

Visions of the Roman North

Art and Identity in Northern Roman Britain

Iain Ferris



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Preface

This study is not concerned with the minutiae of the history of the northern frontiers of Roman Britain, or with military dispositions and the history of individual military installations there, interesting and crucial though these topics are. Rather it is concerned with the role of images and art in the northern region in the Roman period and how art and identity interacted together here, about what will be argued to have been a distinct visual culture in northern Roman Britain. In order to bring out the nature of this distinctiveness I have attempted to explain why it was unique in terms of what kind of art was produced and consumed here, while emphasising issues of ambiguity and complexity. This is to some degree a kind of historical reportage, yet it is a narrative cognisant of the artifice at the heart of all art. But I have also made use of numerous published catalogues of different types of artworks from Roman Britain to produce a quantified or at least semi-quantified profile of cultural production and consumption in the Roman north which, I will argue, helps towards proposing a definition of its artistic identity. Totals and percentages are alien to most art historical studies, and I have generally previously shied away from discussing ancient art in such cold numerical terms, but I hope readers will find the presentation of such figures here useful in placing the art of the Roman north into a broader context and allowing it to be seen in perspective.

Many of the artworks presented as images in this book are rightly very well known, and indeed are canonical pieces in the overall study of Romano-British art. However, I have also tried to introduce images of lesser known artefacts, such as the Binchester jet dog and the Piercebridge head pot, to provide a fuller picture of the visual culture of the region. For the same reason I have also sought out images of objects recovered by excavation or serendipity in this present millennium, such as the Cramond Lioness, the Catterick phallus, the new Gelt Forest *graffiti*, and the Inveresk Sol altar, some not yet fully published, in order to demonstrate the dynamics of archaeological discovery and research in the region.

Unlike in the majority of my previous books I have chosen here not to encumber the text with academic notes, as I am largely presenting here my own thoughts on the uniqueness of the art from northern Roman Britain in the form of an extended essay. As a result, I am hoping that the book will provide a kind of guide for those visiting the museums of the region or those studying its art who often do not want to navigate the full academic history of the study of the objects they are seeing but who want to be sufficiently informed to contextualise the artworks on display there. For the same reason, I have not produced a full bibliography on the art and archaeology of northern Roman Britain but rather a short set of lists of potential further reading directly relevant to the subject in hand. If in the body of the main text I have named a specific academic or researcher who has promoted a particular interpretation of an

artwork or artworks the relevant books or papers by that author will appear in the further reading section.

When I look at the art from northern Roman Britain I do not just see *the* past, but also *my own* past too for various reasons. It is projected into the present, and through this book into the future. This extended essay on art could just as well have been a memoir of sorts. Though I was born and grew up in London, my family roots on both sides lie in northern Britain, my mother's family coming from Whitby in north Yorkshire and my father's from Montrose in east Scotland. For five years in the late 1970s to early 1980s I lived and worked in the north-east of England and on numerous occasions in that period I visited the Roman sites and museums of the region with my then girlfriend Louisa who drove us around each weekend. Though intrigued and fascinated by the art I saw then I did not realise that I had gone beyond my limits of experience and that I would have to return much much later to finally understand what I had seen. In order to research this book in late 2019 and early 2020 I visited many of the same sites and museums again, fortuitously before the imposition of our unprecedented national lockdown. I had never thought that I would somehow come to be a tourist in my own life, but then again it is true to say that one can only really rediscover other people in the past by consciously rediscovering oneself. At times I had the impression I was walking into myself, into some part of my own past.

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Chapter One

A Land Apart

In any study, before description and discussion must come definition and the demarcation of boundaries. For the purposes of this present book northern Roman Britain has been defined as all of that area lying to the north of a line connecting Chester to York and the continuation of that line eastwards across to the North Sea coast which at one time lay within the boundaries of the Roman empire or which the Romans attempted to bring within the empire.

From AD 122 the northern frontier of the province was literally imposed on the landscape here, in the form of Hadrian's Wall, running across the Tyne-Solway isthmus and with the defensive system continuing down the Cumbrian coast. Military campaigns had taken place in Scotland before that date, and victories had been won, including the famous one at *Mons Graupius* in AD 83 or 84, but in the end the occupation of parts of the country had not been sustainable. However, under the emperor Antoninus Pius, who came to the imperial throne in AD 138, the reoccupation of lowland Scotland led to the establishment of a new northern frontier, the Antonine Wall, in AD 142-143. That new frontier only lasted for twenty years or so, with the Roman provincial frontier boundary reverting back to the line of Hadrian's Wall which then retained its boundary function right up to the official ending of the Roman administration of Britain in AD 410. However, major campaigns were launched in Scotland by the Romans again in AD 209 and 210 under the direct command of the emperor Septimius Severus and his two sons Caracalla and Geta. Fort building and fort reoccupation took place in Scotland at this time. The death of Severus at York in AD 211 more or less brought this partial Roman reoccupation of parts of Scotland to an end after Caracalla's final foray north in AD 211-212. Apart from some minor forays into Scotland against the Picts in later years, contact between Roman Britain and the peoples of Scotland took place only on an economic and diplomatic level.

The tribal area or *civitas* became the organisational unit for the governance of Roman Britain, with Aldborough being the *civitas* capital for the northern region of the Brigantes people. The grid of governance in the north was far more complex though than in most other regions of *Britannia* because of the huge military presence here throughout the whole Roman period, with York, the site of a legionary fortress and later a veterans' *colonia*, to a great extent more-or-less eclipsing Aldborough in terms of political importance. This process was completed when York became the designated capital of *Britannia Inferior* as part of the Severan reforms in or around AD 197 and later the capital of *Britannia Secunda* after Diocletian's reforms of AD 296. To further complicate matters, it would appear that by the third century AD Corbridge,

in the east of the Hadrian's Wall frontier zone, and Carlisle in the west, both also were designated as *civitas* capitals.

The Roman north as defined in this present study would have taken in most of the territory of the Brigantes, possibly the northernmost part of the territory of the Parisi, and all of the territory of the Carvetii, while in Scotland large parts of the territories of the Novantae, the Selgovae, the Dumnonii, and the Votadini were occupied for a short time. While the geographical disposition of fortresses and forts probably reflected the reality of tribal dispositions and boundaries, the two northern frontier lines undoubtedly were overlain on the landscape and interrupted traditional territorial integrity, being topographically rather than ideologically designed. However, there is no doubt that tribal identity would seem to have remained an important factor and focus for identity in the northern military zone long after its establishment. For instance, the tombstone of Regina found at South Shields, dating to the second half of the second century AD, is a case in point, in that the dedicatory inscription is at evident pains to inform the viewer or reader that she was Catuvellaunian in origin, that is from one of the major tribal groups or regions of southern Britain. A woman from the Cornovii of the English midlands has her origins recorded on her tombstone at Ilkley, West Yorkshire in the late first or early second century AD. Again, the inscribed so-called *civitas* stones of Hadrian's Wall represent a curious kind of paradox, that is the formal recording of building work on parts of the frontier undertaken by civilian cadres from the southern zones of the province, and could date from the second half of the second century AD or the third century, or could even be as late as the fourth century. There is no academic consensus on their date.

