

EPIGRAPHIC CONSCIOUSNESS

By J. C. MANN

The paper by Saller and Shaw in *JRS* 1984 calls for some comment on its treatment of epigraphic evidence, and especially on the question of what we can expect inscriptions to tell us about the people of a given area.¹

A first point to make in relation to their argument is that the poorer classes throughout the empire could not in any case afford stone inscriptions. If, then, the extended family is (as could be argued) an adaptation of the nuclear family induced by poverty, rather than its biological or cultural predecessor, evidence for it will naturally tend to be absent from the epigraphic record, even if it is in fact quite common at the lowest levels of society.

But my present purpose is to consider a different aspect of the use of inscriptions—the question of habit, a subject recently raised by Ramsay MacMullen.² After examining the relevance of this matter to the claim by Saller and Shaw that there was little or no local recruitment to the Roman army in Britain, it will be argued that the epigraphic evidence cannot be used to support this view.

Any use of inscriptions from Britain must take careful notice, to begin with, of the geology of the island, more especially of the fundamental division, elaborated by Sir Cyril Fox,³ between a highland zone, a land of old, hard and enduring rock, to the north-west, and a lowland zone, of young, soft and easily eroded rock to the south-east. There is little good building stone in the south-east,⁴ so that few inscriptions can be carved on locally-produced stone. Stone may have to be brought in from elsewhere and will thus be expensive. Such movement of stone into the south-east is well attested in the Roman period (see below). But clearly such conditions will of course persist throughout the post-Roman period, which makes it all the more likely that such inscriptions as were set up in the south-east will have been later broken up or trimmed down, or ground up altogether (for lime), right down to very recent times. This will explain the dearth of inscriptions of any kind from tribal cities like Caistor by Norwich (one eight-letter fragment)⁵ or Exeter (none at all), or even large and flourishing cities like Leicester (two fragments, one dubiously Roman) or Verulamium (eight minute fragments, all of stone brought from elsewhere).⁶

Admittedly, not all of the cities of the lowland zone are quite so barren. For Colchester, *RIB* lists some few rather fragmentary dedications, but in addition at least thirteen complete or fragmentary tombstones (*RIB* 200–12). The fragments are unhelpful (*RIB* 206–12), but even if all are assumed to be from civilian tombstones, we have four certainly military tombstones out of thirteen, a proportion of about 30 per cent. Manifestly, the population of Colchester did not include 30 per cent of soldiers. That would clearly be absurd. It should be noted that all of the thirteen were of stone from elsewhere, either Bath oolite or Purbeck marble.

A rather similar picture appears from London. Of 31 tombstones, mostly fragmentary, at least 18 are described as formed of stone coming from well outside London, again limestone or marble. At least seven stones are official (*RIB* 12) or military (*RIB* 11, 13, 15, 17–19). Out of 31 stones this gives a proportion of about 22 per cent. But clearly the proportion of officials and soldiers in the population of London will not have been as high as 22 per cent.

¹ Richard P. Saller and Brent D. Shaw, 'Tombstones and Roman Family Relations in the Principate: Civilians, Soldiers and Slaves', *JRS* 74 (1984), 124–56.

² 'The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire', *AJP* 103 (1982), 233–46.

³ In *The Personality of Britain* (1st ed. 1932, 4th and last ed. 1943), building on the work of Mackinder (*Britain and the British Seas*, 1907) and Haverfield (*The Romanization of Roman Britain*, 1923). Fox's work is improperly neglected, indeed not apparently fully understood, by many modern archaeologists.

⁴ See now J. H. Williams, *Britannia* 2 (1971), 166–95.

⁵ Except where otherwise specifically stated, the inscriptions considered here are those in *RIB* 1 only. It is improbable that discoveries since the publication of *RIB* 1 will have substantially altered the picture. Using the evidence of *RIB* 1 alone makes for ease of reference, and makes it easier for the reader to check the figures given.

⁶ The building inscription of A.D. 79, found in 1955 (*JRS* 46 (1956), 146 no. 3), provides a welcome addition, and exception, to this meagre catalogue.

Thus the military element evidently had some influence on inscriptions in both Colchester and London. Soldiers were stationed in Colchester for a short time in the mid-first century, legion XX (*RIB* 200) and the *ala Thracum* (*RIB* 201), and probably others as well, while of course the colony's original inhabitants consisted of veterans and their families.⁷ The soldiers and the veterans brought with them the custom and habit of using stone inscriptions, at least for tombstones. This caught on to some extent with the local population, although it must be admitted that where they can be dated the stones of Colchester are mostly early. Using stone apparently did not become a firm or lasting habit at Colchester.

In the case of London, the situation is rather different. There is no evidence of any substantial early garrison, apart from the '200 ill-armed men' sent to Colchester in A.D. 61 by Decianus Catus (*Tac., Ann.* 14, 32), surely from London. But there was in fact a continuing military presence in London, in the form of the governor's bodyguard, presumably accommodated in the Cripplegate fort, and the staffs of the governor and the procurator,⁸ supplemented in the fourth century by the staffs of the *vicarius* of the diocese and other officials. While this 'presence' can in no way have amounted to 22 per cent of the population, it might be expected to have provided for the civilian population a continuing 'model' of the use of stone for tombstones and other purposes.

Lincoln is nearer to good building stone. Here, of 21 complete or fragmentary tombstones (*RIB* 240-68 and 272), at least twelve are military, with the alarming implication that 57 per cent of the population of the city consisted of soldiers.

