

Aspects of religion in the Roman period

c70-410AD

This summary, illustrated by reference to sites in our region, is intended to provide project volunteers with a rapid overview of religion throughout the Roman occupation, roughly between 70 and 410AD. Its focus is Roman forts and settlements; reference should also be made to the discussion of 'native' settlements of Iron Age/Roman date in the previous article. Inevitably, complex issues are presented here in minimal detail, but hopefully what follows is a reasonably clear and accurate overview. Roman religion was not identified by project volunteers as a priority area of interest, so no fieldwork relating specifically to it is planned. But the subject is important, not only because it is so fascinating in its own right, but also because of the link it provides between what we know of late prehistoric and early medieval religion.

1. Introduction

The Roman conquest of north-east England, or at least the southern half of it, occurred during the AD70s. The Roman intention was clearly to conquer the whole of Britain, and probably Ireland too, but for various reasons this never happened. In AD122, the northern frontier was set in stone, literally, through the construction of Hadrian's Wall. This meant that most of what is now Northumberland was effectively outside the empire (although Roman influence here was substantial through the network of roads of forts established north of the frontier) while southern Northumberland and County Durham fell within the empire. Through time, the 'Roman' authorities and native populations became ever more integrated, in religion as much as in other aspects of life. But by the time that Rome ended her military occupation of Britain in the early fifth century, the Roman gods, with just one exception, seem all to have departed these shores for good.

Roman religion is a complex subject, and things changed substantially during the dozen or so generations of the occupation. This brief overview attempts firstly to outline the nature of Roman religion in our region, then to describe the kinds of archaeological evidence that we have for religious practice by reference to a number of local sites.

A key point to appreciate with regard to Roman religion is that it was polytheistic, meaning that there were many gods. This was the case right through until the late fourth century when a monotheistic cult with origins in the east, Christianity, became the empire's official religion. In practice, though, the official adoption of Christianity seems not to have exterminated the pagan gods as intended, and, despite various claims, there is no unambiguous evidence for Christian worship in north-east England prior to the end of the Roman occupation.

Although it is impossible to know for sure what individuals made of the various religious options open to them through the dozen or so generations of the Roman occupation, there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating a wide range of gods and practices. Throughout much of the north-east, both north and south of the Wall, an essentially agrarian settlement pattern continued from the Iron Age through into Roman times, and the kind of religious activity outlined in the previous section probably continued largely unaltered in the centuries following the Roman conquest. However, a completely new set of gods was introduced by the Roman military, along with new ways of worship, much evidence of which is known from numerous Roman forts and associated settlements throughout the region, including several on the line of the Wall.

We know from various sources that the Roman calendar was punctuated with numerous religious festivals; nearly 150 are listed on wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_festivals) some of which lasted more than one day (the Saturnalia, comparable in many ways to today's Christmas, lasted from the 17th to the 23rd December; it was closely followed by the Festival of Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, on 25th December, and the Kalends to celebrate New Year). So, getting on for half the days in every year were associated with some kind of religious celebration!

Occasional finds, such as the altar from Bremenium (High Rochester) dedicated to the goddess Roma 'on her birthday', suggest that the dates of festivals (in this case the *Natalis Urbis Romae* on 21st April) were widely known and celebrated. Despite the lack of clear local evidence, the celebration of festivals must have been a key aspect of life in our region; literary sources suggest that many would have included a combination of religious observance (often including prayer and animal sacrifice) with feasting and fun.

It is interesting to note in passing that the Vindolanda writing tablets, that record all manner of details relating to everyday life, make little mention of religious matters other than occasional references to festivals; one, for example, relates to the ordering of supplies for the Saturnalia, while another refers to the need to find a priest for a festival. We have very little evidence from our region of priests, though a priestess, Diodora, dedicated an altar in Greek to the Tyrean Hercules at Corbridge. Evidence from elsewhere, however, suggests that full-time or part-time priests, some based at temples, would have officiated at festivals and on other appropriate occasions.

2. The gods of the Roman north-east

The gods worshipped in north-east England can be conveniently, if somewhat simplistically, divided into three groups: classical Roman (such as those listed in table 1, of which there is evidence for the worship of most in our region), Celtic (including Germanic), and Eastern (introduced to our region from the eastern provinces by serving soldiers). There was a merging of Roman gods with native Celtic deities in many places, resulting in what we might term hybrid 'Romano-Celtic' deities. This phenomenon presumably resulted from the desire of both Roman soldiers and natives to 'hedge their bets' and show allegiance to the classical pantheon and also to

established Celtic gods which, as we saw in the previous section, were often directly associated with particular places in the landscape. Ritual deposits of coins, altars and other objects from sites such as Coventina's Well at Carrawburgh (see below) and the Tees at Piercebridge (where more than 2,000 objects, mostly interpreted as ritual offerings, have been recovered from the river) demonstrate a continuing interest in 'wet places', some of which may have been considered sacred for centuries, if not millennia, before the Roman conquest.

2.1 Classical Roman gods

The main Roman gods and goddesses (most of whom were re-branded versions of Greek equivalents, named here in brackets) are listed on Wikipedia as:

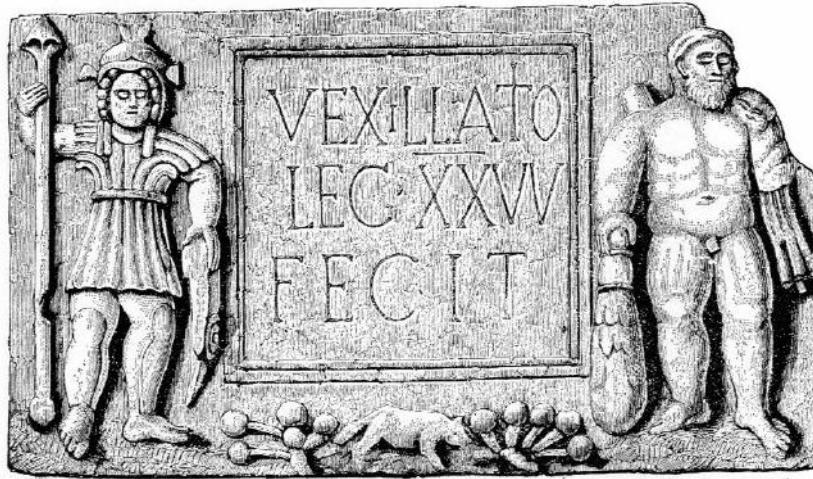
- Jupiter (Zeus). King of the gods, with special responsibility for the sky, lighting, and thunder.
- Juno (Hera). Queen of the gods, with special responsibility for women, love and marriage; wife (and sister!) of Jupiter.
- Minerva (Athena). Goddess of wisdom, medicine, commerce, handicrafts, poetry, the arts, and war.

