

What's in a name? Cocidius and the Epigraphy of Local Deities in the Roman Empire

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Abstract:

Local cults and regional deities in the Roman provinces, especially the northwest provinces, are often known primarily through epigraphic evidence. This presents methodological challenges for reconstructing the social functions of local gods. Scholarship has often turned to etymological analyses of theonyms that are linguistically Celtic or Germanic in origin, or to aligning names on inscriptions with unlabelled local iconographies or with material that is geographically or chronologically remote from the inscriptions' Roman provincial context. These methods, often rooted in flawed conceptions of 'Celtic' culture in the western provinces, are understandable but frequently problematic attempts to 'make more' of our fragmentary evidence. In this article, I use the cult of Cocidius, a god attested primarily through epigraphy from Hadrian's Wall, to explore a more holistic approach to small bodies of epigraphic material. In the case of Cocidius, this approach allows us to see how the god's epigraphy was being harnessed by the Roman army to reinforce landscapes of militarized power and place. More broadly, this case study offers a road map toward a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the diverse social roles of regional gods in the Roman provinces, and how we can access those roles through epigraphy.

Keywords: Epigraphy, local cults, Cocidius, theonyms, provincial religion, military religion, Roman Britain, Hadrian's Wall, Celtic

1 Introduction

Religious inscriptions from the Roman world present us with two, overlapping but not identical, conundrums. First: how can we understand the social role of these text-objects in their ancient contexts? What may the act of setting up an inscription have meant, not only to the dedicators themselves but to their communities and audiences (both human and divine)? How may the texts of inscriptions – so often both brief and abbreviated - have evoked for people a much wider set of religious concepts and worldviews? How did these monuments fit – both physically and conceptually – into wider socioreligious landscapes? In brief: what, for these people, was the point of this?

The second conundrum is a methodological one. How do we, as modern scholars, best make use of this tantalizing yet deceptively tricky body of evidence? Although our answers to this second problem will obviously have bearing on how well we can handle the first, they are not the same issue, and confusing the two can lead us into difficult waters. Ancient audiences had ways of approaching epigraphic monuments (again, both physically and conceptually) that we can and must reflect on, but which we cannot recreate for ourselves. For example, we can recognize that worshippers' understandings of the *identity* of a deity (including its name) will have played a vital role in their epigraphic encounters with that god.¹ Yet, depending on our surviving evidence, it is an understanding that we may not be able to access – and attempting to do so may be unproductive at best, and actively counterproductive at worst. If we want to find our way to how ancient people encountered their gods, our own approaches may need to be different to theirs.

In this article, I grapple with these issues through the lens of our evidence for the cult of the god Cocidius in Roman Britain. This evidence, distributed on/around the western half of Hadrian's Wall, is almost entirely epigraphic, and – at around two dozen inscriptions – conveniently sized for

¹ Belayche, Prost 2005, 18; Bonnet et al. 2021a, 364–366.

my purposes. This is enough material that we surely should be able to say *something* interesting about the god – but what? Cocidius also sits usefully in between gods where the entirety of our evidence for them consists of a single inscription, and gods where we have an (over)abundance of evidence. As a result, we can use him to reflect on how our methodologies – and to some degree our questions – must be driven by not just the nature but the quantity of our material. Here, I use Cocidius to engage with a number of key issues and current debates relating not just to our understanding of the role of inscriptions in Roman religion, but also our conceptions of local/regional gods in the Roman empire (in particular the northwest provinces), our approaches to religion in Roman military contexts, our methodologies for understanding the significance of theonyms (and what we should do with them), and how we handle the intersection between inscriptions (as objects/texts), archaeology, iconography, and human landscapes. In the process, I hope to advance our understanding of what a cult like this – and this cult specifically – was doing in the social world of the edge of empire in Britain.

