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A New Phallic Carving from Roman Catterick

By ADAM PARKER and CATH ROSS

ABSTRACT

A phallic carving excavated by Northern Archaeological Associates in 2014 during investigations at Catterick, North Yorkshire, contained unique artistic features for a carving of this type in Roman Britain. Excavations were carried out as part of the A1 Leeming to Barton road upgrade scheme. The two features — a projecting line of ejaculate and an incised, triangular object — are here considered within the wider evidence base for phallic imagery in Roman Britain.

Keywords: phallic imagery; carving; sculpture; Yorkshire; Catterick; bridge

A sandstone block with a phallic petrosomatoglyph was recovered during archaeological investigations undertaken by Northern Archaeological Associates (NAA) at Catterick, North Yorkshire in 2014, as part of the A1 Leeming to Barton road upgrade scheme (FIG. 14).

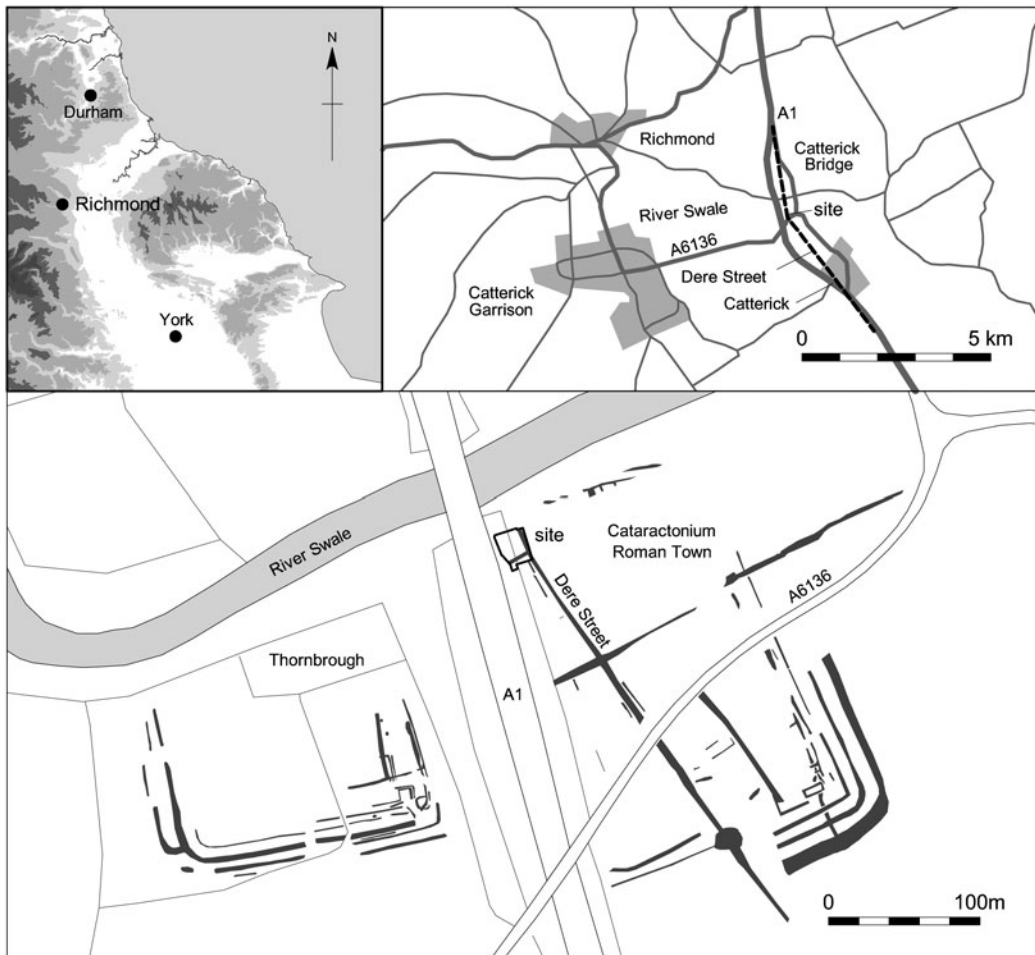


FIG. 14. Site location. (Image Courtesy of NAA)

