds. Yet Roman objects found on native sites were displayed in the first floor gallery below. So in no meaningful way could these Roman displays be considered as forming an integrated part of Scotland's

past. Only the accident of discovery of the objects in Scotland linked them to that and then not very explicitly. All of this harmonised well, however, with an education system which taught the Romans by emphasising the 'civilising' and pan-European aspects of the Roman Empire rather than their more circumscribed place in Scotland's history.

1.2 The Museum of Scotland

The creation of the Museum of Scotland, a new national museum for the Scottish collections which opened on 1st December 1998, gave us a rare opportunity. It was a blank sheet on which to develop integrated ideas about presenting Scotland's past, without the constraints and historical accidents of pre-existing displays. The conceptual structure developed for the displays in the Museum of Scotland uses four major chronological areas: *Beginnings*, from 3.3 billion years ago to the last ice age; *Early People*, from the first appearance of human groups c. 8000 BC until AD 1100; *Scotland in History*, AD 1100 to 1914, embracing the Kingdom of the Scots, Scotland Transformed and Industry and Empire; and finally, *Within Living Memory*, the 20th century. Within these broad chronological groupings, which are arranged vertically through the building with the oldest in the basement and the youngest just below the roof, issues were to be developed thematically and not through a simple refining of the coarse chronological framework.

Clearly, then, integrating the Roman material with the rest of the evidence for Scotland's prehistoric and early historic past was not to be simply a matter of ensuring that it now assumed its correct position in displays offering a visual time-line for the first nine millennia of human occupation of what we now call Scotland. Instead, Roman objects are used throughout an exhibition built around five major conceptual themes (Table 1.1). The first, which provides a general introduction to the displays, deals with *People* and is an unusual combination of figures by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi incorporating prehistoric and early historic jewellery, and images of humans from the first millennium AD, the only time such images are available in the period covered. The second, *A Generous Land*, begins the main exhibition. In twelve themes it develops the material culture evidence for the gathering and processing of resources, essentially looking at how people stayed alive by satisfying the basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and tools. Next comes *Wider Horizons*, exploring both methods of transport and the movement of people, goods and ideas. The fourth conceptual theme, *Them and Us*, looks at issues of power and social organisation. Finally, *In Touch with the Gods* examines issues relating to death, belief and ritual (Table 1.1).

This is the consciously constructed journey for the visitor, although the displays are not so rigid as to require that visitors take the intended route. If they do, the journey takes them from what should be most familiar (and about which we, as archaeologists, can speak with most confidence) to that which is both unfamiliar and challenging, where considerable speculation is a key element in the stories being presented. Within this overall structure, the information is presented in an unvarying visual framework: unvarying, that is, not in the sense of uniformity but in a manner comparable to the style of a newspaper where regular readers know where to look to acquire the information they want. In our case the information provided tells visitors what theme they are in; gives the topic of each case or uncased display with a supporting detailed text referring directly to the objects on display; shows and lists where in Scotland they were found; provides a short description of each object;

Conceptual area	Theme title	Topic
People		
A Generous Land	Fat of the land	Food
	Tilling the soil, tending the beasts	Agriculture
	Fruits of the wild	Hunting and gathering
	Made of bone	Bone working
	Weaving and winding	Textile working
	Skins off their backs	Hide working
	Working wood	Wood working
	Shaping stone	Stone working
	Baking the earth	Clay working
	Melting rocks, forging metal	Metal working
	Broken glass	Glass working
About the house	Shelter	
Wider Horizons	Getting around	Methods of transport
	Moving things, travelling people	Movement of people, goods & ideas
Them and Us	Bloodshed, weapons and heroes	Warfare
	Roman invaders	Imperialism
	Letters of authority	Literacy
	Symbols of power	Display
	Burying treasure, sacrificing wealth	Hoarding
In Touch with the Gods	Dead and sometimes buried	Death
	Glimpses of the sacred	Belief and ritual
	Gods of the frontier, God of the Book	Roman religion and Christianity

Table 1.1: Structure of the *Early People* gallery.

and indicates what date we believe it to be. All text here is intended to be clear and concise with no prior assumption of knowledge on the part of the visitor. But each theme is introduced by a piece of text which is imaginative and provocative. It seeks to make visitors imagine what the realities associated with the theme might be. Here, for example, are the texts associated with the themes dealing with war and imperialism.