(The above three, grouped together as the 'Capitoline Triad', played a pre-eminent role in the rituals of the Roman state.)

- Apollo (Apollo). God of the sun, light, music and prophecy. Son of Jupiter; twin of Diana
- Aurora (Eos). Goddess of the dawn
- Bacchus (Dionysus) - God of agriculture and wine
- Bellona (Enyo) - God of the sky. Father of Mercury.
- Ceres (Demeter) - Goddess of agriculture and the harvest, fertility and motherly love. Sister of Jupiter.
- Cupid (Eros). God of desire, erotic love and affection. Son of Venus and Mars.
- Cybele - Goddess of the Earth, nature, fertility, mountains, and wild animals
- Diana (Artemis). Goddess of nature and the moon, and of hunting. Daughter of Jupiter; twin of Apollo.
- Faunus- God of the forest, fields, and plains
- Fortuna (Tyche) - Goddess of chance
- Janus - God of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, and endings
- Mars (Ares). God of war, defender of the city of Rome and the empire. Also responsible for farming. Son of Jupiter and Juno.
- Mercury (Hermes). God of many things, including travel, trade, profit, and communication; also thieves and tricksters. Also the guide for souls entering the underworld. Messenger of the Gods.
- Neptune (Poseidon) - God of the sea, lakes and rivers, and also of horses.
- Nox - Primordial goddess of the night
- Pluto (Hades) - God of the underworld, and the riches under the Earth
- Proserpina- Goddess of fertility, wine, and agriculture

- Saturn- God of generation, dissolution, plenty, wealth, periodic renewal and liberation and time
- Spes- Goddess of hope
- Terra- Goddess of the Earth
- Venus (Aphrodite). Goddess of beauty, love, desire, sex, victory, and fertility. married to Vulcan, but also partnered with Mars.
- Veritas- Goddess of truth
- Vesta (Hestia) - Goddess of the hearth, the home, and domestic life. Sister of Jupiter.
- Vulcan (Hephaestus). God of fire, blacksmiths and craftsmanship. Son of Juno and Jupiter, married to Venus.

Some 'semi-divine' beings, the offspring of gods and their human lovers, were also popular. The best known of these is perhaps Hercules, son of Jupiter and a mortal mother. Such 'divine conceptions' were far from uncommon in the ancient world; the best known example, of course, forms the basis of Christianity, which became the official Roman religion towards the end of the fourth century.

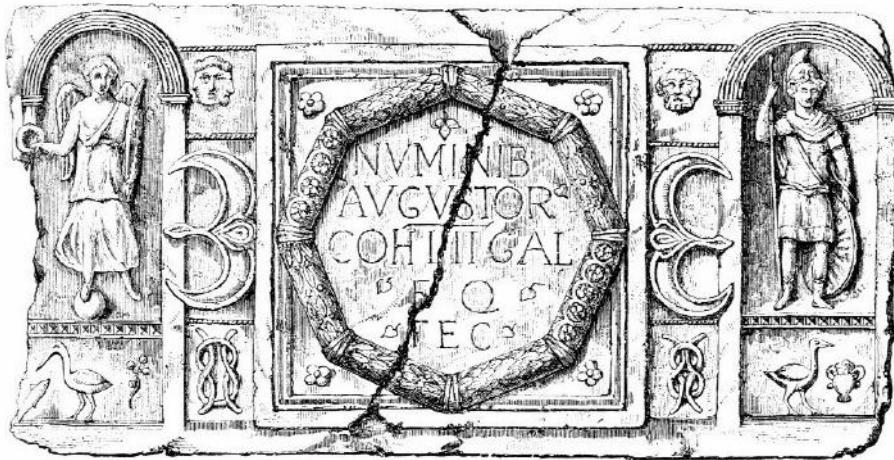


Size, 4 feet 6 inches by 2 feet 6 inches.

Sculptured slab from Bremenium (High Rochester) showing Mars (left) and Hercules (right). The boar in the middle was the emblem of the 20th Legion.

Also of great importance, from the time of Augustus onwards, was the cult of the Emperor, whose authority was regarded as god-given. The 'numen' (spirit) of emperors was a popular focus of worship. Many emperors were deified immediately after their death.

The so-called 'personified virtues', often associated directly with the emperors (for example, on coins), were often recognised as deities in their own right, and many altars were dedicated to them. The best known, all of great importance in military circles, were Virtus (virtue), Victoria (victory), Discipulina (discipline) and Fortuna (fortune).



Sculptured slab from Risingham showing Victory (left) and Mars (right).

In addition to worshipping the empire's 'official' gods, many people also thought it appropriate to make offerings to *genii loci* - local gods or spirits of particular places. This may well relate to Celtic and indeed earlier prehistoric practice, when spiritual significance was clearly rooted in 'special' places throughout the landscape. There are several examples from our region of such dedications, including an altar from *Habitancum* (Risingham) inscribed *Dis Cultoribus* ('to the gods who dwell in this place').

We should note that there is sizeable grey area between what is usually classed as 'superstition', as against 'religion', in the Roman world. Perhaps the classic example of this can be seen in the form of the carved phalli that adorn many buildings, including several along Hadrian's Wall. These are usually described as 'good luck symbols', representing the spirit of the phallus, *Fascinus*, and offering protection against the 'Evil Eye'. However, the phallus also represented *Priapus*, god of procreation and agricultural fertility, so we can't necessarily be sure what of the intention behind every example.

2.2 Celtic and 'Romano-Celtic' gods

Although Druidism was apparently exterminated due to its incompatibility with aspects of Roman authority, links with earlier times resulted in a considerable degree of syncretism or conflation, whereby intrusive Roman and indigenous British practices became merged and hybrid 'Romano-Celtic' gods were created. A key difference between late prehistoric and Roman deities was the tendency for the latter to be depicted in human form; as we saw in the previous section, Iron Age gods were often associated with animals, as well as with special places in the landscape, and were perhaps not generally regarded as anthropomorphic. The story of Brennus, King of the Gauls, scoffing at the very concept of gods in human form when seeing such statues at Delphi in the late third century BC, certainly suggests that anthropomorphic representations of gods were not part of Celtic culture. This incompatibility would

lead eventually to a kind of compromise, as will become clear from the examples considered below.

Antenociticus, known to us only from his little temple at Benwell, seems to be a classic case of a god born out of fusion between native and Roman tradition. His name is Celtic, and his head is of Celtic rather than classical Roman character; it has little horns, almond-shaped eyes, and a torc or necklace of native Iron Age type. He was, perhaps, a god of this particular place, rather than a god of classical Roman type with a particular responsibility. A comparable example is Arecurius, known only from a high quality sculpture at Corbridge; he also has a Celtic name, but is depicted in classical form. Coventina, discussed below, is also known only from one site, her shrine at Carrawburgh.

