

Small Finds of South Shields Roman Fort Notes No. 5: small altars

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Introduction

Roman altars range considerably in size from 100mm to over 1.5m in height, but at the lower end there is a peak in examples in the region of approximately one Roman foot (*c.*300mm) high (Fig. 1). The excavations at South Shields fort have produced a total of six altars that can be classified as 'small' (with heights from 205mm to 320mm), all made from local sandstone. They are all easily carried by a single person, each weighing under 20kg (a modern commonly recommended maximum weight for a single person to carry is 25kg). There is a fragment of a seventh altar that is probably just outside this grouping (Croom 2010, fig. 21, from the 1973 excavations in the *vicus* to the south-west of the fort). It is of unknown height, but its surviving dimensions are similar to altars ranging in height from 360mm (estimated weight *c.*31kg; unknown site on Hadrian's Wall, CSIR I.1, no. 343) up to 480mm (estimated weight *c.*44kg; Carrawburgh, CSIR I.6, no. 149). There is also a single example of a rare miniature altar, just 40mm tall, made from a non-local fine-grained oolitic limestone (Croom 1994, fig. 7.15, no. 119, from inside the fort).

The small altars were not large enough to use during sacrificial ceremonies but were instead votive offerings, many of them bearing inscriptions recording that they had been given as the result of a religious vow. As they were small enough to be carried by a single person they could easily be taken to the shrines or temples where they were to be deposited by the person who had bought them, unlike the larger altars, which would require transport and additional personnel to move them. While the small altars were bought by the lower classes who could not afford full-sized ones, the dedications reflect the interests of the givers: most are to local gods and very few to the major state deities.

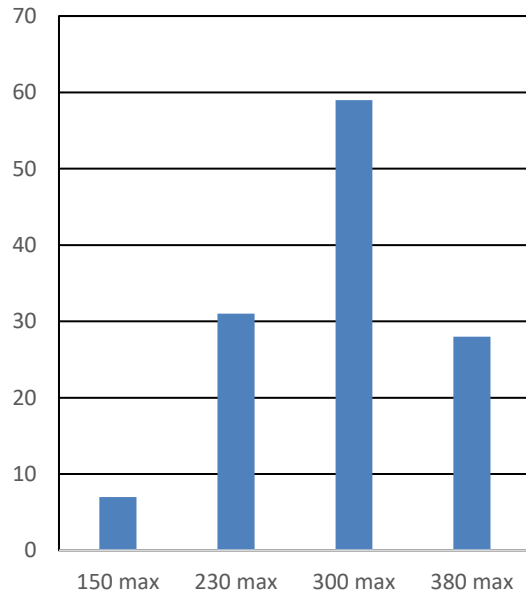


Fig. 1: A survey group of 125 small altars divided according to their maximum height (in mm), from about half a Roman foot (150mm) to a foot (300mm) to a foot and a quarter (375mm).