However, this book is not concerned with the fine details of the chronology and history of the northern frontiers of the Roman province or of the shifting military dispositions there. The history of individual military installations in the north is not discussed either, except in passing. Rather the study is concerned with the role of images and art in the region and how art and identity interacted together here, producing what will be argued to have been a highly-distinctive visual culture in northern Roman Britain. Much writing about the Roman north often is caught up in a relentless specificity-*this* site, *this* building, *this* find-and shies away from the idea of overview. Forward motion and meaning can thus become subsumed in descriptive practice.

It will also briefly be considered whether objects and images played any role in disseminating Roman ideas beyond the frontiers, and whether what today might be termed cultural soft power was at all deliberately employed across the borders. Numerous objects found their way into non-Roman territory beyond the frontier, items such as the famous Turriff glass jug for instance, along with coins, tableware, and brooches, some of them undoubtedly traded but some likely to have been given as diplomatic gifts from the Roman authorities to local tribal leaders or offered as bribes to the same elite class. Discussion of contact between the authorities of Roman Britain

with leaders of tribal groupings with independent cultures of their own constitutes a topic for another, separate study.

Regional studies of Roman Britain have a long history, going back to the classic Duckworth *Peoples of Roman Britain* series of the 1970s (taken up by Sutton in the 1980s), for which Brian Hartley produced a slim volume on the Brigantes of the north in 1988. Studies of the Roman north in particular are part of an even longer tradition going back to the days of J. Collingwood Bruce and his groundbreaking publications *The Roman Wall* of 1851 and *The Hand-Book of the Roman Wall* in its first edition of 1863. However, many of these studies were largely concerned with military archaeology, and considerations of art in these volumes are often generally incidental. It is for that reason that the present book has been written, with a view to placing the art of northern Roman Britain at the centre of discussion. Questions will be asked of this body of art. Is there a distinctive regional art here? If so, why and how is it distinctive? Can the art propose a way to understand the region? A few years ago, in 2007, Roger White argued in his book on *Britannia Prima* that the south-western parts of Roman Britain developed a highly-distinctive identity and art, but such a view has not generally been taken with regard to the Roman north. However, there is overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that the north did indeed itself possess a cultural distinctiveness which had a great deal to do with the development of artistic practices in the region which acted as the means by which culture here became an expression of the identities of the peoples of the region.

Academics are happy to accept that there were regional types of brooches in northern Roman Britain, with, for example, there being a higher proportion of plate and penannular brooch types in the north than in the rest of the province. Indeed, it is accepted that northern variants were also made on indigenous-tradition sites in Scotland as well. Regional variations of types of Romanised items such as toilet implements and nail cleaners have been recognised in the province. Both brooches and toilet implements are types of objects which related to the presentation and maintenance of the body, and thus stylistic variations might even imply regional differences in thinking about the body and the self in contemporary society. Identity, material culture, and art were all somehow ideologically interlinked at the time.

Art forms part of a suite of things that helped facilitate and create the transition of a rural northern region centred on its villages and farmsteads to a militarised landscape of fortresses, forts, and frontier works, though still supported by farms whose production was geared up to supply the new market, and with civilian settlements in the form of the *civitas* capital, some small towns, and *vici* or civilian settlements growing up outside the forts. Thus it might be thought that the art of the Roman north was the art of a region fundamentally and crucially empty of images of a large proportion of its existing inhabitants, save soldiers and their gods, but this would be wrong as non-military individuals are represented in the art of the region as well,

as we shall see. Mapping diachronic change might allow us to question how art here represented at different times a reaction to external events and broader cultural or ideological currents, both in the political sphere and the social. But art is not always necessarily *about* an event. Sometimes it *was* the event.

This book is to some extent a long essay, a series of interconnected studies of particular aspects of identity formation explored by material objects, highlighting the dominant strands of artistic practice at the time. The roots of this practice are not explicitly explored, indeed only in so far as they can be seen to have reinvigorated and tested the potential of sculpture as a medium. The interworking of agency, gesture, and landscape make this very much a regional study. Looking at the art from the Roman north helps us to understand how this geographic space was conceptualized. People, materials, and environment served to emphasise the local context and the landscape acted as a medium through which agency and gestures were translated. The art of the region should be seen as the end result of active engagements with developing patterns of change which formed one crucial aspect of the contemporary experience. Art acted as a kind of mesh through which real life escaped, the overall assemblage of artworks being somehow greater than the sum of its many parts. By deploying new modes of representation it will be argued that it is almost as if the Romans looked down on the northern landscapes which had not been seen in this way before and reinterpreted them through imagery. Looking at this art allows us to recognise the deep connection between social and geological territory, and between landscape and memory. I will also argue that northern Romano-British art between the first and early fifth centuries AD was in a sense a period of sufficient historical integrity to make it worthy of study in its own right and not just as a regional study. This art helped in the creation of a discrete social and psychological space in the north. The study seeks to question conventional polarities with regard to province and frontier. But there nevertheless remains a feeling that these resulting new visual narratives ultimately longed for some degree of constancy and integration in a broader whole. There is a sense that there was a struggle under way to envisage a new politicised landscape effortlessly spanning both the past and the present. The question is whether the art produced ultimately succeeded in doing so entirely successfully?

The visual experience was after all a vital and integral part of the character of the region as it was shaped by broad cultural and sociopolitical forces. Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall did not exist in a void: they lay within a broader landscape. The frontiers existed at a critical point where history and geography, architecture and topography met, or at least intersected; a region of perpetual exchange where economic, cultural, and political currents met in a zone of both contact and ideological, rather than actual, conflict. Perception and interpretation in such a zone can be, but need not necessarily have been, the same thing. Art and culture ultimately became the main arteries of connectivity and communication, drawing on repertoires of extraction and mobilisation.

This bold and innovative art consequently made its own map of the region in a cartography of consequences whose transitory nature defied the rational lines and grids of conventional map-making. Conventional maps of northern Roman Britain would simply have failed to capture the essence and specifics of artistic production and consumption there at that time and consequently would have missed more than they managed to record. The northern landscapes should be understood as both physical and social spaces. The Antonine Wall distance slabs, discussed at great length later in the book, are an exception, a series of conceits of uncommon force. They demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that as a means of expanding rather than circumscribing ideological practice art and craft were media for the exchange of different knowledge systems at the frontier. Contested borders and contested identities to some extent helped decentre the image of the human body here. In the event, abandonment of the Antonine frontier led to the sacrificing of the correspondence between art and fixed historical narratives in favour of a new fluidity.