More widely revered was Cocidius, to whom dedications have been recorded from sites throughout our region (High Rochester, Risingham, Wallsend, Housesteads, Vindolanda, Ebchester, Lanchester), and of whom two depictions have been recorded at remote shrines (see below). A place known to the Romans as *Fanum Cocidi* (the shrine of Cocidius) seems likely to have been Bewcastle, just over the border in Cumbria, where dedications to him on silver plaques were found within the fort headquarters. In some cases Cocidius is conflated with Mars, in others with Silvanus.

Other Celtic gods recorded in our region, about whom very little is known, include Belatucadrus (mainly in Cumbria but also at Carvoran and Carrawburgh), Maponus – often linked with Apollo (at Corbridge, Vindolanda and possibly Epiacum/Whitley Castle), Brigantia (at South Shields and Corbridge), Mogons (High Rochester, Risingham, Vindolanda) and Sattada (Vindolanda). A sculpture of a reclining, bearded male from the fort at Chesters, where the Wall crosses the North Tyne, is generally interpreted as an otherwise unknown god of the river, presumably, though not necessarily, with Celtic roots.

The *Matres* ('mothers' or 'mother goddesses') were popular throughout the empire, the concept having apparently been brought to our region by Roman soldiers from other Celtic parts of the Empire, perhaps originally from the Rhineland. They occur with a range of different names, perhaps in each case referring specifically to a particular place, and when illustrated are usually in threes. There are no ancient literary sources to explain them; they may relate, in very general terms, to fertility and motherhood. Examples of reliefs and dedications from the north-east are known from Binchester, Vindolanda, Risingham, High Rochester, and various places along Hadrian's Wall (Carvoran, Housesteads, Carrawburgh, Halton Chesters, Benwell, Newcastle, and Milecastle 19). Clearly important to those who made these dedications, our lack of knowledge about them serves to remind us how little we really know of the religious beliefs of the time. Similarly, the *Genii cucullati* ('hooded spirits'), such as those from Housesteads, have a wide distribution and seem most likely to have origins in the Rhineland, but they are never found in association with inscriptions so their actual name and purpose remain unknown.

A great strength of polytheism was that new or imported gods could readily be incorporated into existing beliefs. While it is often assumed that Celtic gods such as Antenociticus, Cocidius and Coventina were present in the area prior to the Roman conquest, there is actually no proof of this and it may be that some gods were

somewhat newly created by the complex communities of natives and incomers within frontier community. For example, more than sixty altars to a god called Veteris (or to gods called the Veteres) are known from Britain, with most coming from the Wall zone, including a couple of dozen from Carvoran and Vindolanda. No depictions or details of the god or gods are provided on these, and we have no information about them from other sources, but most were dedicated by people from the Germanic provinces and it seems likely that they represent a 'new' god created by incomers coming to terms with their new surroundings.

2.3 Exotic gods from the East: Mithraism and Christianity

Exotic cults with origins in far-away places such as Egypt (eg Isis, Serapis) and Asia (eg Cybele, Jupiter Dilichenus, Mithras) were brought to Britain via the Roman military. Such new introductions often led to conflations, the interpretation of which can be far from straightforward. A classic example is illustrated by the extraordinary early third-century poem found inscribed on stone within the fort at Carvoran in 1816. This is dedicated to Virgo Caelestis, '*The Virgin in her heavenly place (who) rides upon the Lion; bearer of corn, inventor of law, founder of cities, by whose gifts it is man's good lot to know the gods: therefore she is the Mother of the gods, Peace, Virtue, Ceres, the Syrian Goddess, weighing life and laws in her balance.*' The complexity of all this cannot concern us here, but the tribune who wrote it clearly regarded Virgo Caelestis, a goddess popular in his homeland of Lybia, as 'Magna Mater' (mother of the gods), whose origins may extend back to Cybele, the ancient Anatolian mother goddess. Further evidence of exotic worship comes from Corbridge, where altars were dedicated in Greek to the Tyrian Hercules and Astarte, demonstrating links with Syria.

Of the exotic cults, it is Mithraism for which there is most evidence from the north-east, with Mithraic temples (known as Mithraea) having been excavated at Carrawbrough, Housesteads and Rudchester, and Mithraic inscriptions recorded at High Rochester, Lanchester, Whitley Castle and possibly Corbridge. Almost certainly, further Mithraea await discovery throughout the region.

Mithras is first recorded as the god of light in ancient Persia (Iran) and also in India, although the Roman version of Mithraism, recorded from the late first century AD, has distinctive characteristics not recorded elsewhere. Due to its popularity with soldiers, it expanded rapidly throughout the empire during the second century. Mithraism had a sophisticated theology no less complex than that of Christianity. Mithras himself was 'born' fully formed from the rock, although a famous sculpture from Housesteads (discussed below) shows him being born from an egg. The central Mithraic mystery is the Tauroctony, whereby Mithras sacrificed a great bull that had existed from the beginning of time, with all life springing from its blood. Thus, an act of death and destruction is transformed into one of creation, comparable in its central tenet to the crucifixion in Christianity. The Mithraic temple is the Mithraeum, modelled on the cave in which Mithras slayed the bull; a large relief of the Tauroctony, including Mithras' companions Cautes (with torch raised, representing light) and Cautopates (with torch lowered, representing dark) dominated the interior of each Mithraeum, which had no natural light and would have been artificially lit during ceremonies. Ceremonies must have been very theatrical; we know that they

involved ritual feasting and also initiation rites whereby individuals could progress upwardly through the cult's various grades.

Although Mithraism respected the classical gods (several of whom were specifically linked to the various grades of initiation, while altars to some have been found in Mithraea throughout the Empire), it clearly saw Mithras as the 'main' god. He is conflated in several places with Sol, and Deus Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun) had become the empire's chief deity by the late third century. While this was in many ways a great strength, it would bring him into direct competition with Christ, a conflict he was always destined to lose. The reasons for this lie largely in the 'closed shop' of Mithraism, whereas Christianity was open to all. Another problem for Mithras was that while his adherents were also free to worship other gods as they wished, Christians certainly were not. Once the empire was officially Christian, all 'pagan' gods had to be destroyed, and it seems that Mithras, as a popular competitor, was hit particularly hard. It is interesting to speculate as to what might have happened had Mithraism adapted and become less exclusive; if it had, for example, found a way of ridding itself of its strictly controlled initiation rituals and welcoming larger congregations. But the size of mithraea demonstrates that gatherings were always restricted, thus Mithraism had the seeds of its eventual demise sown firmly within its own structure - a trap into which the early Christian church would not fall.



The Mithraeum at Brocolitia, and a close-up of the altars within it.