It may be argued that at London, Colchester and Lincoln, a disproportionate number of early stones has survived, and that later stones had been re-used or destroyed in the medieval period. We may then turn to a part of the lowland zone where a rather higher proportion of stones may have survived. Of the 302 inscriptions of all kinds in *RIB* from the lowland zone,⁹ over 80 came from the Cotswolds,¹⁰ from the territories of the cities of Cirencester and Gloucester, and the community (which may well have become a city) at Bath. Almost all of these inscriptions are cut in local (oolitic) limestone, which is easily available and must have been much cheaper than in the south-east, given the very high cost of transport, especially by road. Even here, however, where there may well have been rather less pressure to re-use stone, examination of the 33 complete or fragmentary tombstones shows that at least nine of them were military, a proportion of 27 per cent.

In the lowland zone, then, where soldiers had been stationed for at least a short time, their habit of using stone to commemorate the dead was apparently passed on only in very small measure to the local civilian population. Similarly, the lack of civic dedications and building inscriptions suggests that the civic authorities of the lowland zone of south-eastern Britain had not really taken on board the idea of epigraphic commemoration. The same is clearly true of Gallia Comata: are we confronted here with Celtic religious scruples?

When we turn to the highland zone, to the area occupied by the military forces of Rome, we enter a region where there has been somewhat less destruction of the epigraphic record. Of the 2,216 stones included in *RIB* I (excluding milestones), 1,914 came from the areas under military occupation. Most of these are of military origin, building inscriptions or dedications by units or soldiers. When we turn to tombstones, and ask the question how far did the population of the military zone take to using tombstones to commemorate the dead, we find ourselves confronted with a different situation from that in the lowland zone. For whereas in the lowland zone the army moved on and its influence on the local population waned, in the highland zone the army remained in place to the end of Roman rule. It might have been thought that its influence would have been stronger and longer lasting in persuading the local population to commemorate in stone. But (to take figures from *RIB* I again) out of 792 inscriptions surviving from the line of Hadrian's Wall, a mere

⁷ *Tac., Ann.* 13, 32; 14, 31; *Agr.* 14, 1.

⁸ For the governor's staff the best evidence is *RIB* 19, the tombstone of a *speculator*, a judicial official only found on the staffs of governors with capital jurisdiction, although the centurion of *II Augusta* in *RIB* 17 is almost certainly the head of the governor's staff, his

princeps praetorii. For the procurator, there is reason to think that the '200 ill-armed men' of A.D. 61 were in fact from his staff.

⁹ *RIB* 1-308, less the stones, 278-83, from Derbyshire. (Milestones are excluded from these figures.)

¹⁰ *RIB* 99-186, 88 in all.

63 are tombstones, fragmentary or complete. Of these, 20 are certainly military against fifteen which seem clearly civilian. A further 28 cannot be confidently designated either military or civilian. If all of these 28 are categorized as civilian, we have a maximum of 43 civilian tombstones out of 792 inscriptions. This does not suggest that the setting up of tombstones had become popular with the local inhabitants, even though good stone was much more easily available than in the south-east, and has a better chance of surviving down to modern times. In other words, the local inhabitants of the military areas did not develop what Eric Birley has felicitously described as an 'epigraphic consciousness'. They clearly did not take to using stone inscriptions on a large scale.¹¹

This being so, then even if recruitment to the army of Britain did in fact become localized, there is no reason to think that this would show in the epigraphic record. For if men from a non-stone using milieu joined the army in numbers, they would not necessarily set up stones which would tell us about their origins, even though stone was comparatively cheap, and much used by the army for official purposes. In other words, the inscriptions from the British frontier do not tell us anything about the origins of the bulk of the soldiers of the army. We merely note that those soldiers (like their civilian counterparts in south-east Britain) did not take up the custom of setting up tombstones.

To a significant extent, indeed, the epigraphic record from the military zone reflects incomers rather than the local population, often exotic incomers from areas where the use of stone was far more common—for example the Palmyrene (*RIB* 1171, cf. 1065) and other Orientals (*RIB* 1124, 1129) at Corbridge. Tombstones record Germans, probably all military, at Chesters (*RIB* 1483) and Housesteads (*RIB* 1619–20); Pannonians appear in *RIB* 1667, 1713 and 1829, a woman from Salonae in *RIB* 1828. It is worth recalling that among civilians further south origins tend to be recorded almost solely when an individual is away from home—the man from Gloucester at Bath (*RIB* 161), the man from Kent at Colchester (*RIB* 192), the woman from Wroxeter at Ilkely (*RIB* 639) and the Dobunnian woman at Templeborough (*RIB* 621). The absence of an *origo* creates a strong presumption that the individual is of local origin.

Thus the epigraphic record does not in fact support the suggestion that 'Britons made little or no contribution to the military garrison of their own province.' The suggestion is made without taking properly into account the question of epigraphic consciousness. Stone inscriptions do not give us information about the total population of an area. They merely tell us something about the people in that area who used stone inscriptions.

University of Durham

¹¹ Saller and Shaw's figures for military populations (pp. 152–3), give 165 commemorations for Britain compared with 330 for the two Pannonias. Britain had three legions and perhaps 57 auxiliary units in the mid-second century, the Pannonias four legions but only 31 auxiliary units. (The figures for auxiliary units are supplied from her files by Dr. Margaret Roxan, to whom I am also indebted for valuable assistance in the

preparation of this paper.) The garrison of Britain is thus considerably larger than that of the two Pannonias, but it provides only half the number of funerary commemorations, of all kinds, even though stones should have a much better chance of surviving in the highland zone of Britain than among the settlements along the middle Danube.