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**Roman Altars in Gloucestershire**

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ROMAN ALTARS IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

by E. M. Clifford

The discovery of Roman altars in barrows at Bisley and Tidenham last century was barely noticed, although they would appear to be the only examples of such concealment known. The groups found at King's Stanley, Cirencester, Gloucester, and Bisley may, however, be variants of the same practice.

The number of altars with sculptured figures is remarkable, and makes it desirable to record those which are known, as well as some which have no inscription or figure. In most cases the altars are now illustrated for the first time.

Mr John E. Dorington,¹ in his presidential address² to the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society on 21 July 1880, in discussing tumuli, said:—' These tumuli, again, are of different ages, or, at least, have been used again in different ages. The most remarkable proof of such an occurrence being furnished by a round tumulus on Bisley Common, which, having been explored, without result, some years previously, was, in 1866, carted entirely away for the purpose of forming an embankment for a new road. Close beside the trench of the original explorers was found a stratum of unctuous animal matter, mixed with animal bones and Roman pottery, and four Roman altars, two stone weights, and a copper coin of Faustina, which may be seen tomorrow in the temporary museum. I think this is one of the most curious 'finds' which a round barrow has yet yielded'.

¹ Created a baronet in 1886.
² Transactions v, 6–16.
The first exploration of this barrow is likely to have been made in its centre, and as Mr Dorington states that originally nothing was found, the altars being discovered at the later date (1866) close to the trench of the former investigators, this suggests that they had not been centrally placed. They may have been a secondary deposit, and the primary interment may still be in situ below ground level. The coin of Faustina, which was found with the altars, gives a second-century date for their deposit. The two stone weights mentioned are really two small uninscribed altars, making the number found in the barrow six. They are now in the chapel at Lydiatt Park, near Stroud. With them are two more, the provenance of neither being definitely known, but they are believed to have been found on the estate. Three of those found in the barrow (FIGS. 21, 23 and 24) are dedicated to Mars, one probably to Minerva (FIG. 22), while the two small ones (FIGS. 25 and 26), as already stated, have no inscriptions. One, of unknown provenance (FIG. 27), has a serpent (with thick head, and perhaps ram’s horns) coiled round it. It may be the first sculpture of this type found in Britain, and was dedicated to a Celtic god and not to Aesculapius. The other (FIG. 28) represents a man and woman, and is, perhaps, of late 4th or 5th century date.

In 1825, Dr George Ormerod of Sedbury Park, Chepstow, excavated a barrow on Tidenham Chase, Gloucestershire, in which was a Roman altar (FIG. 8), a coin of Faustina the younger being found nearby. These apparently were the only objects which this excavation produced. The coin gives us a date towards the middle of the second

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4 Strigulensia, 1861, p. 4, note 2.
century (A.D. 141–175). The altar is made of a greyish-buff quartz grit and has no inscription.

It is of interest also to note that in 1899 a group of nine pieces of pagan sculpture, all lying close together, was found in what is described as 'made earth' at Ashcroft, Cirencester. Details are given by Professor Haverfield, and Professor M. Rostovtzeff and by Sir George Macdonald. The association of sculptures which were dedicated to the Suleviae, and perhaps other mother-goddesses, suggests the concealment of these fragments on religious grounds, though there is no actual evidence that this deposit was occasioned by the general acceptance of Christianity in the 4th century.

In 1781 six altars were discovered together at King's Stanley. Four of them were illustrated by Samuel Lysons, in his Reliquiae Britannico-Romanæ (1813–17), vol. II (1817), plate xxviii, figs. 1–4, and they and others were later acquired by the British Museum (Figs. 1–5). The whereabouts of the other altar is unknown.

In March 1876 a group of five altars was discovered at Kingsholm, Gloucester. They fell into the hands of Sir A. H. Church and were given by him to the Corinium Museum, Cirencester, of which he was Curator. Of these five altars it is at present possible to identify three among the large collection at the new Corinium Museum.