The stone bearing the carving (RF 6010) was recovered from the excavation of Roman remains in Field 176 (F176) at Catterick and had been reused as an edging stone in a side road extending due west from the edge of Dere Street.⁸⁸ The side road (2216, FIG. 15) was traced over a length of c. 15 m within the trench. The road had an average width of 3 m and was composed of a foundation layer of cobbles (1551) overlain by a metallised surface (1538) and a subsequent mixed surface comprising flagstones and pebbles (1443/1508), bordered by edging stones, including the carved piece. The carving formed part of Group 2216.

Post-excavation analysis and interpretation of this carving has shown the associated imagery to be unique within Roman Britain. Artistic elements of the iconography associated with this carving can be discussed within the wider framework of phallic imagery in the Roman North-West provinces.

⁸⁸ Ross 2015, 11.

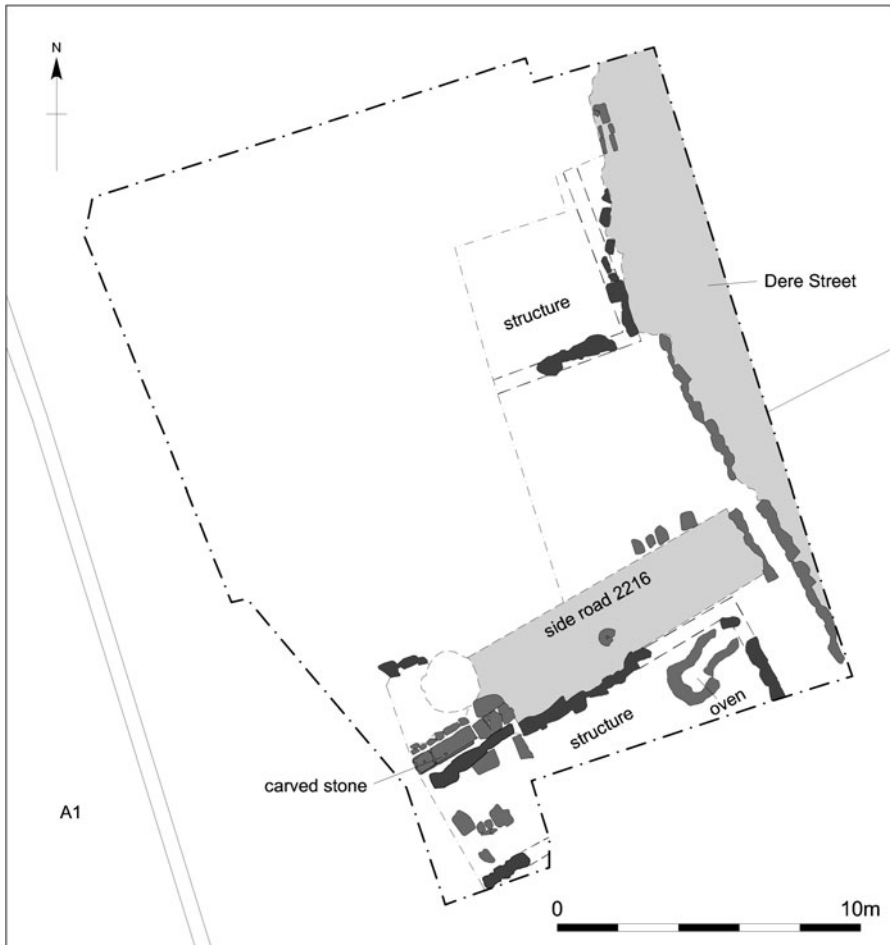


FIG. 15. Location of the sandstone block with phallic petrosomatoglyph. (Image Courtesy of NAA)

DESCRIPTION

The sandstone block upon which the carving was found is a substantial piece of masonry. It is a rectangular cuboidal stone measuring 2.25 m high, 0.6 m wide and 0.21 m thick (FIG. 16). The stone has a tapered moulding along one edge and the carved phallus on one side. Initial investigations considered the stone to be part of a door jamb, but later reassessments have concluded that the block is a component of a bridge, specifically part of a wing-wall protecting the abutment.⁸⁹