Both artists and viewers experienced an alternative world to that created by historical writers on the province, a world that they themselves were creating and perpetuating. In many ways then this study marks an attempt to connect with a cognitive map of the northern region from the perspective of its cultural production over time. This kind of cartography could lead to all sorts of consequences, most importantly by allowing the art discussed to bring its past with it. This art was not just *something to look at*: it was communicative, performative, and constructive, and sometimes dwelled on its own form and formative power.

Almost accidentally and coincidentally the most essential part of the whole process over time was the continual and endless mapping of spots which clustered around the playing-out of the most culturally-significant moments. These spots were highly-desirable locations for art, defined as they were by their high visibility, their potential audience of viewers, and their cultural meaning. Each individual artwork and each spot at which art appeared contributed towards a constant remapping of the Roman roads and route-ways, the fortresses, forts, towns, and *vici* of the region along ever-shifting coordinates of physical access, cultural status, public visibility, and the opportunities and sometimes dangers offered up by the political and ideological backdrop against which life then was experienced.

But we should exhibit caution and try not to see northern Romano-British art as a static, unchanging genre tied in to the values and assumptions of its commissioners, creators, and patrons. Things changed over time as they did according to context. Different viewers would have had different experiences of the same artwork. Northern Romano-British art rather would appear to have represented a fragmented and sometimes seemingly chaotic experience as opposed to what might alternatively be thought of as an overly-regulated and systematised one. The aim of the art seems to have been to reconcile the ideas of its commissioners with the things they saw. We

perhaps need to try to think of the Roman northern region in the same way that its artists did.

The sense of the frontier as contributing towards a narrative of isolation and division is probably mistaken. The administrative role of many of the military installations would have probably meant that more pacific and commercial dimensions to life there informed the cultural output and consumption locally and regionally. We should perhaps not necessarily see a frontier as a line on a map or on the ground marking a boundary, but as a mark defining a zone of managed interaction. We need to remember how the Romans themselves used the *pomerium* as a conceptual marker between the city of Rome and the outside world.

Can we write of a frontier mentality, an existential anxiety naturally born of subsumed tension and expressed through art, a totemic act produced in a climate of perpetual uncertainty? Certainly we can probably find in the art evidence of the inevitable tensions that must have arisen between the ordinary soldier's life and contemporary political discourse as reflected in changing military dispositions and a fluctuating frontier for some of the period under consideration. The Roman army's actions required both political and religious approval to be considered just and right. Life and pictorial art interacted, influences working in both directions. As already mentioned, the *civitas* stones of Hadrian's Wall represent a paradox, linking civilian endeavour to military and political ideology in what might mistakenly have been thought to have been a restricted or liminal zone of the province.

The very specific socio-geographic location of the northern zone must inevitably have led to a tension between isolation and connectivity with the rest of the province and with the wider Roman world. The northern British networks were formed out of a predisposition in the region towards insularity, change, and resilience, dictated, but not necessarily promoted, by the very nature of the overwhelming military and administrative presence here. The question of integration will arise again and again in this study. The strong community identity in the region became a crucial factor in the levels of resilience here and dictated how the culture and the art of the region grew to be individualised and potent. The tensions between local developments and their supra-regional embedding were played out through the commissioning of artworks which foregrounded group or individual identities.

It is interesting that curatorial and museological practice in the northern region is reflected in both the very large number of local and site museums at which the story of the Roman presence in each area is given narrative local specificity (Figure 1) and in the admirable move that has been made towards the presentation of the whole area's Roman history in terms of its connectivity to the history of other frontier zones elsewhere in the empire. The Unesco designation of the trans-national Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site (WHS), alongside individual WHS designations for



Figure 1 Group of Mithraic artworks on display in the Great North Museum: Hancock, Newcastle. (Photo: Author).

Hadrian's Wall in 1987 and the Antonine Wall in 2008, has been of great significance in this respect. The Roman period is now also viewed in subtly different ways in national museums in England, Scotland, and Wales in terms of it being part of a continuum in the creation of a national history and national identity in each of the three countries. These local, regional, national, and international strands mirror certain aspects of the situation relating to the promotion of identity in the northern frontier zone between the second and fifth centuries AD.

But there was not only emptiness on the horizon: there were opportunities too for art to develop and respond, and to finally emerge with distinct regional traits. Much of this art ending up channelling individuals' experiences of that strangest of new environments into the art we now see and ourselves experience at the sites in the north and in its museums. During our visits we have to decide how this art fits in, both as a response to its time and as something that can illuminate a path forward for us in understanding the past in the present.

This is also a study pivoting on the inter-related and not necessarily contradictory processes of remembering and forgetting. At this time we must envisage these as constantly turning and turning together in a kind of Yeatsian gyre.

Regional Character

There was not a Roman art literally portraying this northern region, in the way that, for instance, Campanian landscapes featured repeatedly in the Flavian artistic and poetic imagination and, to a lesser extent, did Thessaly. However, if Campania was a landscape of reality and mythology, a land of both gods and monsters, then so too was the landscape of northern Britain. Maybe *Romanitas* in northern Britain could be symbolised by reference to the idea of that landscape, of that region, without actually depicting it as such. The whole sensory experience of the northern landscape and its cultural signposts was reflected in the ability of the art overall to recall and represent absent things and fuse them into pictorial wholes. It demonstrated the tensions between progress and preservation implicit in all these representations taken together. At different times the art reflected a crisis of confidence, but historical events and circumstances allowed the contemplation of a return to some kind of order and, as a corollary, a return perhaps to more traditional forms of representation and ways of seeing.

There is no denying that sculpture in stone would have appeared to have mattered, that is had some social or cultural value, to only a relatively small audience in Roman Britain, in the fortresses and forts of the province principally and in the large urban centres. As the majority of sculpture from Roman Britain is in some way religious or votive there must be some particular explanation for this phenomenon. It has been argued that once the main military and urban audience for stone sculpture in Roman Britain has been discounted from the picture, then there is an undeniable correspondence, and therefore a link, between the distribution of stone sculptures remaining and geological deposits of good, or at least reasonable, stone suitable for carving. If sculpture linked to religious sites and sculpture of a religious nature made for private individuals is then discounted few dots would be left on the distribution map.

This phenomenon has been described as a 'geography of provincialism', an intriguing idea and one which is useful in describing the stone sculpture tradition in northern Roman Britain. Peter Stewart, who coined the term, has suggested that the outcrops of good stone in the north appropriate for fine working were few and therefore that the nature and quality of artistic output would have been limited from the outset. Stewart has also noted that 'commentaries on provincial sculpture periodically seek to redeem them or make excuses for them' but such approaches will be eschewed here. Romano-British art was what it was: no more, no less, and aesthetic judgements on its quality in terms of adherence to or divergence from classical 'norms' will not be made.

