



<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana/>

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© 2017 Kent Archaeological Society

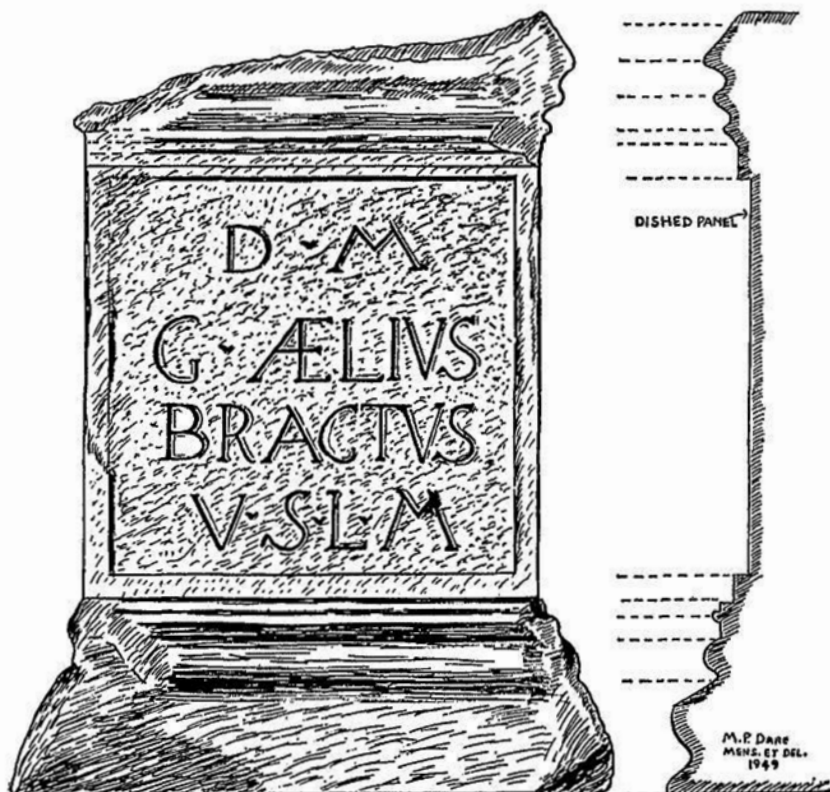
AN INSCRIBED ROMAN ALTAR DISCOVERED AT NAPCHESTER
NEAR DOVER

By M. P. DARE, M.A.

THE small Roman altar here illustrated was discovered by me on August 5th, 1949, at the small hamlet known as Napchester, on the Roman road which connected Rutupiae (Richborough) with Dubris (Dover). I have presented it to Dover Museum, whose war-damaged collection is being reconstructed by the Honorary Curator, Mr. F. L. Warner, in premises at Ladywell, Dover.

FRONT ELEVATION

SECTION



Height: 16.5 cm. Width: 12.6 cm. Scale: $\frac{1}{4}$

Roman Altar discovered at Napchester, Kent, on Roman Road from Rutupiae to Dubris

ROMAN ALTAR DISCOVERED AT NAPCHESTER NEAR DOVER

The altar is a typical portable domestic altar, of white sandstone not indigenous to the district. Its extreme height is 16·5 cm., and its width at base 12·6 cm. Though the top is damaged, there is sufficient indication that there was a plain flat top above the mouldings, without the pediment and flanking scrolls often found. The base is damaged at the front dexter corner, but the dished and inscribed front panel is intact, and the mouldings round the top and base are quite good; there is no ornamentation on the sides or back panel. The inscription reads, the AE and TV being ligatured :

D · M
G · AELIVS
BRACTVS
V · S · L · M

The inscription presents several points of interest, and I am indebted to Mr. R. P. Wright of Durham University for permission to incorporate his authoritative views upon it.

1. It is important, because it gives us a *cognomen*, BRACTUS, not hitherto recorded in Britain, which may well be Keltic. The nearest name at all similar is BRACKILLO, a potter's stamp on an imported bowl from Gaul, recorded from York by Hübner (*C.I.L.*, vii, 1336, 175).