First, warfare:

Bloodshed, weapons and heroes

Some of us liked to fight. It was a high calling to risk life and warriors deserved the respect we gave them and the rewards they took. They were strong and brave. For, when they set out raiding, a few of them together, no-one could tell who of the war band would return from the skirmishes. At first we fought with clubs and with bows and arrows. Later we fought with swords and spears. Our weapons got better, our warriors grew fiercer.

The army of Romans was uncountable. They moved with the purpose of ants. Their weapons were murderous, their war horses terrifying. But we fought them anyway.

And now, imperialism:

Roman invaders

They were alien, the Romans. We had seen nothing like them. Three times they came and left again and we didn't know why they came at all. Some tribes hated them and never gave them peace. But other chiefs saw advantage in them and gained their trust. The Romans gave them silver and other marvellous things to amaze the rest of us. And they drank wine, the Roman drink.

After they left the third time, the Romans gave even more to the people they knew. They needed friends then, when they had grown weak and everyone was attacking them. They were desperate.

Throughout the displays, the philosophy is that material culture has primacy. Yet objects have many possible stories to tell, and we can only select one or two of these to emphasise. In a thematic approach, most objects could fit into several themes, and decisions must be made about where they would make the most impact. A good example of this is the Cramond lioness, an object with a high public profile found shortly before the museum opened (Hunter & Collard 1997). Yet we do not attempt a detailed presentation of it. Instead, we display it in the theme dealing with death and focus on two aspects: as a symbol of status conveyed in burial, and as an example of funerary symbolism. The story of its discovery, its relationship to Cramond fort, and the unresolved questions it poses about whether it was used, where it was made and so on, are not covered. To do more for even a small percentage of the 5,500 objects on display would multiply the amount of text confronting the visitor to the extent that it would dominate the objects. This would, to our minds, defeat the purpose of the museum. For those wanting more information, other sources must be provided, whether textual, electronic, or by personal access to the curators.

An equally important general point about the displays is that they do not aspire to be comprehensive. This is the story told from selected aspects of material culture — not the story of Scotland or, in this context, the story of the Romans in Scotland. As a result, certain hallowed display favourites do not star in this presentation — there is no plan of a 'typical fort', nor is there a map or cross-section of the Antonine Wall. We believe such aspects are best dealt with when confronting the evidence in the landscape, or in a book. The Antonine Wall gets only passing mention in the displays, while sites receive consideration only as findspots. For the history of Roman Scotland, coinage is used as the visual key, with coin portraits of the relevant emperors and reverses showing victory propaganda of the various campaigns. Hence the history is related to objects rather than being an abstract text.

Many of the key aspects of our approach to displaying Scotland's prehistory and early history are rooted in the work we did with focus groups reflecting our visitor profile, both actual and desired, and groups of teachers who provided a closer definition of needs in formal education. Rather surprisingly, teachers expressed strong concerns that the Romans, who are undoubtedly perceived as incomers, should be identified by name whereas we cannot provide an equivalent name for the native inhabitants who are seen as ancestral to today's Scots. Presumably it was a similar viewpoint that resulted in the displays at Archaeolink Prehistory Park, Aberdeenshire, having

Glaswegian accents for Celts and Cockney ones for Romans. Here is a sense of otherness but not the one we started with. This sense of otherness, however strongly laced with inappropriate nationalist sentiments, does nevertheless view the Romans as an element in Scotland's past. We have not shied away from reflecting this in our displays.

1.3 Use of the Roman material

The ways in which Roman material is used in the displays can be split conceptually into four.

- As an undifferentiated part of a theme.
- As an exemplar of a general point not restricted to the Roman material.
- As a Roman-specific contrast to the general picture.
- As a broader case study.

To take these in turn, much of the Roman material fits easily into our general themes. For instance, the Roman objects related to hunting and fishing fit with other material on sport hunting; the evidence for textile production or bone working is essentially similar to the general run of things in prehistoric and early historic Scotland.

In other cases, the Roman material serves to exemplify a general point. The Cra-mond lioness is an example of this, as one of the best indicators of the broader theme of indicating status in burials. Equally, the magnificent selection of blacksmiths' tools from Newstead, probably the finest from the Empire (Curle 1911, pp. 285–6), are essentially the same as blacksmiths' tools since the Iron Age: by their completeness they illustrate a much wider series of points unrelated to their Roman cultural context.