2 Introducing (our evidence for) Cocidius

The Romano-British frontier must be thought of as a border region, consisting not only of the linear barrier of Hadrian's Wall (and, in the mid-2nd-century, the Antonine Wall), but also the militarized network of forts to both its north and south. These forts were garrisoned by auxiliary units, drawn from all corners of the empire, and the multicultural, multiethnic society that resulted has been the focus of considerable attention in recent years.² At the same time, recent scholarship has rightly emphasized how the frontier was shot through with the dynamics of imperialism.³ The construction of the Wall brought with it serious and permanent disruption to indigenous settlement, for example, and the enduring social impacts of the region's militarization during the Roman period should not be underestimated.⁴

The epigraphic habit in Britain is notoriously skewed towards military communities; the vast majority of inscriptions from the province come from military contexts or from militarized areas like the frontier. Most of those inscriptions are also religious. This means that religious epigraphy offers a valuable window onto the dynamics of frontier society in Britain, but one that is largely shaped by military perspectives. This has implications for the sorts of questions we ask of the material.

The gods of the frontier range, unsurprisingly, from gods worshiped widely in military settings throughout the empire, such as Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the Emperor, to deities with much more constrained distributions. Cocidius is one of several deities who appear in the epigraphic record of the Romano-British frontier zone, but who have few if any attestations elsewhere. Some of these gods and goddesses – e.g. Coventina at Carrawburgh (*Roman Inscriptions of Britain* 1522-1535), or Antenociticus (*RIB* 1327-1329) at Benwell, both forts on Hadrian's Wall – are (so far) venerated epigraphically only at their temple sites, while others – e.g. the Veteres or Belatucadrus – are spread more widely through the frontier zone.⁵ These regional distributions, along with non-Latin etymologies for many regional theonyms, invite questions about what it means for a god to be 'local' and how and whether we think localized pantheons intersect with pre-Roman/'indigenous' cosmologies, which will be explored at greater length below. In this section, however, I wish simply to

² e.g. Gardner 2007; Nesbitt 2016; cf. Hingley 2010.

³ Gardner 2013, 11–14; Symonds 2021.

⁴ Bruhn, Hodgson 2022.

⁵ For Coventina and Antenociticus, see, respectively, Allason-Jones and McKay 1985 and Bruce 1865; Rendal 1865. (Two inscriptions from NW Spain and one from Narbonne are also possibly dedicated to Coventina, but it is hard to square them with the rest of our evidence for the cult, and whether they are secure evidence for the worship of the goddess on the continent is, to my mind, an open question (Allason-Jones, McKay 1985, 4–6).) For the Veteres, see Birley 2008; Goldberg 2009, 127–197, and for Belatucadrus Fairless 1984, 225–228.

lay out our evidence for Cocidius and his cult, before moving on to these various questions of interpretation.

2.1 Cocidius in the epigraphic record

Twenty-two dedications in stone, all altars, to Cocidius are known, along with two silver votive plaques, and one further altar, now lost, which apparently read *Deo Co[...]*; see Table 1 for the list of known inscriptions and dedicatee(s)/dedicator(s). The dedications are concentrated in the western section of Hadrian's Wall (including outlying forts), with three notable outliers at Lancaster (Lancashire), Ebchester (County Durham), and Risingham (Northumberland) (Figure 1, excluding altars with uncertain findspots).

RIB number	Dedication	Dedicator(s)	Find-spot and notes
602	<i>Deo sancto Marti Cocidio</i>	Vibenus Lucius <i>b(ene)f(iciarius) co(n)s(ularis)</i>	Lancaster
966	<i>Deo sancto Cocidio</i>	Paternius Maternus <i>tribunus coh(ortis) I Nervan(a)e ex euocato Palatino</i>	Now at Netherby Hall, may have come from either Netherby or Bewcastle
985	<i>Deo sancto Cocidio</i>	Annius Victor <i>centur(io) legionis[us]</i>	Bewcastle
986	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	None	Silver plaque, found in <i>sacellum</i> of Bewcastle <i>principia</i>
987	<i>Deo D(e)o Coc(i)djo</i>	Au(e)ntinus <i>f(ecit)</i>	Silver plaque, found in <i>sacellum</i> of Bewcastle <i>principia</i>
988	<i>Sancto Cocideo</i>	Aurunc(eius) Felicessemus <i>tribun(us) ex euocato</i>	Bewcastle
989	<i>Deo sancto Cocidio</i>	Q(uintus) Peltrasi[us] Maximus <i>trib(unus) ex corniculario praef(ectorum) pr[ae]torio em(inentissimorum) u(ironum)</i>	Bewcastle
993	<i>Deo Ma[rt]i Cocid(io) sancto</i>	Aeliu[s] Vitalianus	Bewcastle
1017	<i>Riocalat(i) [To]utat(i) M[ar(ti)] Cocidio</i>	Vitalis	Uncertain – possibly Old Carlisle
1102	<i>Deo Vernostono Cocidio</i>	Viri[l]is <i>Ger(manus)</i>	Ebchester
1207	<i>Deo Cocidio et Silluano...</i>	Unknown	Risingham
1577	<i>Cocidio [et] Genio pr[ae]sidi</i>	Valerius <i>m(iles) l[e]g(ionis) VI V(ictricis) P(iae) F(idelis)</i>	Housesteads