The phallic carving broadly takes the form of the ‘basic’ phallic design — a medium relief phallus depicted ithyphallic within the confines of the general rectangular frame of a building stone.⁹⁰ The shaft is decorated with diagonally incised lines along its length, creating raised ribs on each side. The two sides are not symmetrical — the upper side of the shaft (as displayed in FIG. 17) has nine such ribs, the lower edge has seven. The glans is depicted simply as a raised, sub-globular area at the appropriate terminal of

⁸⁹ Paul Bidwell, pers. comm.

⁹⁰ Parker in prep.

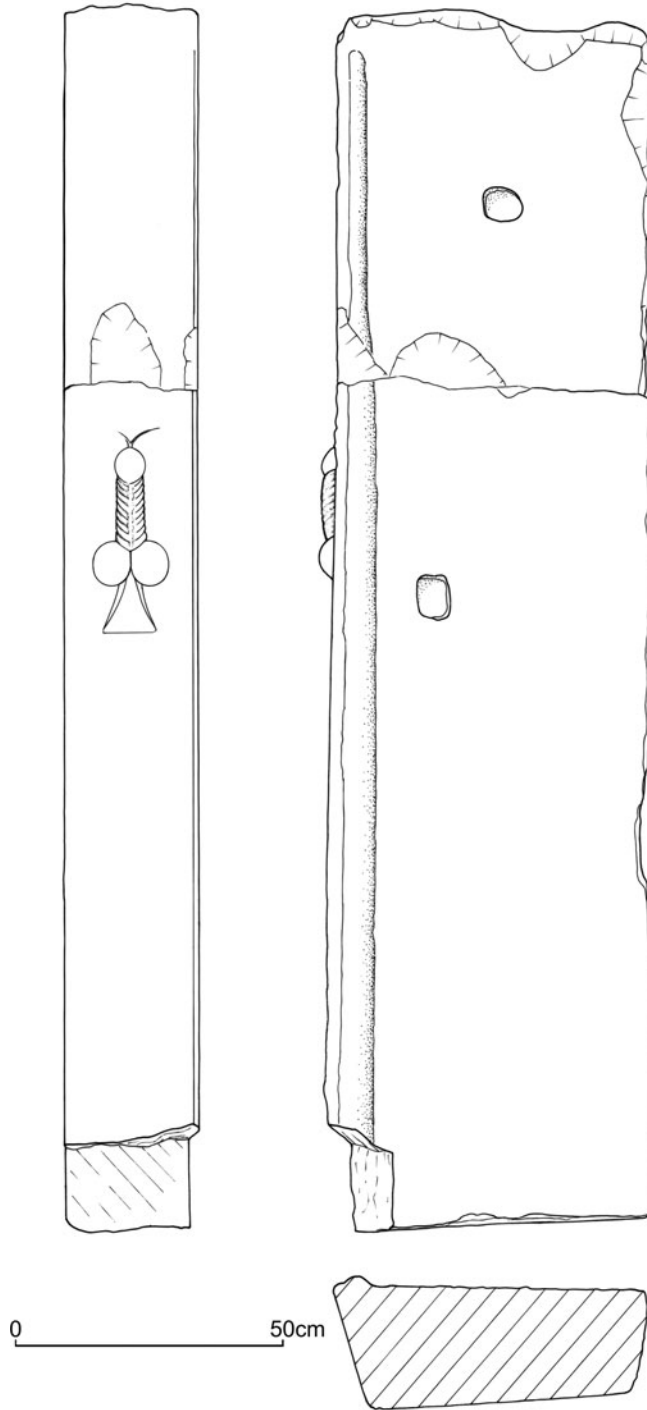


FIG. 16. Line drawing of the carving. (Image Courtesy of NAA)