The Bisley altars were found in March 1861 when the southwest corner of the church-tower, at the junction with the west wall of the south aisle, was excavated. The perfect condition of the altar to Mars was noted, as well as the marks of fire in the square focus in which incense

5 Identified by Dr K. P. Oakley.
6 Archaeologia, 1920, lxix, 180–2; Bericht Rom.-Germ. Kom. 1930, xii, 60.
7 The only reference to them so far traced is in the sixth edition (1883) of the guide to the Corinium Museum, p. 31.
8 H. Lowder, Arch. Jour. 1863, xx, 186–7
or other offerings were burnt. The altar to Silvanus had had its face wholly cut away, in all probability at the time that it was built into the fabric of the church.

A capital, 8½ inches high, was also found at this time, and is almost certainly an altar (uninscribed), making the number discovered in 1861 three. All these cases may be further examples of multiple concealment.

LIST OF ROMAN ALTARS

British Museum

1 Altar to Fortune, with cornucopia, found at King's Stanley in 1781. Presented by Rev. P. Hawker in 1812. Height, 30 inches. (FIG. 1).

Lysons, Reliquiae Britannico-Romanæ (1813-17), II, plate 28, 1.

2 Altar to Mars, with spear, sword and shield, found at King’s Stanley. Presented by Rev. P. Hawker. Height, 24 inches. (FIG. 2).


3 Altar to Mars, found at King’s Stanley. Height 23½ inches. (FIG. 3).

Lysons, R.B.-R, II, pl. 28, 3.

4 Altar to Mars, found at King’s Stanley. From the Towneley Collection, 1805. Height 19 inches. (FIG. 4).


5 Altar to Mars, found at King’s Stanley. From the Towneley Collection, 1805. Height 23½ inches. (FIG. 5).

6 Altar to Mars, found at Bisley in 1861. Height 26 inches. (FIG. 6).


* Four of the altars found at King’s Stanley were illustrated by Lysons in his Etchings of Views and Antiquities in the County of Gloucester, part vi (November 1792), plate 33.—Editor.
BRITISH MUSEUM

7 Altar to Silvanus, found at Bisley 1861. Height 24 inches. (FIG. 7).
Arch. Jour. xx, 186; M. A. Rudd, Historical Records of Bisley (1937), p. 4.

8 Altar (no inscription) found in a barrow on Tidenham Chase. Height 18½ inches. (FIG. 8).

Dr George Ormerod communicated a notice (2 August 1851) of the discovery of Roman remains near Chepstow to the Archaeological Institute at its meeting at Bristol, and then presented the altar to the Society (Arch. Jour. viii, 332). The Museum of the Institute was at its rooms in Suffolk Street, Pall Mall, and is referred to in the early volumes of the Archaeological Journal. In the number for March 1852 (vol. ix, 7–15) is an account of the Collection of British Antiquities in the British Museum, written by Angustus W. Franks, in the course of which (p. 13) he says that 'the Roman Altar found by Dr Ormerod’ had with the latter’s consent been transferred by the Central Committee of the Institute to the British Museum.

EDITOR.

CHEDWORTH

1 Uninscribed altar. Height 23½ inches.

2 Altar, probably representing Mars Olludius, the tree-god, with spear and shield, consisting of an outline with projecting ears and sunk dots for the eyes; there are five similar dots dispersed over the body. (FIG. 9).

Dr Heichelheim states that this quinquex represents Greek magic, and that it is interesting to find an instance so far West. Height 6½ inches.

Cf. K. Preisendanz, Graecae Magicae (1931), ii, 53 (magic protection), p. 140 (amulet), and p. 171 (exorcisms).