1578	<i>Deo Siluano Cocidio</i>	Q(uintus) Florius Maternus <i>praef(ectus)</i> <i>coh(ortis) I Tungrorum</i>	Housesteads
1583	<i>I(oui) O(ptimo)</i> <i>M(aximo) et deo</i> <i>Cocidio Genioq(ue)</i> <i>hui(u)s loci</i>	<i>mil(ites) leg(ionis) II</i> <i>Aug(ustae) agentes in</i> <i>praesidio</i>	Housesteads
1633	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	Vabrius	Near Milecastle 37
1683	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	Decimus Caerellius Victor <i>pr(aefectus)</i> <i>coh(ortis) II</i> <i>Ner(uiorum)</i>	Built into cottage at Hardriding, 1¾ miles SW of Vindolanda
1872	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>coh(ors) I Aelia</i> <i>[Dacorum c(ui)</i> <i>p(raest) Tere]ntius</i> <i>Valerianus [tribunus</i>	Probably Birdoswald, in or before 1694
1885	<i>Deo Co[c]i[di]o</i>	Unknown	Birdoswald. Primary text, with a later inscription to IOM cut on top
1955	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>milites I[eg(ionis)] II</i> <i>Aug(ustae)</i>	Milecastle 52
1956	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>milites leg(ionis) XX</i> <i>V(aleriae) V(ictricis)</i>	Milecastle 52; consular date of 262- 266 (Gallic Empire)
1961	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>uexil[(l)atio] leg(ionis)</i> <i>VI V[ic(tricis)</i>	Cottage garden at Howgill, east of Milecastle 55
1963	<i>Deo Co[c]idio...</i>	Unknown	Seen 1833 at Low Wall, near Howgill, east of Milecastle 55. Now lost.
2015	<i>[D]eo Marti [C]ocidio</i> <i>[...et] Genio uali(?)</i>	Martius [<i>c(enturio)</i> <i>c]oh(ortis) I</i> <i>Ba(t(auorum)</i>	Foundations of Hadrian's Wall, west of Milecastle 59
2020	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>milites leg(ionis) VI</i> <i>Vic(tricis) P(iae)</i> <i>F(idelis)</i>	Near Milecastle 60
2024	<i>Marti Coc(idio)</i>	<i>m(ilites) leg(ionis) II</i> <i>Aug(ustae) c(enturia)</i> <i>Sanctiana c(enturia)</i> <i>Secundini, sub cura</i> <i>Aeliani c(enturionis)</i> <i>cura(uit) Oppius [F]elix</i> <i>optio</i>	Near Milecastle 65

The dynamics of this epigraphy of course form the focus of the rest of this paper. Here, I merely wish to present key aspects of the texts.

