

## BOOK REVIEW

*Britannia Romana: Roman Inscriptions and Roman Britain*. By R.S.O. TOMLIN. Oxford, UK and Philadelphia, PA: Oxbow Books, 2018. Pp. xvi + 472. Hardback, \$80.00. ISBN: 978-1-78570-700-1.

Retelling the history of Roman Britain through the medium of inscriptions is a splendid idea, and there can be no one better qualified to carry out the task than Roger Tomlin, who has been immersed in epigraphy for over forty years (the first of his annual round-ups of new Romano-British inscriptions, jointly with Mark Hassall, appeared in 1975). He has taken as his model *The Romans in Britain: an anthology of inscriptions* by A.R. Burn (Oxford 1969, long out-of-print), and he writes with the same easy style that guarantees an accessible yet authoritative text. Indeed, many of Tomlin's more pithy turns of phrase are worthy of Burn, such as likening the rapid development of business opportunities in the wake of the conquering legions as "vultures flapping close behind the eagles of Rome" (36), or portraying the inscribed face of *RIB* 649 (item 9.10, York), an altar left to weather and decay outside Oxford University's Sheldonian Theatre, as "something resembling a dirty snowdrift" (205).

Inevitably, many more inscriptions have come to light in the half-century since Burn wrote, so that, with a far larger pool to choose from, Tomlin has retained only about 120 of Burn's selection; the other 360 or so include writing tablets from Vindolanda, Carlisle and the London Mithraeum and curse tablets from Bath and Uley, alongside inscriptions on stone. Naturally, old favourites remain, such as *RIB* 665 (item 4.16, York), the latest dateable inscription of the Ninth Legion (where Tomlin is able to correct Burn's 'IMP VII' to *RIB*'s 'IMP VI'),<sup>1</sup> or *RIB* 2110 (item 6.33, Birrens), a much-restored jigsaw of thirteen fragments (where, unfortunately, the accompanying photograph shows the restoration originally proposed by James Macdonald in the 1896 excavation report, which rashly omitted "Pius" from Antoninus Pius' titulature, rather than Haverfield's version,

<sup>1</sup> On this inscription and on the Ninth Legion generally, see now my *The Fate of the Ninth* (Glasgow 2018).

adopted in Tomlin's text). In addition, he has managed to root out less well-known items, such as *ILS* 2730 (item 2.09, Rome), the tombstone of a former commander of an "*ala Hispanorum in Britannia*," rescued from "a reeking patch of weeds inside the Porta di San Paolo" (26; though Tomlin mistakenly renders *L(ucio) Stlaccio Frontoni fratri* as "for Lucius Stlaccius Capito, his brother"), or *RIB* 1228 (item 9.15, Risingham), an obscure metrical altar which Tomlin elegantly links with *RIB* 1482 (item 9.14, Chesters) to give us a fleeting glimpse of one equestrian officer's family life rivalling the examples from the Vindolanda correspondence.<sup>2</sup>

In the first eight chapters, Tomlin brings the history of Roman Britain down to AD 211, after which he inserts four thematic chapters treating civilian inscriptions alongside military ones, so that we catch a glimpse of the private alongside the public, before two final chapters take the story down to AD 409. Tomlin wears his learning lightly, and his occasional digressions into linguistics make fascinating reading: for example, *RIB* 908 (item 9.55, Old Carlisle), where *vigsit annos sexaginta* (for the expected *vixit annos sexaginta*) gives us a valuable insight into contemporary pronunciation, or *AE* 1992, 1127 (item 11.04, Uley), where the phrase *si baro, si mulier* indicates that *baro*, in literature indicating a simpleton, had become synonymous with "man" in the spoken Latin of the populace.

It is a pity, then, that Tomlin's publisher appears to have skimmed on the copy-editing, as is evident from the surprising number of typographical errors, bibliographical omissions and incorrect cross-references for a book with such high production values. Equally, there are a few items where words in the Latin transcript have been omitted from the translation.<sup>3</sup> But I noted only one instance where words on the inscription have been missed from the transcript: the thumbnail photograph of *ILS* 7523 (item 11.38, Bordeaux) shows the traces of "*h(eres) f(aciendum) c(uravit)*" at the base of the stone; however, at least Tomlin is in good company here, as this line was also missed by both Dessau and Hirschfeld. Similar greyscale photographs accompany around half of the items, and in most cases are sufficiently clear for the reader to make out the lettering. However, the puzzling insertion of an image of *RIB* 1638 (Hotbank milecastle) beside the text of *RIB* 1852 (item 5.18, Chapel House milecastle) caused this reviewer much head-

<sup>2</sup> The two inscriptions were already linked by J. Hodgson, *A History of Northumberland*, Part II, Vol. 1 (1827), p. 177, but not noted in *RIB* or, apparently, elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. *ann(orum) XXXVIII* in item 2.12; *cor(ona) aurea* in item 3.20; *cui prae(c)st M(arcus) Aemilius Bassus* in item 4.12; *heredes* in item 9.18.

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scratching before the realisation finally dawned that it belongs with the discussion of item 5.17 (*RIB* 1637, Hotbank milecastle) overleaf.

These shortcomings should all be laid at the publisher's door and should not be allowed to detract from Tomlin's considerable achievement. In fact, he should be congratulated on having crafted a first-rate book.

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