In the article on Olludius, written for the Pauly-Wissowa Realencyklopaedie, xiv, Dr F. M. Heichelheim says (translation from the German):—

‘The divine name (on an altar) is now interpreted as
"mighty tree" or "mighty lord of the gods" (cf. Weisgerber, "Die Sprache der Festlandkelten", Rom. Germ. Komission (1931), xx, p. 205. According to the evidence Olludius is a local deity of Antibes in the Narbonnensis, whose worship might have spread to Gloucestershire through Celtic migration or, perhaps, through trade. A hitherto neglected relief, from a Roman villa at Chedworth, may well be mentioned in this connection, as it was found in Gloucestershire like the altar to Mars Olludius, (C.I.L. vii, 73), and was dedicated to Mars. Represented on the front of this interesting little (perhaps portable) altar is a rude standing figure in simple outline. The adjacent sides show the god's spear and shield in peculiar and surprising technique, (see Fig. 10) which, in my opinion, and perhaps, not accidentally, assimilated these arms to the may-pole, which must have been known to the Celts of Britain in pre-Roman and pre-Teutonic times; the interpretation of Olludius as 'tree-god' would be in keeping'.

3 Altar, representing Sucellus, the Celtic god of the underworld, with similar figure at full length with indications of outstretched arms. The eyes and body cavities are of the same character as those in Fig. 9 and are similarly distributed. Height, 7\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches. (Fig. 11). Dr Heichelheim writes:—

'A second small domestic altar, similar but better executed, comes from the same site, and represents on the front Sucellus with hammer in the left hand and staff in his right, standing (hitherto wrongly described as the War-god with spear and axe; cf. Baddeley, Chedworth Roman Villa (1935), p. 30, no. 145, 1 and 2, with plates); further details in Haverfield, Roman Occupation of Britain (1924), 249; Holder, Altceutischer Sprachschatz, ii, 848; F. M. Heichelheim "On Some Unpublished Statuettes in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge", Procs. Cambridge Antiq. Soc. 1937, xxxvii, 61'.
CHEDWORTH

Panel, probably representing Hercules, found at Lemington, tapering upwards, on which is a draped male figure in relief holding upright in his left hand perhaps a lion's skin, ' debased ', and in his right hand a club. Height 10½ inches. (FIG. 12).

Cf. Espérandieu, op. cit. v, 79. The inscription along the base has been read as D E A R O M A, but without certainty. 10

A very small altar, with focus, with mouldings all round (two at the top and one at the bottom). There are two crosses of St. Andrew on the sides. Found in 1938 by Mr A. N. Irving outside the present entrance gate to the Roman Villa, just below ground level. Height 3½ inches.

CIRENCESTER MUSEUM

Fragment of uninscribed altar.

Altar to the SULEVIAE. (FIG. 13).

Described by Professor Haverfield in Archaeologia, lxxix, 180, (illus.); Ephemeris Epigraphica (1913), ix, 518, no. 998; Procs. Soc. of Antiquaries, 1900, Ser. 2, xviii, 178–84, illus.; Reliquary and Illus. Archaeologist, N.S. v, 197–9, illus.

Upper half of an inscribed altar to the Suleviae. Found outside the south gate at the foundry, Cricklade street, Cirencester, in 1902. Height 11 inches. (FIG. 14).

Ephem. Epigr. ix, 519, no. 999.

Fragment of inscribed altar, found at Kingsholm, Gloucester, 1876. DEO/GENIOCHOCVNC/ ORNENDVS (or ORIVENDVS) *A*1. Height 11½ inches. (FIG. 15).

Watson, Arch. Jour. xxxiv, 148, and xxxvi, 166; Ephem. Epigr. iv, 196, no. 665; vii, 837.

Uninscribed altar. Height 11 inches.

Uninscribed altar, found at Kingsholm, Gloucester. Height 13½ inches.

10 B.G.A.S. liii, 264.
CIRENCESTER MUSEUM

7 Fragment of inscribed altar. Height 10½ inches.
SILVANO/ SABIDIVS/ MAXIMVS. (FIG. 16).

8 Uninscribed fragment, with focus. Height 6 inches.

9 Inscribed altar, broken, with standing figure, found in Sheep street, Cirencester, May 1880. Height 4 ft. 6 inches. (FIG. 17).
G.S. HV. I* SLOC.*
GENIO S(A) N(CTO ?)
(dedicated to the local genius)
Arch. Jour. xxxvii, 322; xxxviii, 289.