First, the dedications. More than half of the inscriptions – 15 in all, including the two silver plaques – are to Cocidius alone. Dedications to Cocidius – still *tout court* – are combined with

dedications to other gods on at least two, probably three altars: *RIB* 1577, to Cocidius and the Genius Praesidi(i), *RIB* 1583, to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Cocidius, and the Genius Huius Loci, and (probably) *RIB* 1207, which has usually been read as to Cocidius and Silvanus, but the text is heavily damaged and the second line, where Silvanus' name theoretically appears, open to interpretation. We then have six altars dedicated to 'syncretic' versions of Cocidius. Three are to Mars Cocidius, one is to Mars Cocidius and the Genius Vali(?),⁶ one is to Cocidius Silvanus, and one is to Cocidius Vernostonus⁷. The final stone (*RIB* 1017) is apparently to Riocalatis Toutatis Mars Cocidius. Whether any 'et's should be supplied in the text (*RIB* translates it as 'To Riocalatis, Toutatis, and Mars Cocidius') is unclear – and it should be noted that this altar is fragmentary, the list of deities potentially controversial (especially Toutatis, very rarely attested epigraphically⁸), and it is possible the reading should be treated with caution.

Second, the dedicators. Of the twenty altars where the names of dedicators survive, sixteen are certainly dedicated by soldiers or groups of soldiers. Of the remaining four, three, *RIB* 1633 to Cocidius, *RIB* 993 to Mars Cocidius, and the slightly dubious *RIB* 1017, give only the dedicator's name (Vabrius, Aelius Vitalinus, and Vitalis respectively), while Virilis of *RIB* 1102 to Cocidius Vernostonus identifies himself as a German. Some of these men may well have been soldiers, but they are not at pains to tell us so. The two silver plaques do not record the names of dedicators (though Auentinus, who identifies himself as the 'maker' of *RIB* 987, may also be its implied dedicator), but were found in the emphatically military context of the sunken strongroom of the *sacellum* in the *principia* of Bewcastle fort, north of the Wall.

It was noted by Eric Birley that in addition to being predominantly associated with the military – not unusual in the epigraphy of the region, as discussed above – many of Cocidius' dedicators are of notably higher rank.⁹ This includes several prefects and tribunes (including two who identify themselves as *euocati* – for discussion of this title see section 5), a *beneficiarius consularis*, and two centurions, as well as a number of inscriptions dedicated by groups of legionary soldiers. What we can do with this dedicatory profile will be explored in section 5.

Finally, all the altars with secure find-spots have been found in contexts associated with military sites. Most come from fort sites or their environs, but there are also a notable number associated with milecastles on Hadrian's Wall. Most were found either in the antiquarian period, and/or in clear conditions of re-use (e.g. built into foundations), and for none do we have a clear understanding of its original display context. The two silver plaques were found during excavations at Bewcastle fort in the 1930s, in a context that is likely significant but also secondary (see below, section 2.3).¹⁰

2.2 Cocidius in the iconographic record

⁶ *RIB* reads the text as '*Genio [...]*vali', i.e. a place-name ending in '-*valium*', rejecting *ILS* 2724b's reading of '*Genio vall[i]*'. Both epigraphic and literary evidence indicate that the Wall was referred to as the '*vallum*' by the Romans (Tomlin, Hassall 2004, 345, n. 47). (NB the use of '*vallum*' to refer to the ditch that runs along the south of the Wall is solely a modern archaeological convention.) The text of *RIB* 2015 certainly reads '*vali*', not '*vall[i]*'. However, since the Staffordshire Moorlands Pan also uses the '*vali*' spelling (Tomlin, Hassall 2004, 344–345, who also note that the -l- and -ll- confusion is not unusual in British Latin), Hodgson (2017, 93) rightly points out that *RIB*'s objection to reading the inscription as a reference to the Genius of the Wall no longer stands. The line drawing of the stone also does not support *RIB*'s conjecture of [...]*vali*; it seems clear that there is no lacuna in the text.

⁷ Vernostonus is otherwise unattested epigraphically; the stone has been partially recut, which has occasionally raised questions about its authenticity, but Wright 1940 convincingly argues that the inscription is genuine.

⁸ Häussler 2008, 23–24.

⁹ Birley 1952, 42; Birley 1986, 39.

¹⁰ Richmond, Hodgson, St Joseph 1938, 208–209.