However, there are also occasions where Roman objects act as a contrast to the rest of the Scottish material, and this reinforces one of our wider points: that the Romans are essentially alien to Scottish prehistory. For instance in leather working, the Romans introduced technical innovations (vegetable tanning) and large scale production: there is also the first clear evidence of specialists, seen best in the magnificent chamfrons from Newstead (Curle 1911, pl. XXI). In agriculture, the Romans also provide a contrast in the introduction of previously unknown tool types such as the scythe and the *ascia-rastrum* hoe, reflecting different types of agriculture (the need to gather hay for cavalry horses, and a more intensive horticultural approach). In pottery too, their bulk-produced, wheel-thrown, kiln-fired products are in total contrast to the individual hand-made, bonfire-fired pottery used at all other times. In each case we separate out the Roman material to reinforce its difference. However this is not to create a false dichotomy of 'progress'; we take pains to stress that the requirements of the Romans were very different, and that many of their innovations were simply unnecessary and over-complex for indigenous societies.

It is perhaps in the theme on warfare, *Bloodshed, weapons and heroes*, where the contrast is most marked. Here the display is split into two parts. The first deals with prehistory and early history, and stresses the small-scale nature of warfare, motives concerned primarily with plunder and status, and the idea of the warrior rather than the soldier, with his weapons reflecting his status. This is contrasted with the Romans, introduced by the Croy gravestone of three legionaries as an icon (Keppie & Arnold 1984, no. 90), with an introductory text to reinforce this:

To native peoples the Roman army was an alien phenomenon in just about every way. It was an organisation of unimagined complexity and scale. Its imperialist motives for being in Scotland were incomprehensible to native people. The technology it used had never been seen before.

These points are developed in the following cases, looking at the organisation, scale and full equipment of the Roman soldiers (a point emphasised visually by putting more objects in the cases than before), along with their unparalleled technical support, notably artillery and a medical service.

The final use of Roman material is in broader case studies integrated into the wider picture. For instance, in the *Moving things, travelling people* theme, there are three cases devoted to the Roman supply system. Along with a similar treatment of the Viking trading network, this makes the general point that there are times when Scotland was connected to international trading networks, as well as looking in some detail at army supply. Equally in dealing with religion, the theme *Gods of the frontier, God of the Book*, looks at Roman religion and Christianity: while a number of points are dealt with, the meta-message here is to contrast our knowledge where written sources are available with the preceding *Glimpses of the sacred* theme which looked at the very fragmentary evidence for understanding prehistoric beliefs. There is a separate theme looking at Roman-native relations, which we shall return to later, while in the theme looking at literacy, *Letters of authority*, Roman material is one of the case studies. In this context we look mainly at literacy as a power tool, turning first to its rôle in propaganda and bureaucracy before looking at everyday literacy, graffiti, and its use in production and trade. Again the main Roman case is deliberately full of objects to make the subliminal message that literacy was important in the Roman world. This is visually contrasted with the much smaller and sparser case on the local take-up of literacy at this time, the evidence for which is minimal and ambiguous. Contrasts are also drawn with the second case study, the Early Historic use of literacy, which is more restricted and socially exclusive.

1.4 Developing themes

In constructing the displays we have been very anxious to portray complex topics and theoretical issues. The uses of literacy, discussed above, are an example. We also look at the topics of hoarding and deliberate deposition which have been to the fore of current concerns, including a specific section on the Newstead pits (*cf.* Clarke 1997; Clarke & Jones 1994); this is important in raising the issue of the source of the exhibits and why they survive, topics rarely touched on in museum displays.

To indicate something of this approach in more detail, we would like to use the *Roman invaders* theme as a case study. This is a key area, as it discusses the Roman/native interface which is crucial to the presentation of the Romans in the display. It sits in the *Them and Us* section, following the display of Roman warfare, and is the only theme devoted entirely to Roman material. The theme starts with a history of Roman Scotland using coinage, as discussed above, and then looks at Roman society and material culture in contrast to local Iron Age societies. Here we display a Samian bowl compared to an Iron Age pot; the massive leg from an equestrian statue (with overtones of the Imperial jackboot); a slave manacle; and sculpture and inscriptions which highlight the alien aspects of Roman culture in its religion, structure, bureaucracy and use of propaganda. The key piece here is the Bridgeness slab (Keppie & Arnold 1984, no. 68), which dominates the area: it is used to epitomise the



Figure 1.1: Part of the *Roman Invaders* theme. © NMS.

difference between Romans and natives. However we stress this is but one side of the picture. A series of cases present Roman artefacts in native contexts (Fig. 1.1). We emphasise that Scotland did not become ‘Romanized’, but that there were complex relations between the two groups of peoples. First the large quantities of Roman material on sites like Traprain Law are displayed — clear visual indicators of something other than warfare. Aspects of the relationship are then dealt with: the idea of the diplomatic gift, illustrated by the Helmsdale vessel hoard (Spearman 1990); and the adoption of certain exotic habits which fitted into local social ways. Here the adoption of wine-drinking is the main case study, emphasising how compatible this was with local traditions of status through generosity at feasts. Contact with the Romans provided a source of prestige items for use within local displays of status, and this prestige goods idea is continued in a number of cases, showing its extent well beyond the frontier.