the shaft. At the opposing end, a pair of large, globular testes bunch against the shaft and are otherwise anatomically correct. Carvings of this nature are always depicted ithyphallic in Britain and remain recognisable when divorced from the rest of the body.⁹¹ Two additional features are visible on this carving which are not standardised features of the type. Firstly, behind (or beneath) the testes, a continuation of the shaft column extends past the testes before expanding out to become a flattened, triangular plate, thinning in depth towards the widest point at the terminal edge. This plate is incised with a series of short, parallel lines creating a ‘comb-tooth’ effect. Secondly, a tapering linear feature, curving upwards and to the right of the glans, emanates from its tip. For ease of discussion this feature shall be referred to as the ‘projecting line’. The stone was displayed horizontally in the bridge wing-wall.



FIG. 17. Photograph of carving. (Image courtesy of Damien Ronan, NAA)

INTERPRETATION

The phallic image is widely used in Roman Britain as an aesthetic icon, an apotropaic image, a sexual gesture and as a symbol of fertility and virility.⁹² In its various forms the apotropaic functions of the phallic image were, perhaps, best conceptualised by Ralph Merrifield. In his important volume on Roman London, Merrifield described the phallic image as a kind of ‘lightning conductor’ for bad luck in the Roman world.⁹³

While the phallic image is interesting in context of its own accord, other reports have sought to investigate its apotropaic importance in detail both generally⁹⁴ and regionally.⁹⁵ Like many individual interpretations of the phallic image, the Catterick example is unique in the specific use of the imagery it incorporates. Thus it is not the actual phallic imagery which requires further interpretation in this recent discovery, but the two artistic elements which flank this example at either end — the panel at the base and the ‘projecting line’ at the tip.

The tapering, curving line projects from the tip of the glans in the manner of a bodily fluid. While urine may at least be suggested stylistically, the likelihood is that this line instead represents ejaculate. The phallus is horizontal within the frame, the downward curving line shows the effect of gravity. There is a suggestion of a second, mirrored line extending in the opposite direction, but the nature and extent of this is unclear. An

⁹¹ Johns 1982.

⁹² *ibid.*, 75.

⁹³ Merrifield 1969, 170.

⁹⁴ Johns 1982; Del Hoyo and Hoyes 1996.

⁹⁵ Plouviez 2005; Pozo 2002.

ejaculating ithyphallic carving is a type with many comparable examples from the Roman Empire, with at least two coming from the north of Roman Britain at Chesters fort on the Hadrianic frontier.⁹⁶ Such examples are part of a ‘phallus attacking the evil eye’ *topos* in which the phallic image is active and dynamic in neutralising the physical threat of a nearby evil eye. If the ‘projecting line’ is interpreted as a bodily fluid and this is intended to be directed towards another carved figure, this scene is incomplete and would otherwise require a secondary image — nominally an evil eye. The absence of an evil eye in this scene instead represents an artistic application of the idea that phalli generate protection and are capable of spreading it.

In questioning exactly what the ‘comb-toothed’ feature represents, there is no clear answer. It is problematic in its interpretation as it does not appear as an obvious feature on any other phallic carving in Britain. Its position directly behind the testes in relief may offer the anatomical interpretation that this is pubic hair. When phalli are carved as an isolated body part, divorced from the main body, it would certainly be unusual for pubic hair to be shown but it is not entirely without precedent. The stronger evidence base for small finds provides a good resource for seeking comparable examples from the North-Western provinces. The closest parallel for a triangular panel depicting pubic hair is a type of pendant depicting a flaccid phallus recorded in copper alloy,⁹⁷ gold⁹⁸ and bone,⁹⁹ which has a distribution across the North-Western provinces in the first three centuries A.D. (the exception being the bone type, which is primarily Republican in date). Interestingly, one such example, in copper alloy, was recently discovered during excavations at Healam Bridge (N Yorks.).¹⁰⁰ The hair is usually added as a later decoration in the cast copper-alloy examples, incised as parallel straight or curved lines, groups of dots, lines of dots, or groups of wavy lines. Rarely is the pubic hair realistic. Interpreting this panel as pubic hair may force a reinterpretation of the visual narrative on the Catterick carving as it has thus far been assumed — the hair is above the phallus and testes and on comparable examples this is very definitely the top or upper part of the image. The major criticism of this interpretation of the triangular panel is that it requires the extrapolation of a design from small, metal, flaccid and realistic phallic objects onto a large, stone, stylised and ithyphallic example; the two do not quite match up. The nearest comparison for an ithyphallic carving with a feature projecting behind the testes is a carving from Braceby and Sapperton (Lincs.), recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), which has a small, globular extension between and behind the testes which remains otherwise uninterpreted.¹⁰¹

