ALTAR AND TOMBSTONES

Reading Roman Altars

To read an altar, we must first become familiar with its anatomy. For alongside the text inscribed on the die, we can also ‘read’ the function of the object from its shape and decoration.

- **Focus**: bowl shaped depression to receive offering
- **Pulvini**: bolsters, depicted here as bunches of incense
- **Capital**: the head of the altar
- **Die**: inscribed surface
- **Base**: The lower section of the altar. Some altars stood on a specially made platform

The inscriptions all follow a similar format, there lots of abbreviations and no spaces between words. Also remember most Roman citizens had 3 names.
Let’s look at some examples
These examples are on display at the Great Northern Museum in Newcastle ALL dedicated to Mithras from his temple at Carrowbough. (There are replicas in the actual temple)

The letters in brackets show the abbreviations.

There is a hole behind the head where a torch could be put to light up the dark temple and make the alter quite impressive. The dedication to Mithras is followed by the 3 names of the dedicant, then his title “prefect” followed by the vow. It does not give the unit as the temple is only yards from the fort.
This has a focus for offerings. In the dedication Mithras is reduced to M. The cohort has a very long title and from that the altar can be dated to between 211AD and 222AD (the time when cohort used that title) it would appear the title frequently added too.
D is dedication M is Mithras and S is sacred. Then his name followed by his position. Then his voting tribe in Rome and where he can from, which is Italy (very unusual). Colonia Septimia Aurelia gives us the region L gives the clue and has the same name as rather more famous ancestor confirming Larinum, which became a “colony” in 208AD, means that it dates from after that date.

It is all a bit like advance “Round Britain Quiz”. All thanks to Prof Ian Haynes

Later in the year will going to Maryport, where the altars are dedicated to Jupiter i.e. IOM not M. Mithras.
Reading Roman Tombstones

These followed a sort of standard format, but had a lot of abbreviations. There is a lot of information in the image.

Standard Bearer in Hexham Abbey.

The tombstone shows a cavalryman on a horse and has the troop standard in this hand, the man under the horse is barbarian, and useful to fill the space under the horse.

Line 1: To the spirits of the departed - FLAVINVS
Line 2: Cavalryman of PETR regiment, Standard Bearer
Line 3: of troop of CANDIDA died at 25 years
Line 4: after 7 years of service-is buried here

The PETR regiment was 1000 strong elite cavalry regiment based at Carlisle, the only 1000 strong cavalry regiment in Britain.
Victor

Victor on a couch possibly at his own funnel banquet, he has his own servant under the couch. He is a former slave and it is interesting that a mere trooper had his own servant. (Or partner?).
Regina is sat on high wicker chair. She has a long flowing dress and is working with her wool in a bag on her right. On her left she is opening a jewellery box symbolising her wealth from her husband. Barates comes from Palmyrene in Syria. Regina again a former slave came from a tribe in Southern England. This indicates how international the Empire was and a master could free his slave and marry her. The inscription was also in Palmyrenen.