The final section considers the very different situation after the final withdrawal from Scotland, when the security of the frontier became an increasingly significant issue. The idea of the buffer zone and frontier politics is introduced, and the Falkirk hoard of almost 2000 *denarii* (Robertson 1982) is presented as a classic ‘gift’, the Roman equivalent of used notes in a brown paper bag. This is the context for the display of the Traprain Treasure (Curle 1923) — a good example of our earlier point about focussing on only a few issues for particular objects or groups, as we plump entirely for an interpretation of this hoard as a gift or bribe, and do not mention other possibilities such as booty. In that sense the displays are personal: they represent our convictions and interpretations.

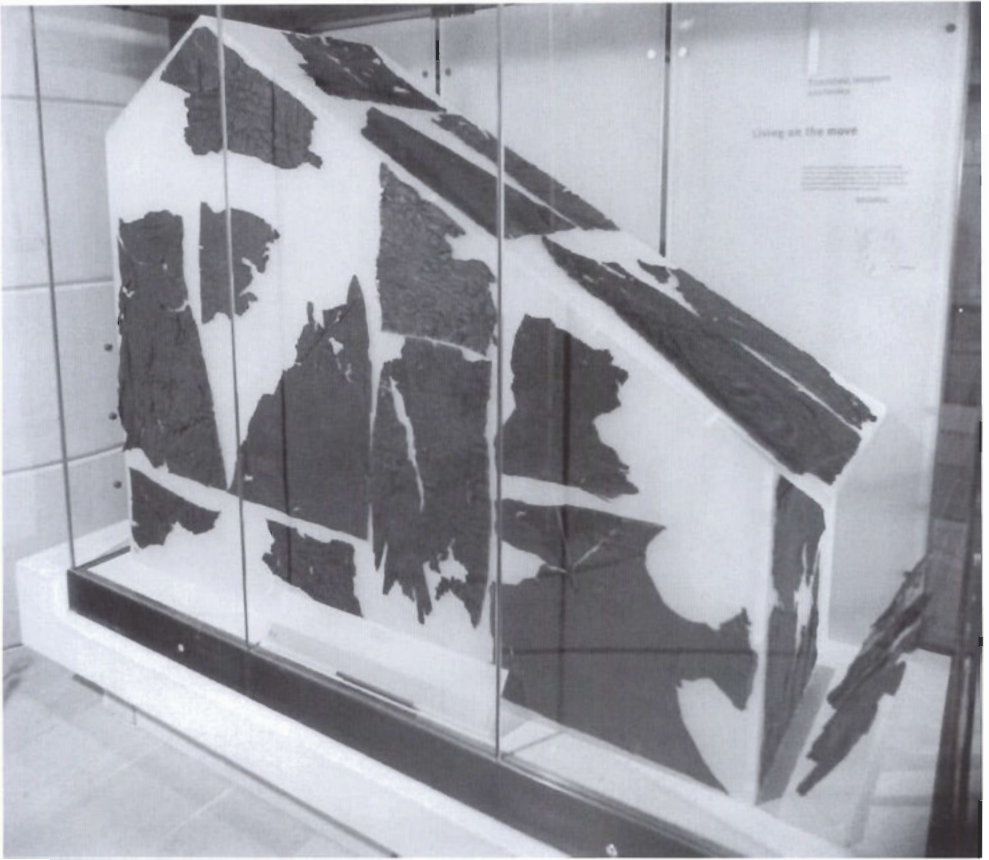


Figure 1.2: Partial reconstruction of a Roman tent. © NMS.

1.5 Practical display

Finally we would like to consider display practicalities: how to make objects understandable. Archaeological artefacts are some of the hardest exhibits for the public to comprehend, as they are often unfamiliar and fragmentary. We have used a number of ways to get round this. Some are developments of existing approaches, while others we feel are innovative.