Three of the dedications to Cocidius – the two silver plaques from Bewcastle and the altar from Risingham – also portray the god, certainly in the case of the plaques, and probably in the case of the altar (Figures 2 and 3). The larger of the plaques, *RIB* 986, shows the god standing in a columned niche, wearing armour and with a spear in his right hand and a shield in his left. The second plaque, *RIB* 987, is considerably more schematic, but again portrays the god holding a spear and standing in a columned niche. This article is not the place to explore the iconographic links of these images in depth; however, the plaques fit in with the wider tradition of metal votive ‘feathers’/plaques in the north-west provinces,¹¹ and the iconography of the god, especially on *RIB* 986, has clear ties to the iconography of Mars in the north-west provinces, though the lack of a helmet is striking.¹²

RIB 1207 (*Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* 1.1, 234) from Risingham, meanwhile, portrays a very different scene. The stone is battered and many of its details no longer visible, but on the front can clearly be seen a male figure, standing facing the viewer and holding a bow, with a dog, seated, to his left, and a stag, smaller than lifesize, moving right on his right. Schematized trees are visible behind the figures. On the left side of the altar is another sculptured panel with two more deer amid trees. This is the stone that may possibly be dedicated to both Cocidius and Silvanus, and commentators have been divided over which god the relief panel depicts. However, as noted above, the presence of Silvanus in the inscription is possible but uncertain – and the panel does not clearly map onto the god’s known iconography, where he is rarely if ever portrayed as a hunter, although he can often appear with a dog.¹³ Regardless, the iconography of the altar clearly seeks to align the god or gods to whom it is dedicated with themes of hunting, deer, and woodlands – a rather different set of associations to those implied by the iconography of the Bewcastle plaques.

Other images in the region have been claimed as Cocidius at various points, as I will discuss below, but these three are the only ones with a secure connection to the god.

2.3 *Fanum Cocidi*?

The final piece of evidence for the place – literally – of Cocidius on the frontier is rather more circumstantial. One of the place-names listed in the Ravenna Cosmography, *Ravenna* 107₃₀, is *Fanocodi* (MS B, followed by Schmetz in his 1940 edition) or *Fanococidi* (MSS A, C), which can be reconstructed as *Fanum Cocidi*, the shrine of Cocidius.¹⁴ The names in the Cosmography are not always listed in logical order (for example, they do not necessarily follow road networks)¹⁵, but the entry is immediately preceded by a list of the forts on Hadrian’s Wall and is followed by a group of sites apparently in southern Scotland, suggesting that we are dealing with a location in the frontier zone north of Hadrian’s Wall. The density of dedications to Cocidius from the outpost fort of Bewcastle, five miles north of the Wall, and in particular the striking find of the silver plaques to the

¹¹ See, e.g., Toynbee 1978; Birkle 2013.

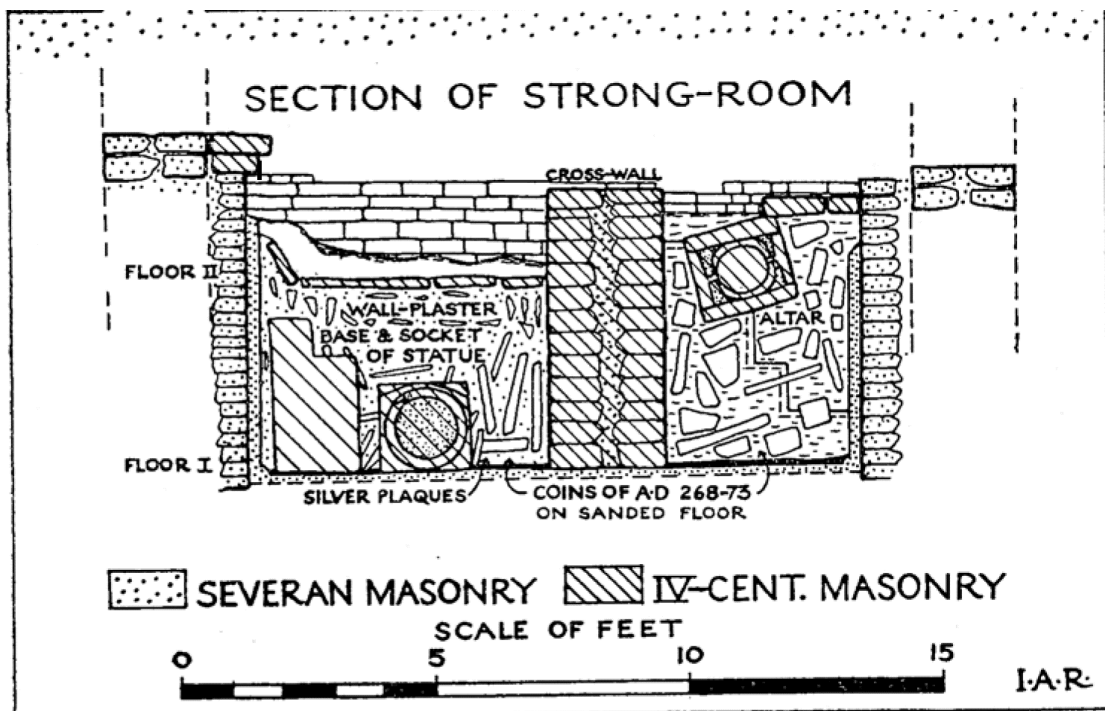
¹² See Bauchhenß 1984 in LIMC for examples of the iconography of Mars and deities syncretised with Mars (including Cocidius) in the north-west provinces.