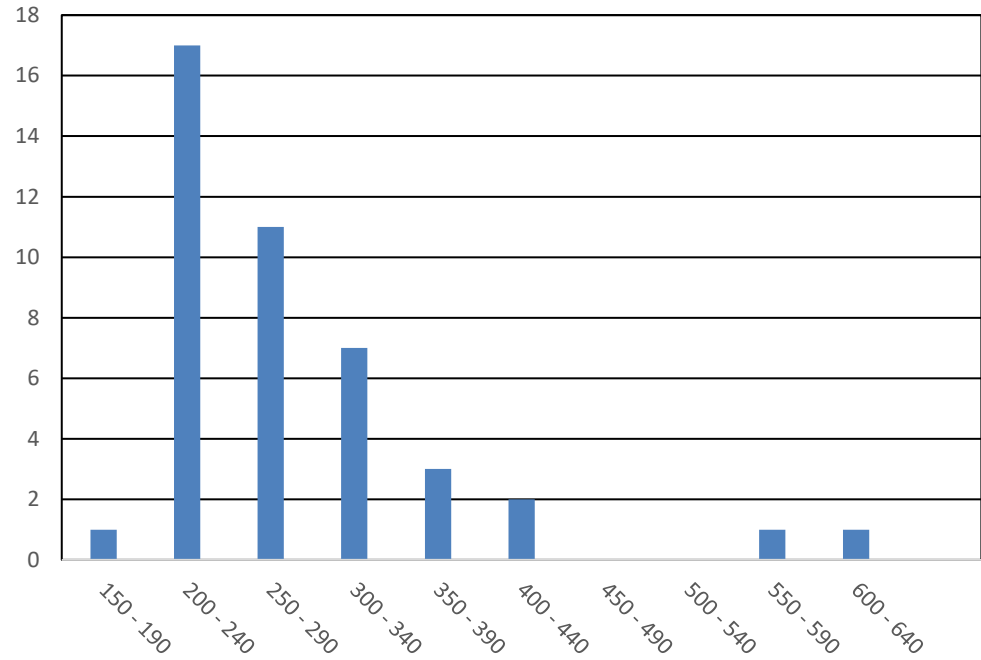




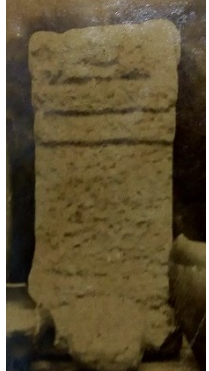







Fig. 2: Altars dedicated to Vitiris, by height (in mm).

Table 1: The small altars from South Shields (measurements are in mm).

	sketch	photo	current image	year	H	W	D	acc. no.	details
1				1880	255	140		NEWMA : 1956.54. A	<p>Recorded: 20 February 1880</p> <p>a) Blair 1957, 19, sketch labelled 'Household Altar, 20.2.80' (So. Shields)'; with measurements 9.5in by 5.5in [240 x 140mm]</p> <p>a) A letter by Blair read out at the British Archaeological Association meeting of 7 April suggests it was found in late March ('a week or two ago'), but the description 'a small altar, 10in by 5in [255 x 125mm] ... discovered on the site of the <i>Castrum</i> here' sounds like this February altar (Anon. 1880, 237)</p>
2				1880	320	170	150	TWCMS : T1503	<p>Recorded: 24 April 1880</p> <p>a) Blair 1957, 17, sketch labelled 'Lawe. Roman Altar (uninscribed) 24.4.80 (Stephens)' [ie. in the collection of Rev. T. Stephens; the Lawe is the name of the locality]. Measurements on sketch: 12in x 6in [300 x 150mm]</p> <p>b) Blair 1957, 127 (photo: see left)</p> <p>c) an altar of these dimensions was found 'a few days ago ... on the site of the Roman Station' in a newspaper report of 6 May (<i>Shields Daily News</i>)</p>

	sketch	photo	current image	year	H	W	D	acc. no.	details
									d) Blair sent a sketch of an altar of these dimensions to the British Archaeological Association meeting of 19 May, saying it was found 'at the Roman Castrum in April' (Anon. 1880, 356)
3				1880	205	125	75	Location unknown	Recorded: September 1880 a) Blair 1957, 122, sketch labelled 'Lawe / Altar (Sept 80) / Museum'. Measurements on sketch: H: 8in [205mm] W: 5in [125mm] W(shaft): 4in [100mm] D: 3in [75mm] (b) Possibly the example stolen in 1965 (<i>Shields Gazette</i> , 17 July 1965), although this was described as 11in tall and 5in wide (in which case it was possibly no. 2, and recovered)
4				1881 ?	180 +	190	140	TWCMS : 2017.508	No details of where or when this was found; it could be the 'fragment of small altar' recorded on 11 July 1881 (<i>Shields Daily News</i>), but no further details are given in the report

	sketch	photo	current image	year	H	W	D	acc. no.	details
5				1986	260	170	120	TWCMS : T1502	Re-used in late fourth-century retaining wall in ditch outside the south-west gate; burnt. Dedicated to Vitires Bidwell and Speak 1994, fig. 5.1, no. 2; <i>RIB</i> 3268; https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/incriptions/3268
6				2013	275	130	110	SF no. S782	Found during the removal of disturbed material overlying the Roman layers outside the south corner of the fort wall