Gemstones are a particular problem. Their great detail on such a small object makes them all but invisible to the naked eye, especially at a distance in a case. However normal approaches such as enlarged photos or magnifying glasses are, we believe, unsuccessful: in the first instance, they generally fail to highlight the key aspects; in the second, they cannot cater for the variety of people's vision. We have opted for greatly enlarged drawings. These have the dual advantage of rendering them more easily visible, while also allowing subtle emphasis to be placed on particular points of detail which are often hard to interpret otherwise.

With fragmentary material we have reconstructed certain key objects with the intention of developing an interpretative toolkit for the visitor when they approach the other fragmentary objects in the displays. Such an approach is especially important in the *Roman invaders* section, where there can be something of a credibility gap in claiming a miserable sherd of pottery or glass was once a highly desirable item. In



Figure 1.3: Reconstruction of the Newstead *lorica segmentata*. © NMS.

general we have used frosted perspex or resin for reconstructions — a clearly modern material, with no risk of confusion with the original. However with sculpture, and with Roman pottery in the *Roman Invaders* theme, we have gone for closer colour-matching of plaster and similar materials. With sculpture, this is for the dual reason that it looks less discordant and avoids confusion between any reconstruction and the frosted glass bases the stones sit on. With the pottery, we wanted to make it look like the intact Roman pots seen elsewhere, to make a closer conceptual link than would be possible with the visually different perspex reconstructions.

Apart from pottery and glass, there are a range of other reconstructions. A number of pieces of sculpture have been recreated, notably one of the Birrens Victory friezes and the Croy Hill depiction of Jupiter Dolichenus (Keppie & Arnold 1984, nos. 26 & 88). Examination of the Newstead leather by Carol van Driel-Murray allowed us to reconstruct part of the gable and side of a Roman tent (Fig. 1.2), while commissioned research by Mike Bishop and Peter Connolly has led to a new reconstruction of the Newstead *lorica segmentata*, with the missing components modelled in perspex (Fig. 1.3). As we hope the illustrations indicate, we feel this makes fragmentary material visually comprehensible without the need for detailed textual explanation which most people would not read.

The other key problem is unfamiliar material. Here we may take two examples. Bridle bits are essentially incomprehensible to all but the initiated equine-lover in normal displays: we have made horse muzzles in perspex and fitted the bits and headstalls to these. While less of the object is visible, it makes it instantly recognisable as horse harness rather than a bizarre metal contraption sitting unhappily on a glass shelf.