¹³ Nagy 1994; Toulec 1998. The god’s most common attributes are a falx and vegetation or a bunch of grapes.

¹⁴ Rivet, Smith 1979, 204, 263. The three surviving manuscripts of the Cosmography, from the 13th to 15th centuries, are notoriously problematic, with ‘extraordinarily numerous’ copying errors, either by the Cosmographer himself from his source material or by later copyists (Rivet, Smith 1981, 185, 202–204), and the ‘-codi’ of MS B in lieu of ‘-cocidi’ is an example of a common omission of internal letters (Rivet, Smith 1981, 204). Rivet, Smith 1979, 185–215 is still considered the authoritative discussion of the British section of the Cosmography; other notable discussions of the section as a whole and of the relevant portion relating to Britain north of Hadrian’s Wall include Richmond, Crawford 1949; Dillemann 1979; Jones, Mattingly 1990, 29–32; Conquest 2000; Frere 2001.

¹⁵ Rivet, Smith 1979, 209–211.

god in the fort's *principia*, led Eric Birley to suggest that Bewcastle was the most likely candidate.¹⁶ Without question, out of all known sites in the region, Bewcastle has the clearest claim for a special link to the god. Four, possibly five, altars have been found to the god at the fort or in its immediate environs, the biggest cluster at a single site. It is the silver plaques, however, that stand out. These were found deposited – possibly placed? – at the bottom of the sunken storeroom belonging to the *aedes/sacellum* of the fort's *principia*. The storeroom was filled with other material (including an altar to the *Disciplina Augusti*, *RIB* 990), in what the excavators read as the aftermath of barbarian destruction,¹⁷ but, in light of changing consensus about the frequency of destructive episodes on the Wall,¹⁸ and considering the published section of the excavation (Figure 4), is perhaps more plausibly the result of a peaceful, deliberate dismantling and burial of the contents of the *aedes*. We cannot say for certain that the plaques' original display context was the *principia*, but their final deposition there seemingly was intentional and meaningful. The presence of dedications to a local god, not officially venerated by the Roman state, in an *aedes principiorum*, is exceptionally rare, though not quite unique;¹⁹ the deposition of an altar to Arnometta in the sunken strongroom of the *aedes* at the fort at Brough-on-Noe in Derbyshire is a striking parallel.²⁰ The plaques, therefore, do strongly suggest that Cocidius' role at Bewcastle was a noteworthy and particular one, whatever it may have been.



¹⁶ Birley 1961, 233.

¹⁷ Richmond, Hodgson, St Joseph 1938, 208–209.

¹⁸ Breeze 2019, 54–58.

¹⁹ The data collated by Sarnowski 1989, Tables 3 and 5 indicate that images and dedications to deities are generally rare in these spaces, but when they do occur are almost exclusively to the gods of the Roman state. Bewcastle and Brough-on-Noe are the only exceptions he records. For stone inscriptions specifically, see also Reuter 1995, who claims (1995, 48) that only state deities are found in *principia* generally, although his omission of the altar to Arnometta (*RIB* 281) from Brough-on-Noe from his list of British inscriptions (1995, 28–30) raises doubts about the completeness of his data. The omission of the Arnometta altar is all the more bemusing because he *does* include an altar to Mars from the same context, which, as *RIB* 282, is immediately preceded by the Arnometta inscription in the *Roman Inscriptions of Britain*.