The number of marble sculptures from the Roman north is very small, as will be discussed later, but given that there are only around forty marble sculptures from the

whole of Roman Britain, the majority in London and the south-east of the province, this is hardly surprising. There is, however, one extraordinary example of an imported stone object from a site in Scotland for use in funerary commemoration which will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

If the north can be seen as a repository of good stone outcrops suitable for carving and sculpting, and of course for many types of localised stone which were not ideally suited but which were used anyway simply out of convenience it would seem, it is noteworthy that no sculptures in stone sourced from the region have been found in London and the south-east of the province, as possibly might have been expected. The *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* (CSIR) volume covering this southern region was the first to include an excellent and very precise analysis of the origins of all stone types by Kevin Hayward. Indeed, the farthest north sources for any stone used in the region are Ancaster in Lincolnshire and South Yorkshire which is represented by an altar made of Millstone Grit. Whether any sculptures in northern stone found their way to the midlands remains uncertain.

When undertaking research for this book in various museums I was struck by the way in which the underlying geometry of the art was made visible by the reduction of sculptural forms to elementary shapes and combinations of shapes, and how this made the viewer more aware of subtle differences of surfaces and materials. I was quite often struck by how the undulations, grainy texture, or inclusions in the stones, and chips and nicks representing chisel marks elaborated and articulated the surfaces, to say nothing of the varying colours of the different local stones used. There would seem to have been a truth to materials represented here that reflected the northern environment. Many sculptural works from the north have a strong surface articulation that deals equally well with volume and light, reflecting the varied landscapes and weather conditions that the sculpture inhabited. The effectiveness, indeed the affect, of contrasting tone and texture marks out much of the region's Roman artworks. Later in the book I will discuss the evidence for some sculptures in the region, and more widely in Roman Britain, having been painted. This would not have negated the situation that I have just suggested, that local stones gave the region's sculpture its own unique character. Rather, even when painted, exposure of some works in the open, while other works were intended to always remain indoors sheltered from the elements, would have led to the flaking and peeling of painted surfaces and the exposure of the natural stone colour and surface below. We must imagine the effect as being akin to the natural outcropping of deposits of the northern region's stone in its own landscape in miniature.

We will need to consider the life of the artworks and their ability to alter the spaces that contained them, as well as their afterlives. The basic question will be how did we get from there to here? Some statues represented an attempt to materialise the place at the other side of bodily appearance. By treating the body as a place in this

way a trace of a real event, of a real body in time, was left. The human figure was thus firmly and unequivocally rooted in this landscape. Sculptures could be personated in a number of ways: by first-person inscriptions, through the use of a name in the inscription, and through the presentation of an image that could be accepted as a portrait or a simulacrum of a specific individual, or by any combination of these three strategies.

As with so many strains of Romano-British art sculpture in the Roman north can be viewed in some way as the creation of new vernacular forms, and their subsequent constant rehabilitation, and as the manifestation of popular visual expression. Much of this art though consisted of public images, which means that its creation and viewing was situated within a political and ideological context sufficiently robust enough in its control of cultural parameters that it could make use of what were otherwise vernacular forms to express mainstream and official messages.

The creation of the frontier works should also be considered a kind of visual exercise as well, one that significantly impacted on the viewing of the landscape. Not only were the two linear frontiers of Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall imposed on the landscape but they also blocked vistas, interrupted sight lines, and changed perceptions of how this underlying landscape could be viewed and experienced. The Roman army, of course, intended for the frontiers to dominate the landscapes into which they were set, but at the same time to be constructed in such a way that visibility, for signalling, for patrolling, and for security, was a highly-significant factor in the design and execution of the works. Both walls took advantage of the natural topography to create vantage points and clear lines of sight northwards.

But what would have the experience have been like to view the wall when approaching it from the north? In the case of Hadrian's Wall there is some evidence to suggest that rather than the pointed stone walling that we see today and which gives us the impression that the original wall was like this, but taller, the outer wall face could have been plastered or rendered and painted white, or just simply have been whitewashed, as Jim Crow has suggested. Certain stretches only might have been painted or this might have occurred just during certain of the wall periods as they are known: there is not enough evidence to be sure of the significance of findings of scored plaster imitating ashlar joints at Denton and evidence for rendering on the wall face at Heddon, both on the wall. Equally, a chamfered block retaining colour from whitewashing from Peel Gap is intriguing, but not in any way conclusive. Were Hadrian's Wall to have been painted white on its outer face it would have been visible for miles from the north looking south, particularly in the spring and summer: in winter snows this might have made the wall less visible from a distance. Colour would in these circumstances have further emphasised the power and might of Rome and its ability to impose itself on a foreign natural landscape in such an unnatural way.

While this study will continually refer to northern Britain as a heavily-militarised zone, it must be made clear from the outset that this did not mean that it was an exclusively military zone, even on the frontiers. Civilian settlements or *vici* would have existed outside the vast majority of Roman forts across the empire, housing the wives and families of soldiers, not legally recognised till the Severan edict of AD 197, veterans, craftsmen, traders, and others. Archaeological evidence from within some forts suggests sometimes the presence of non-military people there, completely blurring the boundaries between military and civilian. Further away from the forts agricultural settlements would have been in existence.

Responses and Practices

There is, of course, a chronological aspect to this study but not one that dictates its structure. Rather I have chosen to organise the study on a thematic basis, stressing the force of the drive towards the expression of identity in the creation of the art of the region.

There can be no doubt that the surveyors of the Roman army were extraordinarily adept and rapid at locating sources of good quality building stone, if available, in every part of Britain that they traversed, many of these stones also being suitable for carving and sculpting. While there is not a particularly large number of sculptures from the north confidently dated to the first century AD it is noticeable that there was a significant and quite dramatic increase in the number of sculptures dating to the second and earlier third centuries and in the number of sites at which sculptures appeared at that time. In the later third and fourth centuries numbers of sculptures decreased and we must look for explanations for this phenomenon in terms of how art was used in the later Roman period in the region, and crucially much more widely, in ways which differed from the earlier circumstances and contexts.

The database of the Last Statues of Antiquity Project (LSA), an impressive empire-wide investigation of Roman honorific public statues dating to AD 284-650, contains a total of 2800 individual entries, but only five catalogue entries (c. 0.18%) relating to Roman Britain and, I think quite significantly, three of these are statues set up in the Roman north, where 'the statue habit' had been a marked trend in the region's art in the preceding two centuries. These three northern statues of late antiquity are the marble head of the emperor Constantine from York, discussed in Chapter Two, a statue of Mars also from York and dating to the late third to early fourth century AD (Figure 2) discussed in Chapter Three, and a fourth century statue base probably from the Roman fort at Binchester in County Durham, subsequently reused and built into the fabric of the nearby Anglo-Saxon church at Escomb, just across the Wear Valley from Binchester. The Binchester/Escomb statue base is inscribed with the words '*bono rei publicae nato*', that is 'to one who was born for the good of the state', a formula of words which might be thought to have been used with regard to Constantine and



Figure 2 Statue of Mars from York. Late third to early fourth century AD. Yorkshire, Museum, York. (Photo: Image courtesy of York Museums Trust: <http://yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk>).

his dynasty. The same formula appears on another northern statue base from Old Penrith in Cumbria, but that particular stone must have been discounted from the LSA database for some reason.