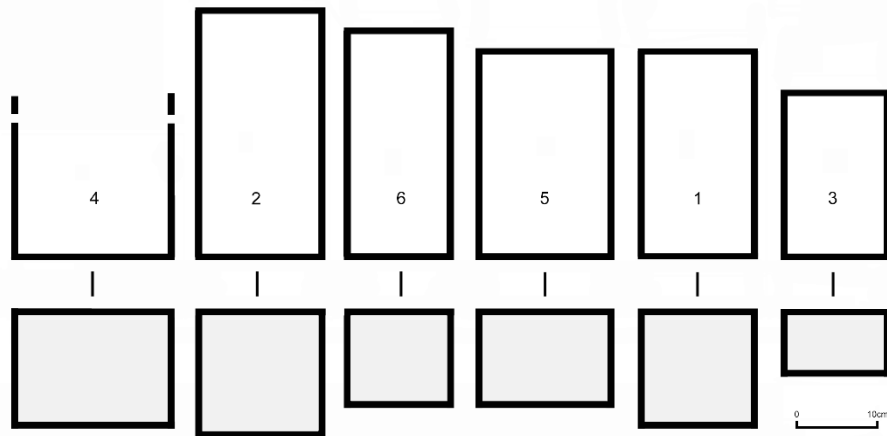


Fig. 3: The relative sizes of the altars (the numbers refer to Table 1).

Discussion

Uninscribed

Five out of the six are uninscribed, though it is possible they originally had painted inscriptions. This would be suitable for altars kept inside a building such as a temple, but if left outside at a shrine or similar the inscription would only last a couple of years before needing to be renewed, although a few years may have been all that was needed for the deity and fellow worshippers to see that the donor had fulfilled their vow. It has also been suggested that the inscribed altars could relate to a specific vow while the uninscribed examples were given as a more general thanksgiving offering (Esmonde Cleary 2008, 109).

Inscribed

The single example with a carved inscription (no. 5 above) was dedicated to the god Vitiris. This is the most common deity recorded on small altars. It appears as both male and female, singular and plural, with at least 18 different variations in the spelling of the name. It was a popular northern deity (the southernmost example of an altar bearing its name is at York), and is found particularly in the central section of Hadrian's Wall. There are 59 surviving examples of altars dedicated to the deity, almost all small in size (Fig. 2), of which 28 specifically mention a vow. Of the 43 examples with a complete surviving height, 65% came from altars 200-300mm in height, generally below the average height for this type of small altars, and possibly reflective of the social status of those who bought and dedicated

them. There are only two examples possibly tall enough to have been used as functional altars (*RIB* 971, 1046), although even these are small by usual standards.

Location

The exact finds-spot for the altars, and whether they came from the fort or the *vicus*, is only known for the two examples found during modern excavations (nos 5-6). One (no. 5) was re-used as building material, something their small size made them susceptible to. Two of the Victorian finds are described as coming from the site of the Castrum, but this does not necessarily mean inside the fort walls, as at this period they did not distinguish between fort and *vicus*. It is of note that three were found in a single year, 1880. It is known there was building work being carried out in the area of the Roman cemetery during this year, but possibly also in and near the fort itself. In July 1879 the plans for the new Infants School, situated outside the south-west fort wall near the south corner, were approved while in September work had started on enclosing (although not clearing) part of the fort with a wall and railings, one side of which ran through the *vicus* outside the south-west fort wall, and it is possible some of this building work continued into early 1880. If the slighter larger altar found in 1973 is included, then out of seven altars three have been found between the south-west gate and south corner of the fort, and three more *potentially* from the same area.

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