²⁰ Garstang 1904, 190–192.

Figure 1: Section of Bewcastle sunken strong-room (Richmond, Hodgson, and St Joseph 1938, fig. 6)

The identification of Bewcastle as Fanum Cocidi has now been broadly accepted.²¹ However, it does still rest on circumstantial evidence, and even if correct, it is hard to know quite what the implications are. Archaeological excavation in the fort and geophysical survey outside of it have not yet turned up any evidence of a shrine to the god (though one may remain to be discovered), and it is difficult to assess how or whether the fort itself may have functioned as temple/shrine site. The possibility that we are dealing with a pre-Roman sacred site, coopted by the Roman army, has been raised repeatedly, but cannot be proven on the current evidence.²²

Now that we have a picture of our evidence for Cocidius and his worship, it is time to consider what we do with it.

3 How do you solve a problem like Cocidius?

The cult of Cocidius presents a number of methodological issues common to deities who are attested predominantly, if not entirely, through epigraphic evidence. It is becoming cliché to note the traditional separation of text from object in epigraphic publications, and the resulting erasure of inscriptions as objects.²³ Even so, scholarship still often struggles to move from acknowledgement to solution, i.e. to perform the mental shift necessary to treat inscriptions routinely and regularly as objects. The circumstances, not so much of publication but of discovery, inexorably draw us back to the text.

The stone altars listed in Table 1 are archaeological artefacts. However, almost none were found in secure archaeological contexts, and none at all through modern excavations. Most are antiquarian finds from the 18th and 19th centuries, with only minimal information surviving concerning the circumstances of their discovery. What is more, even those minimal details often testify to the myriad opportunities for reuse of Roman masonry in both ancient and more modern times (and an altar is, after all, a convenient chunk of stone), underlining how rarely we see inscriptions in anything approaching their original contexts. *RIB* 1578 to Silvanus Cocidius from Housesteads, for instance, was found accidentally in late 1854 at Housesteads, ‘in the interior of the station [i.e. the fort], when removing an accumulation of ruins from the side of a wall, to provide a fence against cattle — which otherwise could climb up the top, and have an opportunity of tumbling over.’²⁴ Several other altars to Cocidius have been found built into modern buildings, e.g. *RIB* 989, from the foundations of Bewcastle church, *RIB* 1683, built into a cottage at Hardriding, some 2.8 km from Vindolanda, or *RIB* 1207, which functioned as the door pier for a byre/garage at a farm near Risingham.²⁵ Still others were already reused as building stones in antiquity, e.g. *RIB* 1955 and 1956, both found in the foundations of Milecastle 52, *RIB* 2015, discovered in the foundations of Hadrian’s Wall itself, and *RIB* 2024, which (judging from the description of its 1804 discovery) seems to have come from a culvert crossing under the Wall: all of these are likely to have been built into these contexts as part of repair work in the 3rd or 4th centuries AD.²⁶

RIB 1872, probably originally from Birdoswald, had a particularly complex story of reuse and discovery. It is first reported in the collections of Scaleby Castle in Cumbria by the end of the 17th

²¹ Rivet, Smith 1979, 363; Conquest 2000, 347; Frere 2001, 287.

²² Birley 1961, 233; Symonds 2021, 78; Cousins forthcoming.

²³ Jackson Williams 2022, 17.

²⁴ ‘Report of Annual Meeting’ 1855, 5. This image provoked much amusement when reported to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle by the eminent antiquary John Clayton (loc. cit.).

²⁵ Findspot information for *RIB* 989 and 1683 from *RIB*; *RIB* 1207 from Richmond, McIntyre 1937, 103.