Another cult with eastern origins was Christianity. Known to have existed within the Empire as a minority cult through the second and third centuries, including within the army, hardly any evidence of it is known from north-east England. There are occasional suggestions of Christian practice during the third century, for example in the form of finger rings with Christian symbolism at Binchester and other places, but it was under Constantine in the early fourth century that all religions were granted immunity from persecution and Christianity was free to expand throughout the empire, which it did at great pace. Although popularly regarded as the first Christian emperor, Constantine's personal beliefs seem to have been rather complex and it may be that his personal support for Christianity was as much political as religious; he supported the founding of numerous Christian churches yet was still linked to the pagan Sol Invictus on statues and coins, and never actually sought to ban pagan worship. This is odd, as allegiance to the Christian god is clearly incompatible with the worship of other deities, and of course with the imperial cult; while pagans were free to selectively celebrate Christian festivals as they may have wished, the same was most certainly not true in reverse. It may well be that Constantine equated Christ with Sol Invictus, regarding Christianity as a sophisticated new variant of the long-established sun cult. However, regardless of his own beliefs, Constantine opened the way for the Christian Church, with its cleverly-constructed diocesan structure centred in Rome, and its accessibility to all, to become the empire's main religion, with huge repercussions for all aspects of society including the military.

In 380, under Theodosius and Gratian, Christianity became the official religion of the Empire; the empire's chief priest (Pontius Maximus) was no longer the emperor, but the Pope. However, evidence for Christianity within north-east England throughout Roman times remains elusive. Late Roman churches have been claimed at Vindolanda, Housesteads and South Shields, but in no case is the evidence unambiguous and even if these buildings were churches they could be post-Roman in date. Similarly, a small number of early Christian tombstones, for example at Risingham and Vindolanda, could be late Roman or post-Roman. A few artefacts, such as silver vessels with chi-rho symbols from the Tyne, are also suggestive of Christian worship, but certainly do not prove that it was popular here. It is possible that Christianity was adopted by tribes north of the Wall in late Roman times, thus accounting for the Christian nature of the 'British' kingdoms of the fifth century, but if so then we have yet to recognise the evidence.

2.4 Summary: from Jupiter to Jesus.

To anyone familiar with the concept of worshipping just one all-powerful god, or perhaps no god at all, the preponderance of different deities available to people in the Roman north east must seem confusing and perhaps difficult to take seriously. However, remember that the early Christian church was very clever in that it only allowed one god but invented the concept of the saint, with different saints allocated responsibility for subjects previously divided up amongst different gods, so in some ways the contrast between pagan and Christian worship was not as absolute as it may initially appear. That said, the Romans undeniably had a lot of gods to pick from. If we count variations of particular gods (such as the 28 recorded variants of Mars, and ten of Jupiter) as separate entities, which in truth they were, then more than 250 different deities are known from inscriptions to have been worshipped in Roman

Britain, of which about half are recorded in north-east England. Many others have been recorded throughout the empire, most if not all of whom would have been known in Britain; some of the more obscure examples include:

- Cardea - goddess of door hinges.
- Cloacina - goddess of sewers.
- Iris - goddess of rainbows.
- Mephitis - goddess of poisonous gases and volcanic vapours.
- Muta - goddess of silence.
- Potina - goddess of children's drinks.
- Sarritor - god of hoeing and weeding.
- Salacia - goddess of seawater.
- Spiniensis - god of thorns (prayed to when removing thorny plants from fields)
- Sterquilinus - god of manure.
- Terminus - god of mileposts and boundary stones.
- Viriplaca - goddess of marital strife.

It is perhaps not difficult to understand how this pagan complexity was eventually displaced by the altogether simpler concept of the single Christian god with his saintly assistants.

3. The nature of the evidence

Our evidence for religion throughout Roman times exists in the form of a bewildering array temples and shrines, sculptures and inscriptions (including about 280 altars and 70 tombstones), and cemeteries. These mostly relate to settlements adjacent to forts; a few examples of altars and shrines are known from places distant from forts, such as in Weardale, but these are all linked to the activities of soldiers from forts a few kilometres away. We cannot hope to provide anything approaching a comprehensive account of these sites here; the following interesting examples are provided merely to give a flavour.

3.1. Temples and shrines

At the heart of every Roman fort was its headquarters building (*principia*), within which was the chapel of the standards (*aedes*). This contained a shrine of the imperial cult, with statues of the emperor and altars to Jupiter and Imperial Discipline. Also kept and venerated within the *aedes* were the regimental standards, and usually a trap-door in its floor gave access to an underground strong-room (effectively a fort's bank vault). The *aedes* was thus the practical and spiritual heart of the fort community. What most serving soldiers actually thought of this 'official' religion (which was perhaps more about practical duty than religious fervour) must be open to doubt, given the number of other gods worshipped in the vicinity of all forts.

Outside the forts, numerous temples and shrines have been recorded throughout the north east; many are known from inscriptions while a few have been excavated. In general, these were of no great size; they were not built for large congregations like Christian churches, but for private worship or perhaps to act as foci for small outdoor gatherings. Temples were generally either classical in form (rectangular on a raised platform, with colonnaded and often pedimented portico), or 'Romano-Celtic' (consisting of a small, often circular, central shrine, within an outer courtyard).

Corbridge, the most important settlement within our region at the junction of Dere Street and the Stanegate, had several temples. A sanctuary of classical temples is thought from architectural fragments to have stood within the town in the mid second century, including temples to Sol Invictus, Dea Roma, Jupiter Dilochenus and several other oriental deities, reflecting the diversity of beliefs within the Corbridge population.

At Vindolanda, a 'temple precinct' has been identified west of the fort, between the vicus and cemeteries. At least three temples have been identified here, though it is not clear to whom they were dedicated. One Celtic temple became a mausoleum, with several cremation burials, when no longer used for worship. Elsewhere at Vindolanda, a third-century temple to Jupiter Dilochenus, containing a fine altar, was excavated in 2009.