Recent research by Maryl Gensheimer has suggested that the specifics of the decorative programme of the monumental Baths of Caracalla in Rome were to a great extent dictated by the ideological preferences of the Severan dynasty and its nostalgia for the Antonine emperors, expressed by tell-tale decorative elements, themes, tropes, and statuary subjects that acted as a kind of shorthand to help the viewer understand the dynastic programme. I will argue that to some extent the profile of the second into third century AD assemblage of sculptures from northern Britain also partly reflected these aims.

The researchers from the Last Statues of Antiquity project were obviously not concerned with other types of decorated stonework or with dedicatory inscriptions, unless they related to now-lost statues. Certainly stonemasons were producing these other types of work after AD 284 but just not in the quantity that they previously had done. In Chapter Four I will consider inscribed gravestones or stelae and inscribed sarcophagi which might have been Christian, and some of which must date to after this time. Other post-AD 284 material from the Roman north includes two inscriptions from Hadrian's Wall, from the forts at Birdoswald and Chesters. The Birdoswald stone is a dedication slab and building record commemorating the rebuilding of the commandant's house, headquarters building, and bath house at the fort, and in its mentioning Diocletian and Maximian as Augusti and Constantius and Maximianus as Caesars can be confidently dated to AD 297-305. The Chesters inscription is a dedication to Jupiter Dolichenus that can be very precisely dated by its formula to AD 286. But by far and away the latest Roman military inscription from the north comes from the east coast fortlet at Ravenscar, North Yorkshire. This inscription records that

Justinianus and Vindicianus ‘built this tower and fort from ground level’ which must date the stone to after AD 369 when Count Theodosius set in train the creation of the system of defensive fortlets along this stretch of the east coast.

In addition, a few of a noteworthy series of over a dozen third or early fourth century AD inscribed milestones from Hadrian’s Wall and its hinterland post-date, or could post-date, AD 284. These almost seem to have been advertising hoardings supporting certain emperors in a time of great political instability and should be thought of as not only functional objects but also highly ideological ones. These include the milestone from Gallows Hill, south of Carlisle in Cumbria, whose original dedication had been erased, with a new dedication to Carausius (AD 286-293) being added above: subsequently the stone was dug up, reversed, put back in position with the name of Carausius now out of sight on the buried portion, and a third dedication to Constantine as Caesar (AD 306-307) was now cut. Other milestone inscriptions mention Diocletian (AD 284-305: Old Wall, Cumbria), Maximian (AD 286-305), and their immediate successors, Galerius as Caesar (AD 305-311: from off Dere Street in County Durham), Maximinus as Caesar (AD 309-313: from Corbridge), Constantius I as Caesar/Constantinus I as Caesar/Maximianus/and Maximinus (respectively AD 296-305/306-307/305-311/and 309-313: from near Vindolanda), and Constantine I (AD 307-337: from Hesket, Cumbria, Carvoran on Hadrian’s Wall, and two from near Vindolanda).

It might be thought that the production of art and the scale of that production would at any time have mirrored trends in material culture and cultural practice in general in Roman Britain. In the Roman north it is therefore interesting to note that changes among certain classes of artefact can be detected in the second half of the fourth century AD, and most particularly in the last quarter of that century.

Underpinning any study of Roman or Romanised art is the idea of tracing stylistically-consistent signatures within this group, even before the semiotics of the works is considered. So in terms of analysis we can draw upon ideas of similarity or difference, look for physical connections, and examine conventions of representation. Romano-British art’s richness could be said to have lain in its often hybrid combination of these. We need to look at broader culture beyond appearances. At first sight it might be thought that art in the Roman north was just a series of discontinuous sequences, but through these we can trace the legacy of various ideological positions and expressions of identity. We need to be aware of the different roles played by text and images at this time in this specific region and the way that social practices and meanings were constructed through competing interpretations. Changes over time reconfigure or emphasise particular readings.

While the question of whether certain artworks from Roman Britain constituted examples of ‘good art’ or ‘bad art’ will not be asked or answered in this book it needs to at least be considered in terms of whether divergence from classical norms could



Figure 3 Tombstone of a Romano-British woman holding a fan from Carlisle. Second century AD. Tullie House Museum, Carlisle. (Photo: Copyright Tullie House Museum, Carlisle).

have represented a deliberate act of resistance or subversion, as has been suggested in some cases from Roman Britain. Indeed, in some contexts in the north it is the works in a classical style which might be thought to have been out of place. Of course, not every image had rigour and weight, and some had just power rather than subtlety or accomplishment. Misfires or experiments are never altogether without interest in any case. The contrast in style between the image on the late third or early fourth century AD tombstone of Vellibia Ertola from Corbridge (Figure 4) and the image on the second century AD tombstone of a woman holding a fan from Carlisle (Figure 3) could not be greater. But both were in the end successful works of communication.

The idea of a canon of a very small number of good Romano-British artworks and the rest existing at the margins can be rejected. The responsive eye would have seen something dense, novel, taut, charged, multivalent, or ambiguous in most of the art discussed here. The deeply-negative views of Robin Collingwood on Romano-British sculpture in general, though curiously exempting a few select works including the so-called Corbridge Lion, now appear decades later to be a little ridiculous, though some of these same prejudices centred around ideas of style and competence still unfortunately linger in a few even quite recent academic studies. Yet in the



Figure 4 Tombstone of Vellibia Ertola from Corbridge, Northumberland. Later third century AD. Corbridge Site Museum. (Photo: Slide archive of the former School of Continuing Studies, Birmingham University).

contemporary environment some of these artworks must have arrived like postcards from the future, and many still seem especially potent now. The stance adopted here is that the art of Roman Britain ‘is what it is’ and that value judgements on it should not generally be made. The consolation of this approach is the knowledge that the dynamic ambivalence of many works surveyed had a dreadful vitality that must have reflected a dedication to universalising particular messages. However, nevertheless the book will explore how a tension between the poles of marginality and canonicity informs the central discourse on Romano-British art and its practitioners and consumers. These two extremes are more a reflection of ingrained art historical practices rather than a reality: perhaps there has been too much emphasis on surface rather than on close reading.