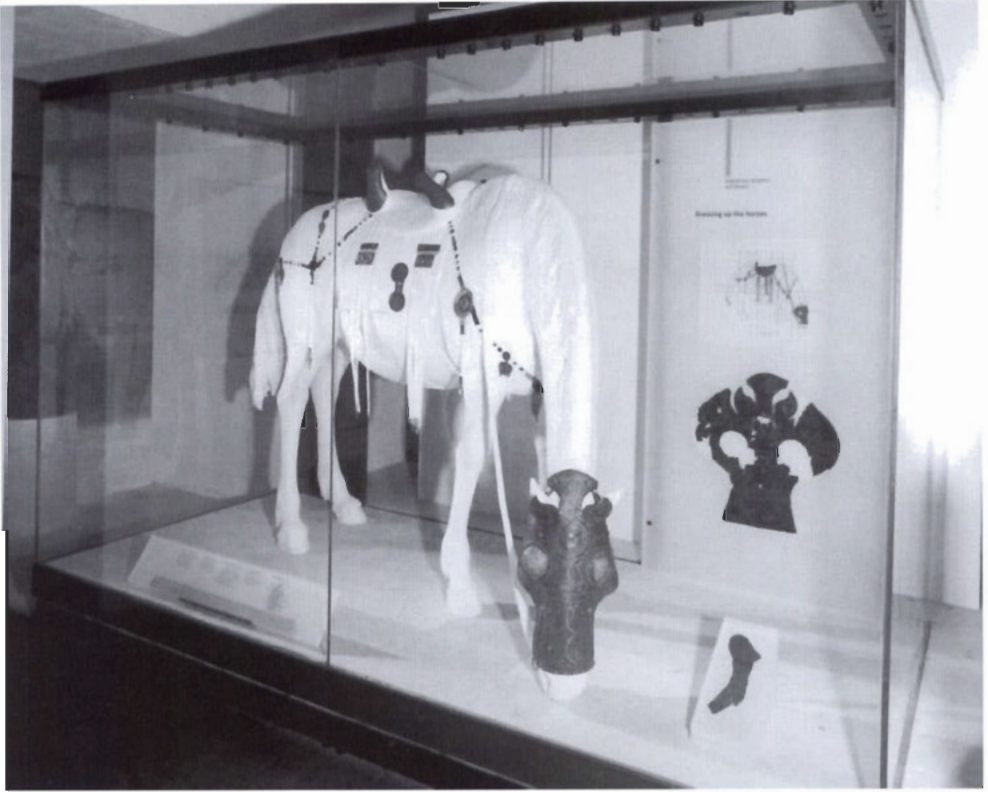


Figure 1.4: Reconstruction of a cavalry horse in parade armour. © NMS.

Our second example is parade harness for the Roman cavalry. There is a fine selection, notably from Newstead, but again it is hard to appreciate its original rôle. Rather than the normal use of an illustration to contextualise the material, we commissioned a full-size reconstruction horse from sculptor Tim Chalk; onto this the original material was mounted, with the straps and missing pieces modelled. Again the reconstruction is clearly modern, in this case in white plaster and resin (Fig. 1.4).

Finally, we are in the process of tackling the difficult problem of inscriptions. While these are vital to understanding Roman material, they are an instant turn-off to many people because they are an abbreviated form of an unfamiliar language. To tackle this, we are focussing on Roman religion, where most of our inscriptions are displayed, and are using a multimedia presentation projected onto a blank altar. This splits an inscription into three essential questions: who was the altar dedicated to; who dedicated it; and why? By taking a real inscription, displaying it line by line and transforming each line from Latin to English we hope to convince people that inscriptions are not as alien and difficult as they appear. The knowledge acquired from this programme is carried through the gallery by presenting our altar transcriptions in a similar way, giving an integrated line-by-line translation rather than a block of incomprehensible Latin text with adjacent translation.

1.6 Conclusions

We hope we have conveyed something of what we have tried to do in the Museum of Scotland: the concepts behind the general displays; the approaches to the Roman material, at times similar, at times very different; and the practicalities of making such material interpretable and interesting. There are, of course, areas we have not tackled which we would have liked to. For example, we had intended to have a section looking at the identity of Roman soldiers, to counter the popular misconception that they all came from Italy and spent their time on the frontier shivering and dreaming of Tuscany. Yet as our display structures evolved, this proved difficult, and there is no detailed treatment of the topic, although the origins of the troops are mentioned. However we hope we have presented a picture of the Romans which is not a conventional one, but shows them as interesting, complex and comprehensible, in some aspects part of our broader picture, in others very different. Have we been successful? We can but ask people to visit the museum and judge for themselves.

References

- BEARD, M. & J. HENDERSON 1999. 'Rule(d) Britannia: displaying Roman Britain in the museum.' In N. Merriman (ed.), *Making Early Histories in Museums*, pp. 44–73. Leicester University Press, London and New York.
- CLARKE, S. 1997. 'Abandonment, rubbish disposal and 'special' deposits at Newstead.' In K. Meadows, C. Lemke & J. Heron (eds.), *TRAC 96. Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference Sheffield 1996*, pp. 73–81. Oxbow, Oxford.
- CLARKE, S. & R. JONES 1994. 'The Newstead pits.' *Journal of Roman Military Equipment Studies* 6: 109–24. Published 1996.
- CURLE, A. O. 1923. *The Treasure of Traprain*. Maclehose, Glasgow.
- CURLE, J. 1911. *A Roman Frontier Post and its People*. Maclehose, Glasgow.
- HUNTER, F. & M. COLLARD 1997. 'The Cramond lioness.' *Current Archaeology* 155: 404–7.
- KEPPIE, L. J. F. & B. J. ARNOLD 1984. *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani, Great Britain I, 4. Scotland*. British Academy, London.
- ROBERTSON, A. S. 1982. 'The Falkirk (1933) hoard of over 1900 denarii: a review in the light of recent research.' In S. Scheers (ed.), *Studia Paulo Naster Oblata I: Numismatica Antiqua, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 12, pp. 207–26. Peeters, Leuven.
- SPEARMAN, R. M. 1990. 'The Helmsdale bowls, a re-assessment.' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 120: 63–77.

David Clarke
grumpy@nms.ac.uk

Fraser Hunter
f.hunter@nms.ac.uk

Dept of Archaeology
National Museums of Scotland
Chambers St
Edinburgh EH1 1JF