The ruins of the fascinating little temple of Antenociticus can be visited at Benwell. When this was excavated, the stone head of the god was found, along with three altars dedicated to him by serving soldiers of quite high rank. Antenociticus is unknown

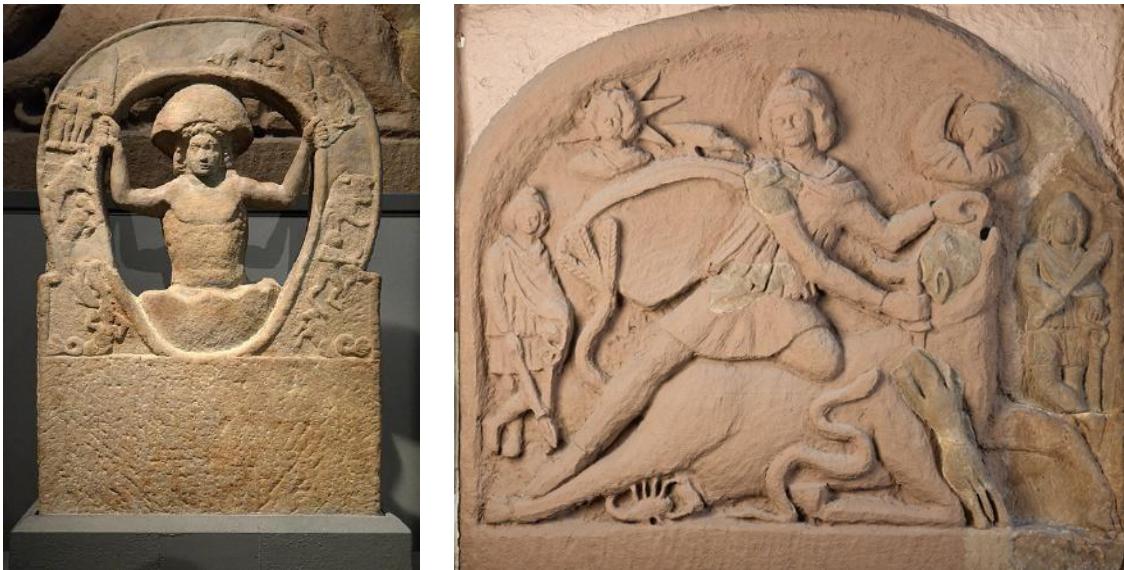
elsewhere, so may have been unique to this particular place. His temple is tiny, so could never have held a congregation of any size; it was presumably for private worship. In 2013, a small stone head with similarities to that of Antenociticus was excavated at Binchester. This could be another representation of Antenociticus, but is perhaps more likely to be an otherwise unknown deity, perhaps local to Binchester; its original context is unknown.

The best-known shrine in the north-east is Coventina's Well, adjacent to Carrawburgh (Brocolitia) fort on Hadrian's Wall. Here, a square stone-lined well, surrounded by a stone walled enclosure, was excavated in the late 19th century and found to contain numerous altars, more than 13,000 coins, and various other offerings to the goddess Coventina (named on several of the altars) dating from the mid-second century to the late fourth. Though unrecorded elsewhere, Coventina was clearly regarded here as of exceptional importance. Carrawburgh is also the location of a well-known mithraeum, discovered in 1949 and subsequently excavated and consolidated complete with replica altars (the originals are in the Great North Museum). Adjacent to the Mithraeum there was also a little nymphaeum, consisting of a simple semi-circular stone seat and an altar adjacent to a well, dedicated to the Nymphs and Genius Loci. No doubt further shrines and temples remain to be identified within the extensive Carrawburgh vicus.



Brocolitia (Carrawburgh). Left: Relief of water nymphs from the nymphaeum. Right: relief of Coventina from her shrine. ([ADD CREDITS](#))

Another Mithraeum was excavated at Housesteads. This included an extraordinary sculpture depicting Mithras being born from a ‘cosmic egg’, surrounded by the signs of the zodiac. This demonstrates that Mithras in this instance was conflated with two Greek deities: the Orphic Phanes, creator of all, and Aion, god of eternal and cyclical time. Altars in this Mithraeum were dedicated to *Mithras Saecularis* – ‘Mithras, Lord of Ages’.



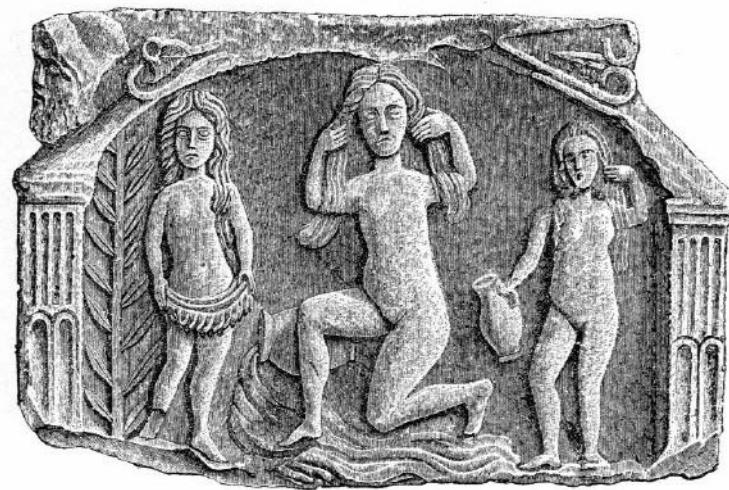
The birth of Mithras (left, part reconstructed) and the Tauroctony (right, largely reconstructed) from the Mithraeum at Housesteads. ([ADD CREDITS](#))

Many small shrines must have existed throughout the countryside, especially in the vicinity of forts. Two such sites, probably of early to mid third-century date, were excavated in 1946 at a remote location high up on Scargill Moor, about 3km south of the fort of Lavatris (Bowes). At least two altars from these are dedicated to Vinotonus, a local deity unknown elsewhere, about whom we know nothing for sure, although the conflation of the name with Silvanus on one of the altars suggests that both may have been linked with woodland and hunting. It is interesting to note that one of the altars was dedicated by an officer from Parma in northern Italy, reminding us of the extent to which serving soldiers travelled around the empire, reaching such far-flung places as Scargill Moor. Fragments of several further altars, all probably dedicated to Vinotonus, were also recovered from the Scargill Moor shrines, but nothing meaningful can be gleaned from what remains of their inscriptions.

North of the Wall, along the line of Dere Street close Risingham (Habitancum) fort, the 'Dream Altar' was found some time before 1825 adjacent to a spring. Its curious inscription can be translated as 'Forewarned by a dream the soldier bade her who is married to Fabius to set up this altar to the Nymphs who are to be worshipped.' One can only wonder as to the original story behind its production and installation at this location, presumably a shrine to the nymphs. A little further north the carving traditionally known as 'Robin of Risingham', possibly representing Cocidius, presumably marked another shrine. Sadly it was broken up to make gateposts by a farmer who wished to discourage visitors, and now only its lower half remains. A further shrine to Cocidius, at Yardhope above the Roman road linking the fort of Bremenium on Dere Street with the Devil's Causeway to the east, was discovered in 1980 and subsequently excavated. It is quite possible that several more such shrines at remote locations still await discovery throughout our region.