10 Small plain altar, with focus. Height 7 inches.

11 Fragment of inscribed altar to MARS, found at Kingsholm, Gloucester. Height 6 inches. (FIG. 18).

12 Fragment of altar. Height 7 inches.

13 Fragment of altar. Height 6½ inches.

14 Probable fragment of inscribed altar. Height 11 inches. (FIG. 19).
Ephem. Epigr. vii, 838.

15 Fragment of altar, found at Ashcroft, Cirencester. 1899. Height 9 inches.

CUSTOM SCRUBBS

Inscribed altar to MARS OLLUDIUS. Known to have been found in 1802, now apparently lost.
Fosbrooke’s Gloucestershire, 1807, 1, 347; C.I.L. vii, 31, no. 73.

GLOUCESTER MUSEUM

Altar to MARS, with oblong shield. Provenance unknown. Height 29 inches. (FIG. 20).
Fig. 1
Altar to Fortune, King's Stanley, 1781

Fig. 2
Altar to Mars, King's Stanley, 1781

(Figs. 1-8 by permission, British Museum)
Fig. 3
Altar to Mars, King's Stanley, 1781

Fig. 4
Altar to Mars, King's Stanley, 1781
(Towneley Collection)
Fig. 5
Altar to Mars,
King's Stanley
(Towneley Collection)

Fig. 6
Altar to Mars,
Bisley, 1861
Fig. 7
Altar to Silvanus. Hisley, 1864

Fig. 8
Altar from a tumulus. Tidenham Chase
Fig. 9. Altar, Æ Mars Olludius
(Chedworth Museum)

Fig. 10. Details on sides and back of above Altar
Fig. 11. Altar to Sucellus, Celtic God
(Chedworth Museum)
Fig. 12. Panel, ? representing Hercules, Lemington
(Chedworth Museum)
Fig. 13. Altar to the Suleviae  
(Cirencester Museum)

Fig. 14. Part of Altar to the Suleviae  
(Cirencester Museum)
Fig. 15. Fragment of Altar, found at Kingsholm, Gloucester
(Cirencester Museum)

Fig. 16. Fragment of Altar to Silvanus (Cirencester Museum)
Fig. 17. Altar found in Sheep Street, Cirencester (Cirencester Museum)

Fig. 18. Fragment of Altar, Kingsholm, Gloucester (Cirencester Museum)
Fig. 19.  ? Fragment of inscribed Altar (Cirencester Museum)

Fig. 20.  Altar to Mars (Gloucester Museum)
Fig. 21. Altar to Mars (Lypiatt Park)

Fig. 22. Altar to Minerva (Lypiatt Park)
Fig. 23. Altar to Mars (Lypiatt Park)

Fig. 24. Altar to Mars (Lypiatt Park)
Fig. 25. Uninscribed Altar (Lypiatt Park)

Fig. 26. Altar with Crosses of St. Andrew (Lypiatt Park)
Fig. 27.  Altar to Celtic God  
(Lypiatt Park)

Fig. 28.  Man and Woman  
(Lypiatt Park)
Fig 29. Altar to Sylvanus
(Pavey-Smith Collection  Nailsworth)

Fig. 30 Altar to Mars
(Stroud Museum)
LYPIATT PARK, STRoud
Figs. 21-28 are illustrated for the first time.

1 Mars. Height 23 inches. (FIG. 21).
2 Minerva. Height 15 inches. (FIG. 22).
3 Mars. Height 18 inches. (FIG. 23).
4 Mars. Height 14 inches. (FIG. 24).
5 Uninscribed altar. Height 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. (FIG. 25).
6 Altar with two crosses of St. Andrew on the sides. Height 6\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. (FIG. 26).
7 Altar to a Celtic god. Height 11 inches. (FIG. 27).
8 Man and Woman. Height 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. (FIG. 28).

Pavey-Smith Collection
Altar to Silvanus, with cowl or hood head-dress; fracture under right hand and piece missing, possibly dog below; spear or long staff in left hand. Found at Cherington, near Stroud.\(^\text{11}\) Height 24 inches. (FIG. 29).