2. The dedicator has the three names of a Roman citizen. His *praenomen* is Gaius; the *nomen* Ælius shows that either he or an ancestor received the citizenship under Hadrian (A.D. 117-138). It does not seem possible to date the inscription very closely either from the names or the style of lettering; it probably falls between A.D. 150 and 250.

3. The cutting of the inscription was probably done by a local mason on a mass-produced "blank", as in the case of so many of these small votive altars. The lettering is not so good as the workmanship of the altar, and is somewhat off-centre, and the curves are not very skilful; but the mason did use serifs, and he set out his spacing carefully.

4. The first line, the contraction D.M., presents some difficulty. It occurs universally on tombstones, and there means *D(is) M(anibus)* (=to the gods, the Shades), but Mr. Wright does not think it can bear that interpretation on our altar, because on altars it is usual to state in the first line the deity to whom the dedication is made, and to use more than the initial letters, so that the identity is not in doubt. In Mr. Wright's view, the choice here seems to lie between Mars, Mercury, Mithras, and Minerva, with a balance in favour of Mars, and he thinks it best provisionally to interpret the Napchester example as *D(eo)*

M(arti); in support, he points out that the secondary title *Nodons* on a bronze plaque from Lydney, Glos., inscribed *D. M. Nodonti*, indicates expansion into *D(eo) M(arti)*, as *Nodons* is identified with *Mars*. Again, there is a statuette of *Mercury* from Wallsend (*E.E.*, ix, 160) whose inscription begins with the mere letters *D.M.*, but the sculpture proves that the god is *Mercury*.

5. To these suggestions, I would venture to add one other: that the *Napchester D.M.* might possibly stand for *D(is) M(atribus)*, for the cult of the Keltic mother-goddesses (called in Britain *Deæ Matres*), widespread among the tribes of Western Europe, was well distributed over Roman Britain; it is found in places and districts as far apart as *Skinburness*, *Cumberland* (whence comes a small sandstone altar in the *British Museum* dedicated to the trio), *Derbyshire*, *Winchester*, *Bath*, and *London* (*B.M. Guide to Roman Britain*, p. 28, 1922 edition).

Granted that the *Napchester* inscription is unorthodox, there remains an intriguing speculation: that some eccentric Keltic-Roman citizen may have "willingly fulfilled his vow" (*V.S.L.M.*) by inscribing his little altar *Dis Manibus*, to the deities of his mysterious Keltic underworld, either in gratitude for his escape with a whole skin from a military campaign, or in propitiation as an insurance against the uncertainty of his ultimate destiny!

We may thus read our inscription: *Deo Marti* (or *Dis Matribus* or *Dis Manibus*) *Gaius Ælius Bractus Votum Solvit Libens Merito*.

THE NAPCHESTER SITE

Napchester, the site of the discovery, is a small hamlet of a few farms, lying just west of the Roman road (which here mounts the hill as a steeply-banked sunken track), opposite *West Langdon Church* and $\frac{3}{4}$ m. north of *Whitfield*, on *O.S. 6" Sheet, LVIII, SW*. It is $3\frac{1}{2}$ m. north of the Roman pharos at *Dover Castle*. It is rather remarkable that in the whole 12 miles of the road's course from *Rutupiæ* to *Dubris*, *Napchester* is the only place-name giving any hint of a Roman site, and this fact—though, as appears below, it may be a case of "popular false etymology"—led to the discovery of the altar, as the elements of the name (*O.E. hnæpp*, a bowl, and *ceaster* from *castra*) conveyed a hint that a *Jutish* settlement occupied a pre-existing Roman site, since in *O.E.* place-names we do not get the *-chester* element attached to a virgin site. Consequently, I searched the whole area in the V formed by the Roman road and the lane connecting *Napchester* with *Whitfield*, and at the end of a sweltering day, was rewarded by seeing the moulded edge of the altar projecting from the heterogeneous banking of earth and stones at the side of the clover-field nearest the Roman road. In the banking were several stones which (without closer examination) appeared to have dressed edges.