*Left: Carving of Cocidius from the little shrine at Yardhope.
Right: 'Robin of Risingham' drawn prior to the destruction of his upper half.*



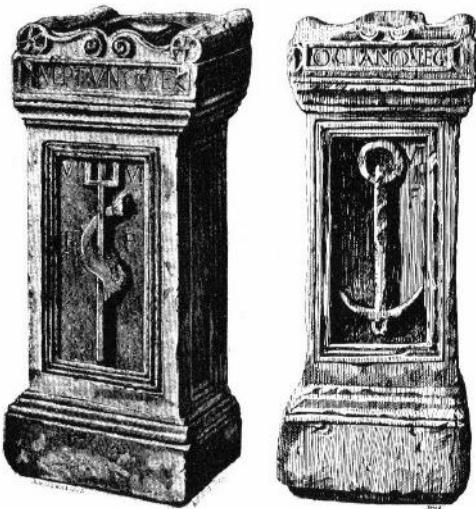
Size, 3 feet 6 inches by 2 feet 4 inches.

Carving of Venus and Nymphs from Bremenium, presumably form a shrine.

3.2. Altars

Romans were very keen on their altars. These collectively tell us much about religion in our region, demonstrating the worship of various deities at particular places. The almost 300 examples known from the north-east vary from large, high-quality sculptures, sometimes dedicated by or on behalf of entire military units and installed at temples, shrines or other important locations (such as those noted above), down to small, crudely produced examples many of which were apparently mass-produced for individuals to purchase, customise and deposit as votive offerings at shrines. Their archaeological value lies in the inscriptions placed upon them, usually stating who had commissioned them and why, as well as naming the particular deity to whom they were dedicated. A key element of Roman religion was the concept of the vow made between an individual and a god; people would make a promise to dedicate an altar (or make some other offering) to a god if that particular god answered their prayers. Hence a lot of altars include the inscription 'VSLM' which translates as 'willingly and deservedly fulfilled the vow'.

Two fine altars found in the Tyne at Newcastle are thought to have stood on the Pons Aelius, the Roman bridge across the Tyne close to the site of today's swing bridge. These were dedicated to Neptune and Oceanus by the 6th Legion which arrived in Britain just prior to the commencement of construction work on Hadrian's Wall; it seems likely that the altars were dedicated to these particular gods to give thanks for the legion's safe arrival here, presumably by sea via the Tyne estuary.



These altars to Neptune (left) and Oceanus (right) probably stood on the Roman bridge at Newcastle.

Many such altars are known from well-studied sites along Hadrian's Wall and elsewhere, but there are also examples from less well-known parts of our region. At the heart of the north Pennines, for example, a couple of interesting altars were recovered from what may have been a temple complex near the fort of Epiacum (Alston). These include one (now on display in the Great North Museum) dedicated to Mithras (or Apollo); the remains of a Mithraeum may well lie buried here. A second altar from Epiacum (now in Bedford Museum) was dedicated to Hercules by Gaius

Vitelius Atticianus, a centurion of the sixth legion. It was found in association with fragments of a giant statue of Hercules, suggesting that both may have originally have stood together within a temple, parts of which may yet survive within the ground. A further altar, dedicated to Minerva and Hercules, was recorded in 1716, but is now lost; whether or not it comes from the same general area as the above two altars is unknown, but it provides further evidence of the worship of classical Roman gods at Epiacum.

Elsewhere in the North Pennines, an interesting altar (now in St Thomas Church, Stanhope) was found in 1747 on the north side of the Bollinope Burn, just west of Bollinope Shield Farm, close to a spring. It was dedicated by a serving soldier to 'the Divinities of the Emperors and Unconquerable Silvanus' with thanks for the 'taking a wild boar of remarkable fineness'. Another altar to Silvanus from Weardale (now in the The Old Fulling Mill Museum, Durham; a replica stands at a bus stop near the original findspot) was found on the east bank of the Rookhope Burn, about 500m north of its confluence with the Wear. It is possible that a shrine may have existed adjacent to the burn here, not unlike those on Scargill Moor discussed above.

As will be clear to anyone who has read this article up to this point, altars from the north-east are dedicated to an astonishingly wide and (to us at least) confusing range of deities from the well-known down to a few who are mentioned only once. It seems, though, that even the dedicators could on occasions be unsure of exactly to whom their altars were being dedicated: amongst numerous references throughout northern England to mother goddesses, three altars from Binchester are dedicated to the Matres Ollototae, ('Mother Goddesses from other peoples'), while one from Risingham is to the Matres Tramarinae ('Mother Goddesses from overseas').

3.3. 'Celtic' stone heads

Several 'Celtic' stone heads are known from northern England. Most have no clear context, but all seem likely to have been found at, or close to, Roman military sites. Those from Benwell (Antenociticus) and Binchester were noted above; others are known from Corbridge, one of which, unusually, is topped with a *focus* (a bowl for offerings), so must at one time have been part of an altar; it has been tentatively identified as Maponus. Although definitely 'Celtic' rather than 'Roman' in character, there is no record of any such heads having been produced in Britain prior to the Roman occupation, although they were made in parts of continental Europe. This suggests that they may have been produced by serving soldiers who had roots in a European community with a tradition of producing such heads, and who were seeking to maintain aspects of their native religious traditions while serving in Britain.

A recently discovered example is the 'Head of Ayle', found built into a drystone wall at Middle Row, near the hamlet of Ayle, high above the east bank of the South Tyne overlooking the line of the Maiden Way and the fort of Epiacum (Whitley Castle). Its original context is unknown, but there are a number of natural springs in the immediate vicinity and it is probable that the head once embellished a 'sacred spring' somewhere in the locality. It has two small bumps above its forehead which probably represent horns, suggesting it could be Belatucadros, a little-known Celtic god linked to warfare and hunting who was worshipped by serving Roman soldiers at several

places along the Wall, in some cases being equated with Mars. Another stone head thought to represent Belatucadros, with more prominent horns than the Head of Ayle, is known from Carvoran, just a few kilometres to the north along the Maiden Way.



Stone heads from Binchester (left), Carvoran (centre) and 'The Head of Ayle' from near Whitley Castle.

3.4. Religious imagery on portable artefacts

The gods were by means restricted to their temples, as is demonstrated by religious imagery on a range of portable artefacts, including decorated pottery. However, these artefacts don't necessarily tell us much about religious belief amongst the common people. Many deities appear, for example, on coins, but it would be wrong to assume that anyone using a particular coin was an adherent of the god or goddess depicted upon it. By way of example, a few objects from our region are noted below.

The Corbridge lanx, a silver tray found in the north bank of the Tyne near Corbridge in 1735, depicts a scene set on the island of Delos, featuring Apollo, Athena, Artemis (and her hound) and others. While it demonstrates awareness of these gods amongst people in fourth-century Corbridge, it doesn't necessarily mean they were being worshipped here. A silver bowl of similar date, but incorporating a chi-rho symbol, is suggestive of Christian worship at Corbridge. Both objects are now in the British Museum and may have been found as part of the same hoard, most of which is now sadly lost.