This and the altar in Stroud Museum were exhibited at the meeting of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society at Stroud in 1880.

SIDDINGTON

In Trans. B.G.A.S. XLV, 291-2 there is a note by Dr St. Clair Baddeley on an altar at Siddington. Its present location is not known, and the reading given is only tentative.

STROUD MUSEUM

Altar to Mars, found about 1850 in Hazelwood, near Nailsworth. Height 20 inches (FIG. 30),

The altars at Bisley and Tidenham Chase were undoubtedly buried in barrows and would appear to have no comparable parallel in England, although the Cirencester discovery of 1899 may be another example.

\(^{11}\) B.G.A.S. v, 59 and 61.
These may be different examples of deliberate secretion which took place in all probability in the second century. The Bisley altars may also have been hidden in the same manner on the site of the present church, and discovered at the time of its building or rebuilding, when they were incorporated in the fabric. This hypothesis is more likely than their transport from elsewhere. Churches in early times were probably built on sites which were used for sacred purposes, and some of these sites were certainly utilized in Roman times. At Notgrove, in 1882, Mr J. E. K. Cutts12 said that when excavating for the heating apparatus where the font stood, a large cinerary urn with two handles was discovered—'other fragments were also picked up in the church, and it is worthy of note that several churches in the neighbourhood seem originally to have been Roman burial places'.

The Rev. David Royce, who was vicar of Lower Swell, stated in 188213 that the churchyard abounds with Roman pottery, and that much ash and a third brass of Constantine were found when levelling the ground for the new nave, and Bisley may be another site which had been occupied in Roman times.14

The single altars (e.g. Pavey-Smith collection, Stroud Museum) which have been discovered, and of which some record remains, had also been concealed, for they were 'dug up'.

The earlier group of altars with little figures under canopies are specially well represented in Gloucestershire. They are perhaps the product of a local group of native artists of the 2nd century who were working under Roman rule and therefore do not occur outside the Cotswold district.15

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12 B.G.A.S. vii, 32.  
13 B.G.A.S. vii, 76.  
14 The Woodchester Roman Villa lies under the church-yard.  
15 Hoards belonging to shrines have been found in several places, the Willingham Fen (Cambridgeshire), being one of the most notable. Details of this and others are given in Jour. Roman Studies, 1923, xiii, 93 ff.
With the exception of the Tidenham altar all are made of oolitic limestone—the rock of the Cotswold region.

The later group, represented by Figs. 9–11 from Chedworth, and Fig. 28 from Lypiatt are remarkable for their crudity.

Dr Heichelheim says that 'religious affinities between places in Britain, and particular parts of Continental Gaul, are not uncommon—important indications of unrecorded or little known emigrant movements of larger or smaller groups, mostly of Belgic origin'. He cites the cult representation of the Genii Cucullati in Cirencester and near Hadrian's Wall, whose origin might have been in the Danube region, but whose main centre on the Continent was in the Rhenanian provinces. Among other Belgic Cults he notices that of Olludius at Chedworth, a typically southern Gallic god.

Professor Haverfield in Archaeologia, LXIX, 187, note 4 and p. 190 ff, attributes similarly the occurrence in Cirencester of the Suleviae, and to 'wanderers from Gaul'.

A figure with projecting ears and staring beady eyes (probably a husbandman, as he is holding a rake) may give support to Mr T. D. Kendrick's view, expressed in his Anglo-Saxon Art, that mosaics were a basis for design. This mosaic was found towards the end of last century at Spoonley Wood Roman Villa, near Winchcomb, Glos.

Plain uninscribed altars were a more cheaply produced type, as the dedication was painted on, this being less expensive than carving.

Acknowledgements for help are made to Dr F. M. Heichelheim, Mr Reginald Smith, Miss Adlard, the late Mrs Talbot, Mrs Westerling, the National Trust, the Keeper of the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, British Museum, Mr G. H. Pavey-Smith and the Curators of the Gloucester, Cirencester and Stroud Museums.

17 Winchcombe and Sudeley Record, 1893, iv, nos. 39–48, plate 5.