Considering the triangular panel as an artistic device on its own, without the remainder of the phallic scene, the ‘comb-toothed’ panel may be considered as a representation of a comb. If it is a comb its appearance alongside the phallic image is of interest. Triangular-backed combs stylistically similar to this feature can be found in Romano-British small finds assemblages, but rarely outside of Richborough.¹⁰² Combs are utilitarian objects associated primarily with women as a cosmetic tool, but a relationship with soldiers has also been established.¹⁰³ They served an important hygienic¹⁰⁴ function in cleaning the scalp and removing lice—a physical form of continuation and personal protection¹⁰⁵ and thus one which has clear links to ideas of supernatural protection.

An apotropaic use of combs is not well established in the archaeological record for the Roman period so caution is advised when considering this interpretation. Eckardt records at least two bone hairpins depicting a hand holding a comb — a type of the ‘hand holding a circular object’ hairpin used as good luck symbols, styling tools and indicators of identity.¹⁰⁶ In this context, a phallus incorporated with a comb could represent a combination of apotropaic imagery. In the rare cases that they appear in grave assemblages

⁹⁶ Coulston and Phillips 1988, nos 404 and 407.

⁹⁷ Zarzalejos Prieto *et al.* 1988, nos 1, 2, 9, 10; Feugère 1989; Pozo 2002, nos 48–9, 55; Plouviez 2005, no. 9; PAS: KENT-E3D152.

⁹⁸ Johns 1982, 66, pl. 10.

⁹⁹ Deschler-Erb and Božič 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Bishop 2006, 42.

¹⁰¹ PAS: LIN-CFA375, recently acquired by The Collection, Lincoln.

¹⁰² Allason-Jones 2005, 136.

¹⁰³ Derks and Vos 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Parker 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 32.

¹⁰⁶ Eckardt 2014, 171.

(56 examples were recorded in 1991, predominantly in the south of Britain),¹⁰⁷ their inclusion is more likely to represent aspects of identity rather than serving a protective function. While the use of phallic imagery in inhumation graves can be considered an important apotropaic addition, this is much rarer than combs in Britain.¹⁰⁸ Variations of phalli as zoomorphic, winged beasts represent a more readily visible image in Britain, but in all cases the wings rise from the shaft rather than beneath the testes and are more anatomically correct in representing the curve of the wing and long, flowing feathers.

DISCUSSION

One major issue with the interpretation of carved phallic imagery in Roman Britain is the large number of unstratified or reused examples in which the original context of the carving is lost; this is important information in the interpretation of such imagery as carvings are permanent, static features of standing stone buildings and their physical location within a structure can offer insight into the nature and use of the carving. Johns suggests that phallic carvings were used in liminal, transitional places which garner the unfortunate focus of the evil eye.¹⁰⁹ While pragmatism dictates that doorways, cross-roads and bridges can be focal points for physical danger (through the raised chance of danger or accident), there is a very broad application of this superstitious knowledge in the north of Roman Britain¹¹⁰ where we can find a range of physical places where phallic carvings are appropriate: both Hadrian's Wall bridges at Chesters¹¹¹ and Willowford¹¹² have phallic imagery recorded on one of the banks leading up to the original platform, and examples are known from a window voussoir at Birdoswald,¹¹³ a bathhouse and the *principia* at Chesters,¹¹⁴ a building probably used as a storehouse at Vindolanda¹¹⁵ and even on a quarry wall at Barcombe Hill.¹¹⁶ This is in addition to the examples used on other linear boundaries in the region: the fortress walls at York,¹¹⁷ the Hadrianic curtain wall near Birdoswald,¹¹⁸ the *principia* wall at Carlisle¹¹⁹ and a gateway to the *colonia* at Lincoln.¹²⁰ The spatial interpretation of this example at Catterick is certainly relevant in light of these patterns of use — its use on a bridge forms part of a small group of such examples in the north of Britain.