The 'Capheaton Treasure', thought likely to have been the silver plate of a temple, was found in 1747 close to the line of the Devil's Causeway Roman road, about 15km north of Corbridge. Much of it was melted down without being recorded, but surviving pieces (now in the British Museum) include three second/third-century silver patera handles. One of these depicts Mercury, Juno, Bacchus with Ariadne, an unidentified river god and a water nymph, another shows Minerva presiding over a sacred spring, while the other shows six of the Twelve Labours of Hercules. How these objects came to be deposited at Capheaton is not known, but some of the

imagery might be thought particularly appropriate if they had belonged to a temple adjacent to a river or spring (though no such site has been recognised in the locality). A comparable silver-gilt patera, dedicated to the Matres and also now in the British Museum, was found in the early nineteenth century as part of a substantial hoard near Backworth (c8km north-east of Newcastle). This hoard also included five gold rings, one of which was similarly dedicated to the Matres. Why all this treasure should have been buried in the mid-second century at this otherwise unremarkable locality is unknown, but some kind of ‘religious’ explanation seems most likely.



The Corbridge Lanx. (ADD CREDIT)



Two patera handles from the Capheaton Treasure (ADD CREDITS)

Some gods are depicted on signet rings from our region, the wearers of which presumably felt some affinity with the god or gods in question. Examples include a red jasper intaglio from South Shields depicting Silvanus or Cocidius, and another from Vindolanda featuring Helioserapis. A gold ring found in the strong room of Aesica (Great Chesters) fort held an intaglio depicting Iao (a version of the Jewish god), with the head of a cockerel, body of a soldier, and snake-like feet, presumably representing some version of heaven, earth and the underworld. From Piercebridge comes a gem depicting a lyre supported by two dolphins, on which lies a sleeping hound; this is Orphic symbolism that suggests belief in an afterlife (Orpheus was an ancient Greek hero and prophet renowned for his poetry and music).

The extent to which apparently everyday Roman objects incorporate religious or mythological imagery can sometimes be surprising. By way of example, a small bronze statuette of a plough team from Piercebridge may at first appear to be nothing more than an ornament representing an everyday scene. But the plough is being drawn by a cow and an ox; a very impractical combination. However, according to legend, when the boundary of Rome was first marked out on the ground, this was done by just such a plough-team, with the combination of cow and ox intended to represent fertility and good luck. Other newly founded settlements were traditionally marked out in similar fashion. Thus, the Piercebridge plough-team is almost certainly of ritual significance, as could be many other apparently prosaic objects from our region.



Bronze plough-team from Piercebridge (© Trustees of the British Museum).

3.5. Cemeteries and tombstones

Cemeteries would have existed outside all Roman settlements; the locations of many are known from archaeological surveys and chance finds over the years, but few have yet been excavated. In general, where excavations have taken place, the results have little to tell us about the nature of religious belief. Inscribed tombstones sometimes tell us much about the lives of the deceased, but nothing about where they are thought to have gone. Evidence from classical sources demonstrates that Roman attitudes to death and an afterlife were varied, ranging from what we might define today as devout atheism through to a firm belief in the immortality of the soul linked to the worship of various deities. The phrase ‘*Diis Manibus*’ (often abbreviated to ‘DM’), commonly found on Roman gravestones, can be translated as ‘to the spirit of the departed’, clearly suggesting a belief in some kind of afterlife. Festivals such as the Parentalia (in February) and the Rosalia (May) were held to honour the departed, and could include family gatherings at graves.

Although burial grounds could be located close to temples (as at Chapel Hill, Housesteads), it is important to stress, in complete contrast to Christian churches and churchyards, that burials did not take place actually at temples, but at cemeteries located well outside settlements. This made practical sense on health grounds, but also meant that worship of the gods and commemoration of the dead took place in different places. The Roman gods were separate from the mortal ancestors; there is no suggestions of bodies, even of important individuals (other than deified emperors), being interred within temples as would happen later with, to give the most extreme example, St Cuthbert at Lindisfarne and Durham. The Christian practice of interring saints, martyrs and other important individuals within churches, and ordinary folk in surrounding churchyards, would have seemed most odd to an inhabitant of Roman Corbridge. That said, the dead were certainly not forgotten.

At Corbridge, two Roman cemetery areas are known, north and west of the town. To the north, numerous cremation burials have been recorded by geophysical survey along the line of Dere Street, but these have yet to be investigated. To the west, a huge late second-century ‘tower tomb’, the Shorden Brae mausoleum, must have been an impressive sight to travellers on the Stanegate; much of its masonry was floated up the Tyne to Hexham for use in the crypt of Wilfrid’s sixth-century abbey at Hexham where it can still be seen today. There is no record of who was buried here, but it must have been someone very important. Other impressive tombs presumably stood nearby; the famous Corbridge lion, later remodelled for use as a fountain, probably came from one. The superbly carved lion has just killed a stag or goat which he is about to devour, dramatically illustrating the nature of death. Several tombstones are known from Corbridge, ranging from the powerful memorial to Flavinus (now in Hexham Abbey), standard-bearer of the ala Petriana cavalry unit, who died aged 25 and is depicted on his horse leaping over a defeated ‘native, to that of little Vellibia Ertola playing with a ball - she ‘led the happiest of lives for four years and sixty days’ and serves to remind us that people in Roman Corbridge endured their share of personal tragedies, presumably leading them to appeal to one or more of the many gods available to them.

30km north of the Wall, at Bremenium (High Rochester) part of an extensive cemetery of at least fifty visible barrows has been excavated at Petty Knowes, close to

the line of Dere Street; this was largely of third-century date, consisting mostly of cremations with little in the way of grave goods. Nearby, three stone-built officers' tombs stood adjacent to Dere Street, one of which remains in situ; it is circular and incorporates small carvings of a pine-cone and the horned head of a deer. Carved pine-cones are associated with at least three burials from sites along Hadrian's Wall; they are thought to represent belief in an afterlife, probably linked to the legendary Attis (consort of Cybele), who upon death was transformed into a pine tree.

Several tombstones with complete or fragmentary inscriptions are known from Risingham, roughly midway between Corbridge and High Rochester. Tragically, these include some of children, including those inscribed as follows:

- *Sacred to the spirits of the departed: Aurelia Quartilla lived 13 years, 4 months, 22 days; Aurelius Quartinus set this up to his own daughter.*
- *To the spirits of the departed: Aemilianus, aged 10.*
- *To the spirits of the departed: Satrius Honoratus lived 5 years, 8 months.*
- *To the spirits of the departed: Blescius Diovicus (set this up) to his own daughter; she lived one year and 21 days.*

Also on Dere Street, but this time some 30km south of the Wall, a cemetery at Lanchester has been partly excavated and found to consist of a mix of inhumations and cremations, apparently mostly civilian rather than military, dating from the mid-second century to the late third. A similar mixture of inhumations and cremations has been found at South Shields.