My definition of art in this book has been broad. As an archaeologist rather than an art historian I view art as being part of a broader material culture and not as something that existed or exists in a vacuum, relatable only to other art. It is the cultural life of images that it is most important to always consider. The key to understanding and interpreting art is to consider its context, if possible, and its viewers. In Roman Britain the social and cultural significance of this new market in art was that by putting a price on things that previously had none mere goods were transformed into commodities with a specific exchange value. There was obviously a great deal of difference in the meaning and significance of images viewed in a private house, in the social environment of the Roman baths, in a town forum, or in a funerary context.

Roman art need not be defined as simply figural sculpture, along with mosaics and wall paintings. It also included engraved gemstones, decorated silver and bronze vessels, decorated and figured pottery and glass vessels, other types of decorated metalwork including military equipment, carved jet items, and decorated bone items. In Roman times non-figural decoration in itself could constitute an image and be a signifier of sorts, as indeed were certain styles and forms. Sometimes under the category of art also can be included inscriptions or maker’s marks on pottery vessels and other

items, where the words inscribed or stamped were as much to be *seen* as to be *read*. Caricature *graffiti* can also be considered to have been art, to be part of the overall visual field. As already noted, questions of artistic competence or stylistic adherence will be largely absent from the book, unless they are strictly relevant. A degree of accuracy would appear to have been but one element, and often a minor one at that, in the construction of an image in Romano-British art. Our present-day perception of these artworks, that is the turning of something we see into something that we actually know, cannot possibly be the same as contemporary perceptions, but by recognising this, and by the liberal use of the words ‘possibly’, ‘probably’, and ‘might have’ to temper our interpretations, we can at least attempt to unpick the dynamic inter-relationships of vision and perception which would have hung around many of these artworks like an early morning mist.

The art from northern Roman Britain will above all be read as an expression of identity on both a macro-level, that is regionally, right down to a micro-level, that of the private individual. Of course, individuals can have, and often did have, more than one identity, indeed sometimes multiple identities. The porousness, permeability, and mixture of identities was reflected in the art, most commonly in funerary art, as will be discussed in Chapter Five and Chapter Seven. The different types of identity could include: individual or personal identity; group identity; tribal or ethnic identity, or identity based on origins; gender identity; status identity; religious identity; and occupational identity. Identities could coexist, overlap, be replaced, ebb and flow and so on, often in powerful and significant ways as we shall see. The contrast and contradictions inherent in the creation and maintenance of identities was apparently dynamic. Inscriptions could be read as if spoken by funerary stelae and funerary images viewed, somehow bringing the deceased persons into the here and now in a way which questioned standard concepts of linear time.

In Praise of Sandstone

As noted in the Preface there has been no previous book-length study of the art of northern Roman Britain, though most of the sculpture from the region has been catalogued in the *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* (CSIR) project volumes for Roman Britain, with the final volume in press, its few mosaic pavements have been discussed in the first volume of the impressive *Roman Mosaics of Britain* series, and its few recorded wall paintings have also been catalogued in a published monograph study.

Not a single one of the artworks from the region carries an artist’s name or signature, and no production workshops of artists have been excavated. Hypotheses about the location of sculptors’ workshops in Carlisle making distinctive and stylistically-similar grave stelae depicting women and children make sense, but this remains unproven, as does the existence of a northern school or group of mosaicists producing pavements out of a postulated workshop in Aldborough.

One factor which makes the art of the region so distinct when viewed alongside the rest of Roman Britain is the sheer number of sculptural works from the north. Using data from the *CSIR* project, enhanced with reporting of new finds of sculpture in the annual journal *Britannia*, it can be seen that around 1750 items of sculpted stone come from the Roman north, as opposed to around 1005 items in total from the rest of Roman Britain. This means that 63.5% of all sculptural items in the whole province come from the Roman north, indicating that visual culture in terms of its expression and consumption through the medium of statuary and sculpture seems to have been of particular significance in the region, presumably because of the heavy military presence here and the role that art played in the ideological programme and workings of the Roman army.

Using the *CSIR* categories of types of sculpture this breaks down into: Graeco-Roman Deities; Oriental Deities; Romano-Celtic Deities; Altars; Imperial Iconography; Funerary Monuments; Building Records; Anthropomorphic Figures; Miscellaneous Sculptures; and Miscellaneous Animals. The largest category of statuary by far in the northern assemblage is images of deities, which includes decorated inscribed altars with deities' names, with around 580 individual items, representing almost exactly one third of the overall sculptural assemblage. Under this category Graeco-Roman deities dominate, at around 67% of the total number of deities, followed by Romano-Celtic deities at around 21% of the total, and Oriental deities at around 12%. Further discussion about the relative popularity of individual deities in the northern region will be offered in Chapter Three. The second largest category of sculptural type is funerary monuments, mainly tombstones, at around 21% of the overall northern assemblage. It is extremely interesting, and highly significant, to note that of decorated funerary monuments from Roman Britain as a whole just over 80% of the province's decorated funerary monuments come from the northern zone. Again, this must say something very specific about the way that death was both conceptualised and commemorated in the region, and the role that art played in the ideological underpinnings of contemporary funerary practices. Again, I will return to this point in a later chapter.

Such a huge dataset of sculptures from the region allows us to perhaps approach the material in a different way to an analysis of the much smaller southern Romano-British assemblage, to probe the potential multiplicity of meanings of individual statues or of certain statue types, and to think about the ways in which sculptural decoration might have engaged the viewers, and revealed intended messages which underlay the experience of different regional contexts.

Distribution patterns of almost any commodity tend to reflect patterns of supply and demand, and art in Roman Britain is no exception. Find-spots of sculptures in the towns and military bases of the province reflect a pattern in how sculpture was conceptualised, consumed, and used. The clustering of significant quantities of sculpture in northern Roman Britain reflected the concentrated deployment of

military forces in this region. In addition to this, there is the determinism of geology: that is, that sculptural traditions took hold in areas where accessible and good quality stone was available. Certainly in northern Roman Britain there is no evidence to suggest that sculptural stone from other regions or finished works in non-local stone were traded.

This very much supports my argument that the art *from* northern Roman Britain was an art *of* northern Roman Britain, quite literally in terms of stones employed in the production of sculpture here. Interesting though it is, I am not sure that I altogether agree with the suggestion that the material presence of some sculptures from Roman Britain, particularly funerary monuments, in terms of their permanence and overt physicality was more significant than what was actually carved on them in terms of inscriptions and images.

Large-scale bronze statues must have been common throughout Roman Britain, and therefore in the northern region as well, but evidence for these is limited by the fact that metal from redundant statues could be easily recycled and probably would have been. When fragments of bronze statues are recovered it is important to consider why and how such fragments escaped the bronze-smiths' melting-pot. The afterlife of such sculpture is sometimes of great interest in itself. Sometimes heads from statues seem to have been deposited deliberately in so-called 'watery places' and there must have been some ideological or religious motive for such actions.

