

VINDOLANDA

CHARITABLE TRUST

Excavation News 2009

UNIQUE SHRINE TO A MAJOR ROMAN GOD UNEARTHED AT VINDOLANDA

The Vindolanda excavation team has uncovered a unique religious shrine next to the north gate of the fort.

"What should have been part of the rampart mound near to the north gate of the fort has turned out to be an amazing religious shrine with a substantial and exceptionally well preserved altar dedicated by a prefect of the Fourth Cohort of Gauls to an important eastern god, Jupiter of Doliche.

We estimate that this highly decorated stone altar, standing some 110 cms. High, and showing the god standing on a bull holding an axe and a thunderbolt, is around 1.5 tons in weight.

The inscription reads: *"To Jupiter Best and Greatest of Doliche, Sulpicius Pudens, prefect of the Fourth Cohort of Gauls, fulfilled his vow gladly and deservedly"*.

Jupiter of Doliche's cult centre was in modern southern Turkey and his worship spread rapidly in the Roman Army where he was regarded as all powerful and strongly associated with Rome's Jupiter.

Major altars like this are very rare finds and to discover such a shrine inside the fort is highly unusual. The shrine also has evidence of animal sacrifice and possible religious feasting. It all adds to the excitement of the excavations and is a once in a lifetime experience for most excavators" Andrew Birley - Director of Excavations.

Stop Press: The bottom half of a second altar has also been discovered in the shrine. This altar was dedicated by a prefect of the Second Cohort of Nervians, a Vindolanda regiment that then moved to the fort at Whitley Castle in the third century.

Roman Vindolanda: Roman Vindolanda is situated in the heart of the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site, just to the north of the village of Bardon Mill, Northumberland. Roman Vindolanda is one of the most exciting sites along Hadrian's Wall with its wealth of archaeological remains and ongoing excavations.

The 2009 Vindolanda excavations continue until mid September and trench edge talks by archaeologists are given at 2pm each day during the school holiday period.

Note by Professor Anthony Birley
Chair of The Vindolanda Trust

A massive altar has just been found at Vindolanda, dedicated to an eastern deity by the commanding officer of the regiment based there in the third century, the Fourth Cohort of Gauls. The text reads:

I.O.M. Dolocheno Sulpicius Pu dens praef coh IIII Gall V. S. L. M.

"To Jupiter Best and Greatest of Doliche, Sulpicius Pudens, prefect of the Fourth Cohort

of Gauls, fulfilled his vow gladly and deservedly".

Sulpicius Pudens is surely the same man who is named as commander of the Fourth Gauls on another altar, found in 1949 reused in the mediaeval tower of Staward Pele, 4 miles SSE of Vindolanda.

The Vindolanda altar has a fine relief on one side, showing the god standing on the bull, the other side having the traditional jug and patera. An unusual feature of the new altar is that it was found inside the fort, in what may be a small shrine built close to the fort wall. Most altars and shrines were placed outside.

The god called by the Romans Juppiter Dolichenus (the usual spelling, but Dolochenus, as at Vindolanda, or Dolychenus, are also found), "Juppiter of Doliche", was originally an ancient weather god, known to the Semitic peoples of the Middle East as Hadad and to the Hittites as Teshab. The original cult centre was on a hilltop close to the small town of Doliche (the modern Dülük in southern Turkey) in mountainous territory west of the River Euphrates, that was ruled by many different great powers over the centuries, such as the Hittites, Assyrians, Persians and finally the Hellenistic Seleucid dynasty. Later, in 162 BC, the land became independent as the kingdom of Commagene.

Recent excavations have discovered remains at the sanctuary near Doliche, going back to the early first millennium BC. Commagene was finally annexed by the Romans in AD 72, and the god of Doliche seems not to have attracted Roman worshippers until the early second century AD. But from then on the cult took off and spread all over the empire, in frontier provinces being favoured by the officers and men of the Roman army (although in total civilian worshippers predominated). The god was regarded as all-powerful and identified with the traditional chief Roman god, Juppiter Optimus Maximus, "Juppiter Best and Greatest", abbreviated IOM. He is generally portrayed standing on a bull, and holding an axe in one hand and a thunderbolt in the other. Sometimes his consort is also portrayed, identified with the Roman goddess Juno and given the added name Dolichena or Regina, "Queen", and standing on a heifer. The worshippers of Dolichenus in Britain all seem to have lived in the second or third centuries AD. In the 250s AD the original cult centre at Doliche was captured by the Persians and this is thought to have resulted in disillusionment-the god was not all powerful after all-and the cult soon died out almost everywhere. All the same, the shrine at Chesters on the Wall-where a fine statue of Juno Regina on a heifer still survives in the Museum-is now known from a recently discovered inscription still to have existed in AD 286. Maybe the news of the disaster to Doliche had not reached the far west.

Unlike other eastern mystery religions, such as that of Isis and Serapis, the Syrian Goddess (worshipped at Carvoran) or Mithras, there are absolutely no literary references to Dolichenus, so all that we know about the religion is based on some 300 surviving inscriptions and sculptures from different parts of the Roman Empire-about twenty are known in Britain. Quite a few dedications state that the worshipper had set them up "by the command of the god". It is not certain how this "command" was transmitted: sometimes it was through a dream, but Dolichenus had priests in his service, who seem to have spread the cult and passed on the god's commands to their converts.



Vindolanda Jupiter of Doliche Altar July 2009



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