Since an altar is not, as a stray coin would be, an "accidental" object, its presence arguing reasonably the existence of at least a Roman farm, it seems that the site might well repay trial excavation. By the courtesy of Mr. L. R. A. Grove, Curator to the Society, through the good offices of Mr. R. F. Jessup, I have been able to inspect the relevant air-photographs from the Kent Archæological Society's collection. These were taken (in April, 1946) purely for survey purposes, and the altitude of flight, 16,000 feet, precludes their showing much in the way of sub-humus indications of a settlement. There are, however, two mysterious markings—a grid-shaped outline and a solid dark rectangle—unaccounted for by anything above-ground. I have drawn Mr. Grove's attention to these, and at the time of writing, he is taking steps to approach the Ordnance Survey on the question of a detailed archæological air-photograph of the site.

Mr. Grove draws my attention to a difficulty regarding the etymology, in that Wallenberg (*Place Names of Kent*, Uppsala, 1934) adduces twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth century examples to prove that Napchester was originally *Napesherst* (the second element being, of course, O.E. *-hyrst*, a wood), whence Wallenberg concludes that "this is a further instance of a false *-chester* name," and that "the second element is no doubt due to popular etymology and a craving for gentility."

If this be so, it is at least remarkable that a false deduction on my part should have led to a practical discovery such as one would expect if the premise were tenable, and that it should further be strengthened by the hint given by the air-photograph. It would be interesting to know when *Napesherst* first became *Napchester*, and if the change is traceable to one of our peripatetic sixteenth or seventeenth century antiquaries either seeing some ancient walls then standing, or being shown any Roman objects ploughed up on the site—in the way that Stukeley was notoriously prone to pin the title of Roman Station, and even a definite identification, on to places where a few sherds and coins turned up, and to make wild speculations thereon.

While we must, of course, accept Wallenberg's early forms, I personally cannot subscribe to his interpretation. He probably had no practical acquaintance with this remote little site. Why should popular etymology, unless, indeed, it *is* due to some long-past and unrecorded find of Roman objects here—which seems worth considering—pick on the smallest of all the hamlets on the line of the Roman road, to turn into a *-chester*? Why not Whitchester for Whitfield, or Lanchester for Langdon? I cannot see the serious farmers of remote little Napchester, in the absence of any great country-house, having a "craving for gentility" such as caused a finicky Norman overlord in Essex to change a name like Foulanpettae (Foul Pits) into Beaumont!

THE ROMAN ROAD¹

The adjacent Roman road, marked as a complete entity on the Ordnance Survey map *Roman Britain*, is well-defined throughout, except in its first two miles out of Rutupiæ. It must have started from the west gate of Rutupiæ, which is, indeed, the only gate that fort has, except a small foot-postern on the north side. The road must thence have proceeded westwards for about a mile and a half, owing to the marshes, and it seems reasonable to assume that this portion of it followed the same line as that going west to Durovernum (Canterbury), and, somewhere at this point, branched off south. Though its track in this first small portion is utterly lost, a memory of it (and of its fellow, the Canterbury road) may be preserved in the names *East Street* and *New Street*.

We first pick up our Rutupiæ-Dubris road to-day just south of Marshborough, whence it goes in nearly a straight line due south. For two miles it forms the main road through Eastry, then plunges across Betteshanger Wood, passing west of the remote little church there. It then skirts Telegraph Farm, and runs as a well-defined footpath between hedges its original width apart, till it reaches the lane connecting Mongeham with the main Dover road. Crossing this lane, our track then mounts the Weald, as a metalled road still in use, over the high, open land between West Studdal Farm and East Studdal.

Running to the east of the hamlet of Ashley, it crosses the West Langdon lane at Maydensole Farm, then becomes a grassy track between the isolated West Langdon Church and Napchester, the latter lying only a few hundred yards to its west. Continuing to Pineham, the road there goes across the modern Whitfield-Guston lane, runs to Frith Farm, and is lost between that point and Connaught Park on the north-east side of Dover; at this point, of course, it must have turned south-east to reach the fort or pharos of Dubris.

¹ See also I. D. Margary in *Arch. Cant.*, LXI (1948), p. 129.