Given the possibility raised above that the 'projecting line' feature may be ejaculate attacking an image of the evil eye, the existence of a secondary image somewhere in its vicinity would clarify the phallic scene somewhat. Phallic carvings and objects are elsewhere variously adapted into larger scenes, often depicting zoomorphic phallic creatures¹²¹ or associated with human riders.¹²²

The nearest parallel to this image used on an elongated rectangular stone is an unprovenanced example in Chesters Museum presumed to be from the Hadrian's Wall region; a simple medium-relief phallus is depicted within a rectangular cuboid building stone. The stone is, however, much smaller (0.5 m by 0.22 m by 0.11 m) and the phallic image depicted does not incorporate either the comb-toothed panel or the projecting line at the tip — both these features are unique to the Catterick carving. It is possible that the Chesters example was also used in a similar situation to that from Catterick.

¹⁰⁷ Philpott 1991, 180, fig. 32.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰⁹ Johns 1982, 64.

¹¹⁰ Parker in prep.

¹¹¹ Coulston and Phillips 1988, no. 404.

¹¹² *ibid.*, no. 457.

¹¹³ Wilmott 1997, 65, fig. 39.

¹¹⁴ Coulston and Phillips 1988, nos 405–6.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, no. 445.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, no. 442.

¹¹⁷ Tufi 1983, no. 124; RCHME 1962, 114.

¹¹⁸ Coulston and Phillips 1988, nos 458–9.

¹¹⁹ Henig 2009, 871, pl. 232.

¹²⁰ Huskinson 1994, no. 88.

¹²¹ Zoomorphic phallic images in stone: Moore 1975 and Henig 1993, 84, no. 7, and for small metallic objects:

Plouviez 2005, nos 8–10, Blazquez 1985, PAS: SF-EE7435 and PAS: WMID4035.

¹²² Plouviez 2005, no. 1.8; Moore 1975.

As with many other examples in the north of Britain, the Catterick phallic carving was found in a state of reuse, as an edging stone to a secondary road leading away from Dere Street, and in this context it forms part of a smaller group of carvings reused in such a way. The nature of this is somewhat unclear, as reuse in the third and fourth centuries may suggest an ending of the application of phallic imagery as an apotropaic icon, perhaps related to the rise of Christianity in Britain. An entirely conjectural, functional relationship may yet be suggested between the carvings and the structures in which they are reused — i.e. a road is itself a liminal place in need of supernatural protection. Other examples of reuse include in the drain of the fourth-century *principia* at Vindolanda¹²³ and in Bridge 3 at Willowford.¹²⁴

Phallic imagery is not particularly common at Catterick. Recent examples include phallic decoration on pottery and a small phallic copper-alloy object.¹²⁵ Six fist-and-phallus pendants, five from the grave of an infant (and one immediately adjacent) excavated in 1959 from the Catterick Bypass site,¹²⁶ represent a unique pendant grouping. Fist-and-phallus imagery is largely associated with the military,¹²⁷ though this group is the first which creates a direct link between the fist-and-phallus and the iconography of protection in child burial in Roman Britain.¹²⁸

Post-excavation assessment and analysis of the archaeological remains from the site continues. The archive will eventually be deposited with York Museums Trust. At the time of writing this note, a 3D scan of the carved stone by NAA was underway, but a final version was unavailable. This will be available to view at www.naa.gb.com from Summer 2016.

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¹²³ Coulston and Phillips 1988, no. 444.

¹²⁴ Coulston 1989, 142; Coulston and Phillips 1988, no. 457.

¹²⁵ Hannah Russ, pers. comm.

¹²⁶ Wilson 2002, 66–70, fig. 260, no. 244.

¹²⁷ Greep 1983.

¹²⁸ Parker 2015.

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