There is huge potential to learn more about lots of things through the investigation of Roman cemeteries throughout our region, but such work is complex and expensive and is probably unlikely to occur any time soon. Whether such work will tell us much about the nature of religious belief is perhaps doubtful.



Tombstone of Regina from South Shields

3.6. Housesteads

Finally, the following brief summary of Housesteads will serve as an example of the complexity of religious activity that went on at Roman sites. Many other places could have been chosen to illustrate the point equally well. (Producing similar, or perhaps more detailed and illustrated, summaries of other key Roman sites throughout the North East is a task that might appeal to some project volunteers; if so then let us know and we will do what we can to assist you.)

About 200 sculpted or inscribed stones are recorded from Housesteads, including numerous references to a range of gods. Altars include some to the official gods, including Jupiter and Hercules, while others are to less well known deities including Genius or 'the spirit of the place'. One interesting example is dedicated to Silvanus Cocidius, a combination of the Roman Silvanus and the Celtic Cocidius. An unusually high proportion of statues at Housesteads are of Mars or Victory, suggesting these two gods may have been regarded with special affection here, although they were obviously of importance at all military establishments. An area of the vicus south of the fort known as Chapel Hill has given up several altars and tombstones, and three temples have been found here. The temples include one of Jupiter, and one of Mars Thinucus, a Germanic war god, built in the early third century by the Frisian regiment (originally from what is now Holland) which at that time formed part of the fort garrison. This was built adjacent to a spring or well which may have been the original focus of spiritual activity here, possibly in pre-Roman times. A little to the west of this was a Mithraeum from which was recovered a famous sculpture showing Mithras emerging from the 'cosmic egg'. While Chapel Hill may have been the main focus of religious activity at Housesteads, and further temples may well await discovery here, evidence of religious practice was also uncovered elsewhere in the vicus, notably a small early third-century domestic shrine incorporating a relief of the Genii Cucullati (three hooded deities) within the yard of a house about 50m south of the fort's south gate. Within the fort, an apsidal structure has been interpreted as a possible Christian church, but neither its function nor its date are known for sure.



Relief of the mysterious Cucullati, Housesteads.

4. In conclusion

This overview has demonstrated something of the complexity of Roman religion within our region. From our modern viewpoint, it is easy to dismiss the Roman gods as scarcely believable fictional characters from fanciful ancient stories. But we must remember when discussing them that were no less real or important to Roman people than the Christian god is to countless millions of people today. No doubt individuals believed in different gods to differing degrees, just as people within individual families today can be devoutly religious or confirmed atheists, or somewhere between the two. Some no doubt changed their mind during their lifetime, perhaps several times. Many probably opted for agnosticism, while others were simply unable to make up their mind, perhaps opting for the safe option of ‘going with the flow’, whatever that may have been. Clearly, despite all the changes introduced under the influence of Rome, there was some continuity in belief from earlier times, and it is the fusion between Rome and the ‘Celtic’ world that makes the study of ‘Roman’ religion in our area so interesting.

While Hadrian, who ruled the empire unchallenged from 118 to 138AD, can hardly be regarded as an average Roman, he is, for obvious reasons, a particularly important figure in the history of our region. So we will end this overview with a brief summary of what we know of his complex religious beliefs, to illustrate some options open to people in the early first century. On an official monument, close to the east end of the Wall, quite possibly at Tynemouth, it was recorded that Hadrian *'son of all his divine ancestors, decided it was necessary on the advice of the gods to fix the boundaries of the Empire....'*. This statement about the origin of the Wall makes it clear that Hadrian respected his predecessors, now deified, and had somehow been advised by ‘the gods’ (we are not told which ones) to build the Wall. We must assume that the gods in question were of the classical Roman variety, but Hadrian was certainly very interested in many others outside the traditional Roman pantheon. He was particularly fond of all things Greek, and spent much time Athens, taking part in the Eleusinian Mysteries, an ancient annual ceremony linked to mysteries of life, death and rebirth. In Athens he ordered the completion of the vast temple to Zeus Olympios, amongst other impressive building projects. Elsewhere in Greece he facilitated the restoration on the already ancient statue of Zeus at the sanctuary of Olympia, and visited the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. In Rome, he built a splendid temple to his recently deified predecessor and his wife, Trajan and Plotina, and a huge temple to Venus and Roma. He also rebuilt the exquisite Pantheon, and helped to design his own great mausoleum in readiness for the time when he himself would join the ranks of the deified emperors. He showed great interest in ancient Egyptian religion, visiting many ancient sites. It was in Egypt that his young lover, Antinous, drowned in mysterious circumstances in the Nile; his response was to deify Antinous (whose cult became popular throughout many parts of the empire) and found a new city in his honour. In Judaea, he replaced the ancient Jewish temple with a new one to Jupiter Capitolinus; while he was clearly tolerant of most religions throughout the empire, he seems to have found Judaism incompatible with Roman religion and this was a key factor in the Judaean war of 132-5, by far the largest-scale military conflict of his entire reign. His attitude towards Christianity is not recorded. At the end of his life, he wrote a brief poem, addressed to his own restless soul, which translates roughly into English as:

*Little spirit, gentle and wandering,
Body's companion and guest,
To what places now will you take flight,
Pale, stark and bare,
Unable, as you used, to play?*

Clearly, Hadrian's religious views were complex. No doubt his contemporaries, including thousands who lived and served in north-east England, had similarly cosmopolitan views, as can occasionally be glimpsed from the archaeological record. Throughout the dozen or so generations of the Roman occupation, our region probably saw greater variety in religious belief than at any other time in its history. But the occupation was over by the early fifth century, by which time the great Roman gods were no more. In our region, the scene was now set for a three-way fight between the descendants of the old native Celtic gods, Christianity, and a new set of pagan gods introduced from Scandinavia. It would be some time before a permanent victor would emerge.

The drawings in this article (unless otherwise stated) are reproduced from John Collingwood Bruce's *Lapidarium Septentrionale* (1875).

Information about individual Roman inscriptions of the north-east can be found on the excellent *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* website:
<https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/>

Plenty of information about Roman religion, in Britain and elsewhere, is readily accessible on many websites. For those of us who still prefer reading books to staring at a computer screen, the following two volumes (information from both of which is incorporated within the above account) may be of interest:

Martin Henig. 1984. *Religion in Roman Britain*. London: Batsford.

Guy de la Bedoyere. 2002. *Gods with Thunderbolts. Religion in Roman Britain*. Stroud: Tempus.