Very few bronze statue fragments have been found in the north. Indeed, of around 60 finds of fragments of bronze and in one case silver statues from Roman Britain as a whole only nine come from north of Lincoln (figures from a study by Ben Croxford enhanced by subsequent PAS (Portable Antiquities Scheme)-registered finds). In the *CSIR* volumes are listed: the leg and a basal fragment of a full-size equestrian statue found in a remote location at Milsington, Roxburghshire in Scotland (Figure 5); a bronze finger is reported as having been found at Arthur's O'on, also in Scotland; a small fragment of a male torso from Carrawburgh; a full-size bronze finger, bent at a joint and wearing a ring from Carvoran; and part of a silver statue of Victory was found at a quarry site at Tunshill, Butterworth, Lancashire in the late eighteenth century and is now in the British Museum in London. The Tunshill Victory (Figure 6) is a fascinating object, less than half-size and dating to the second to fourth century AD, consisting of an arm and an inscribed plaque that would have been attached to the wrist. The inscription records that it was dedicated 'to Victory, to the victorious Sixth Legion' by Valerius Rufus, suggesting that the statue was originally set up in the headquarters building in the legionary fortress at York. How this statue fragment later ended up some sixty miles away must remain a mystery.

In the late 1980s a finger from a bronze statue was excavated from just outside the fort at South Shields. The PAS database holds records of a full-size right ear and part of the



Figure 5 Leg from a life-size bronze equestrian statue from Milsington, Roxburghshire, Scotland. Undated. National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. (Photo: Author).

side of a head from a life-size statue, possibly dating to the second or third century AD, found quite recently at Brompton on Swale in North Yorkshire and, from the same county, fragments of an eye, the hair, and neck of a bronze statue from Terrington. A bronze hand from Carrawburgh is probably a religious item, like the bronze hand of Jupiter Dolichenus recently excavated at Vindolanda.

As noted, there must have been a considerable number of bronze statues in the region, but by reason of the reuse of scrap metal throughout the Roman period and beyond we have little evidence to produce even basic numbers and to discuss contexts. Ben Croxford has noted that though according to present figures metal statues represent just 13% of the total number of recorded statues from Roman Britain, the other 87% being of stone, we can only guess at what the actual percentage might really have been, particularly as we do not know what cultural value might or might not have been placed on such artworks in Romano-British society.

Quantifying Character

Compared to central, southern, and particularly south-western Roman Britain the northern region is very noticeably an area in which buildings such as villas and town-houses decorated with mosaic pavements and painted wall and ceiling plaster were relatively rare. Therefore it is not possible to talk about questions of integrated



Figure 6 Silver arm and plaque from a small statue of Victory from Tunshill, Lancashire. Second to fourth century AD. British Museum, London. (Photo: Copyright Trustees of the British Museum).

decorative schemes in all media in private residences, as one often can in the southern parts of the province. However, some notable examples of these art-forms are present in the archaeological record in the north and the quantification of such artworks can add to the definition of the distinct artistic character of the region.

In the first volume of *The Roman Mosaics of Britain* series David Neal and Steve Cosh catalogued 62 mosaics from sixteen sites in the northern region as defined in this present study, and one has been discovered subsequently, giving a total of 63 mosaics from 17 sites. These comprise eleven pavements from the main regional urban centre and legionary fortress of York, twenty three from the *civitas* capital of Aldborough, one each from the small towns at Malton and Catterick, four each from the villas at Well and Kirk Sink, Gargrave, both in North Yorkshire, three from the Holme House villa at Piercebridge in County Durham, the most northerly mosaics from Roman Britain, and three from the West Yorkshire villa of Dalton Parlours at Collingham, two each from Beadlam villa, Oulston villa, Castle Dykes villa, and Langton villa, all again in North Yorkshire, and one each from the villas at Hovingham, Kirkby Wharfe, Musley Bank, Roughborough, and Aiskew, all in North Yorkshire. As the *Roman Mosaics of Britain* project eventually published four substantial volumes on the pavements of the province, totally around 2000 catalogue entries, it can be seen that the number of mosaics from the north of Britain is infinitesimal compared to the rest of the province, just c.3.15% of the national total.

Two stray *tesserae* have been found at the Brooklyn House, Norton site, North Yorkshire, and though there are reports of *tesserae* having been found at the Scottish sites of Birrens, Castlecary, and Inchtuthil no mosaic pavements have been found *in situ* in Scotland.

The most significant site in the north for mosaics is the town of Aldborough, from which comes one of the most interesting and curious mosaics, a small pavement centre-panel or *emblema* carrying an image of the infant baby brothers Romulus and Remus being fed by the She-Wolf under the canopy of a tree (Figure 7). This image then is highly significant in terms of its ideological connections to ideas about Rome's deep mytho-historical origins, even though quite unrealistically rendered.

Later, Remus was to die, killed either by Romulus or by one of his underlings, and Romulus became sole founder and ruler of the new city of Rome, named after him. That the foundation myth involving Romulus still remained potent down the years is well illustrated by the accounts detailing the repair and renovation of the '*casa Romuli*', that is Romulus's original hut or a facsimile of it, on the Palatine Hill on a number of occasions following its damage by fire towards the end of the first century BC. Remarkably, it is also possible that this heritage structure was still extant in some form during the reign of Constantine in the fourth century AD.

Like all such myths the basic story of Romulus and Remus apparently became embellished with extra detail down the years. For instance, in his book the *Aeneid* the Augustan Roman poet Virgil made King Numitor of Alba Longa a descendant of Aeneas, the Trojan prince who had fled from burning Troy. In this way he gave succour to the emperor Augustus's own attempts to link himself with the Trojan hero in his political and artistic propaganda.

Anyone viewing the Aldborough Wolf and Twins mosaic today will immediately realise that it has been very heavily restored, some think fancifully over-restored, in the Victorian period before its acquisition by Leeds City Museum. Indeed, David Neal and Steve Cosh believe that the mosaic is a fake, a view not shared by all academics or by Leeds Museum which still displays the piece along with an interpretive caption that does not question its authenticity.

Although the Aldborough pavement probably dates to the late third or even early fourth century AD it is possible that the house's owner and commissioner of the mosaic was somehow connected to the imperial cult or to the Roman administration. In any case, they are likely to have been familiar with Latin literature and Roman mythology.

Another mosaic from Aldborough, known as the Muses Mosaic, again suggests a Roman or Romanised house owner who wished to demonstrate and indulge their classical learning. Heavily-damaged, and surviving only in part, there can be made out on the mosaic a figure holding a scroll, probably Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, or Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, with an accompanying Greek inscription that names Mount Helicon and thus helps identify the woman as one of the nine Muses who lived there. This is one of only a very small number of inscribed mosaics from Roman



Figure 7 Mosaic panel depicting the She-Wolf with the twins Romulus and Remus from Aldborough, North Yorkshire. Late third or fourth century AD. Leeds City Museum. (Photo: Author).

Britain as a whole. A nature versus culture opposition could sometimes be created by the appearance of male and female images together, and yet culture itself was best exemplified in Roman art by the depiction of one or all of the nine female Muses, born to the Titaness Mnemosyne and fathered by Zeus, an ideological strategy probably employed here at Aldborough. Another mosaic from the town bore an *emblema* of a lion lying under a tree, while a number of other geometric patterned mosaics have also been discovered here.

A larger number of mosaics are recorded from York, the most interesting and significant of which comes from a Roman house at Tanners Row which had at least four floor mosaics, including the York Four Seasons mosaic of the later third century AD which is now on display in the Yorkshire Museum in the city. On it can be seen a bust of a figure representing Spring with a bird, Summer with a bunch of grapes, though this is considered to probably be an imaginative restoration, Autumn with a rake, and Winter with a dead branch. The Gorgon Medusa is pictured at the centre of the mosaic, badly damaged and just now represented by her snake hair

The Yorkshire Museum also houses fragmentary mosaics from a number of villa sites in the countryside beyond *Eboracum*: a fragment again with Medusa on it from Dalton Parlours villa, Collingham, Leeds, West Yorkshire; a fragment of a female head from

Oulston villa, Hambleton, North Yorkshire, from where also comes a mosaic of an urn and trees; and part of a mosaic from Well, Hambleton Roman villa.

The size of the northern mosaic assemblage is far too small from which to make meaningful generalisations, but a few observations can certainly be offered. There is a predominance of geometric patterns on these pavements which might tell us something about perhaps more modest aesthetic tastes in the north in comparison with south-western Britain for instance. Having said that, the very fact that there are more than thirteen modest villa sites with mosaics so far identified in the region suggests an interesting level of take-up of Romanised architecture and its attendant adornments particularly in the southern countryside of the northern zone. Seasons mosaics were popular throughout Roman Britain and the two such pavements from town houses in York and Malton probably simply reflected a more generalised Romano-British taste, as indeed did the Medusa mosaic from the villa at Dalton Parlours and the Medusa on the York Seasons pavement. Aquatic motifs, like the sea-cow on the Toft Green York mosaic, were common in bath houses throughout Roman Britain. The two most exceptional northern pavements both come from houses in Aldborough, the Muses Mosaic and the She-Wolf Mosaic. The choice of design of both suggests a learned client with knowledge of Latin literature and Greco-Roman mythology, while the inscription on the Muses pavement probably also confirms that the client had some knowledge of Greek or, at worst, pretended to and found a mosaicist who did. On the other hand, the difference in competence in the drawing of the design for these two pavements, if the allegedly heavy-handed Victorian restoration of the She-Wolf Mosaic has not in fact rendered a good quality mosaic into a poorly-made one, suggests different workshops and client expectations. While at one time it was thought that the mosaic pavements of Aldborough, Dalton Parlours, and Malton shared enough stylistic similarities as to constitute a coherent Northern Group of mosaics, and to have been the product of a single workshop, this theory is not quite so widely accepted now.

Two Gorgon mosaics being recorded from the north is highly interesting and perhaps significant. In the Greco-Roman world certain types of images of mythological women could be seen to be images of apprehension by men in particular. Fear of untamed women such as Amazons, Maenads, and Medusa and the Gorgons, for instance, placed the use and deployment of such images often in a didactic context aimed at female viewers. It was as if the appeal of such rogue and feral women could have negatively influenced ordinary Roman women and subverted individual male power and society's institutions in the process.

Most common though of these ravaging monsters were the three Gorgons. Medusa and her two Gorgon sisters with their destructive gaze represented an inversion of the power of the male gaze. Their fangs, snake hair, and ability to turn mortals to stone with their glare made them anathema to many men, an untamed demonic female sexual energy. Medusa in Roman art was generally shown just as a severed head-a

gorgoneion-particularly in military contexts throughout the empire where her ferocity might have been often admired and in funerary contexts as well, where, like the sphinx, she served a protective purpose. Images of Medusa were very popular on Roman mosaic pavements throughout the empire, serving perhaps as talismanic, apotropaic protectors of the household, their ubiquity in this context being well illustrated by the fact that they occur quite widely in the western provinces on mosaics, with at least five examples being known from Roman Britain alone, two of those being our northern examples.

Decorated painted wall plaster has been recovered by excavation of a number of buildings in both York and Catterick, from Chester and Malton, from Dalton Parlours villa, the latter including ceiling plaster, from Piercebridge, and from Binchester fort. The Catterick plaster includes material from a probable *mansio* that would appear to have undergone fairly regular replastering and redecoration over the time of its use, as indicated by three successive layers of plaster, one on top of another. In the first phase the room bore decoration in the form of a tree or shrub with leaves, in the second phase another tree appears, along with floral swags and a *cantharus* containing foliage, the third phase being simply open panels and below a register of painted marbling panels. Another section of plaster from a shop premises in Catterick again was painted with panels intended to resemble marble.

The York plaster comes from one of the northern rooms in the fourth century AD *principia* of the fortress there, now incorporated in the undercroft of York Minster. Though fragmentary when found, the decorative scheme was partially reconstructable following the lifting of the plaster and its conservation. It consists of a lower register of rectangular panels painted to resemble marble and an upper register with panels, theatrical masks, and foliage. In the taller, central register are architectural elements including columns, arches and coved ceilings, doves or other birds, and, most intriguingly, a human figure, a man dressed in a long garment standing facing out directly towards the viewer and holding something in his hand.

From the commandant's bath house at Binchester Roman fort in County Durham comes a small fragment of painted plaster on which can be seen a man's leg, possibly the leg of an athlete, an altogether appropriate figure to be found in such a setting.

In summary then, the art of northern Roman Britain was distinctive from other areas of the province because of the sheer number of sculptural works commissioned and produced here, because of the balance of subject matter of these sculptures, because of the contexts in which this art was placed or used, because of the use of local stone for sculpture and the exploitation and use of regional materials such as jet and shale, because of a smaller market for the work of mosaicists and wall painters here, and because of the ways in which both the art of sculpture and the minor arts of gem cutting, glass, pottery, and metal vessel production represented and reflected the

identities of the people of the region. Viewed in comparison to the rest of the province, this art can be argued to have defined the region's cultural character through the power of images and of visual culture here. In the next three chapters the issue of identity will be further pursued by an examination of the appearance of images of the Roman imperial families in the region and of the manifestation of religious identities here through the creation and use of images of the gods. Religious identity became a focus for artistic expression and innovation, and allowed belief and emotion to be reflected in the art of the northern region.