²⁶ Bidwell 2018, 224–225, although Bidwell points out that *RIB* 2015’s reuse may even date to the original replacement of the Turf Wall with the Stone Wall in the mid-2nd century AD. I will return to the issue of altars as (ancient) building material in the final section.

century. It was then lost to academic sight until 1923, when it was rediscovered in the gardens of North Munstead, Godalming, Surrey, where it had been serving as a pig trough for at least 60 years.²⁷ Detective work by R.G. Collingwood and J.H. Larner, the rector of Busbridge, near Godalming, determined that it probably had made its way from Scaleby Castle to Godalming via Busbridge Hall in Surrey, as one of a number of Roman inscriptions incorporated into a fanciful landscape of grottoes and sunken walks by the Hall's mid-18th-century owner, Philip Carteret Webb.²⁸

It is often difficult to do much even with stones where the find context may relate directly to the altar's original location. *RIB* 1577 and 1583 were both found in or near the Mithraeum at Housesteads, for example.²⁹ However, the scant details stemming from their 19th-century discoveries make it impossible to assign much significance to the location. Are these instances of non-Mithraic altars deliberately set up in a Mithraic context (whether as a primary or secondary location) – a hardly unique but nevertheless interesting practice?³⁰ Or are both findspots the result of religiously uninflected secondary deposition?

I have dwelt at some length on these various examples, to illustrate how easily the nature of the evidence can deflect attempts to approach inscriptions archaeologically. This is especially frustrating, because when the material allows it, analysis of the interaction between altars, religious spaces, and viewers/worshippers can be exceptionally fruitful.³¹ However, even contextless inscriptions – as with any other sort of artefact – can be analysed in a materially-focused and archaeologically-minded way, and I will attempt to do just this in the concluding section. Nevertheless, opaque or clearly secondary contexts understandably lead scholarship to focus on the stones' most 'splashy' component, the text itself. But epigraphic texts from Hadrian's Wall tend to be short and to the point. With rare exceptions (e.g. *RIB* 1791, an extended – for Roman Britain – poetic dedication to '*Virgo Caelestis situ*'³²), texts do not go much beyond recording the name of the god(s), the names (and sometimes titles) of dedicators, and an epigraphic formula such as *V(otum) S(oluit) L(ibens) M(erito)*. This means we have to work quite hard – and in general, scholarship has not often succeeded – to make our discussions of religious evidence go deeper than the mere listing of deity names and dedicators, or at most the construction of a distribution map; in other words, the material I presented in Section 2 is usually the end of the conversation.³³

However, if we are interested in deeper questions about local deities – their nature and spheres of power, the particularities of their worship, their role within provincial societies – a simple list of dedications and dedicators cannot get us very far. Two routes have then proved tantalizing. First, scholarship attempts to *do more* with the text. The god's name especially becomes seen as a portal to understanding him – not just in his Roman context, but even perhaps in an Iron Age one. Second, scholarship attempts to *find more*. We take our thinly scattered landscape of securely attested epigraphic evidence for a given cult, and turn to our even more problematic landscape of unattached and unidentified religious – usually iconographic – evidence, and engage in a game of matching.

²⁷ Collingwood 1928, 136.

²⁸ Collingwood 1928, 130–132.

²⁹ Hodgson 1822, 291 and no. 4 on plan on frontispiece plate; Haverfield in Bosanquet 1904, 281. Judging from Hodgson's plan, *RIB* 1577 was found a few metres to the east of the Mithraeum; for *RIB* 1583, Haverfield reports it was '[f]ound lying loose in the western part of the Mithraeum. It had been, doubtless, overlooked when the Mithraeum was excavated in 1822, and its original position cannot now be fixed.'

³⁰ See Clauss 2000, 157–162 for some representative examples.

³¹ The various case examples explored in Pearce 2023 demonstrate particularly well the potential of contextualized analysis of epigraphy. See also Lätzer-Lasar 2022 for a highly compelling discussion of broader methodologies for religion, epigraphy, and landscape.

³² See Kruschwitz 2015, 14–15 and 56–57 for translation and discussion.

³³ Cf. Bonnet et al. 2022a, 1.

All of this is done in a worthy cause but poses serious methodological challenges. In the following section, I address these challenges head-on: what do we do with a god name, when that is all we have? And what are the issues with trying to maximize our evidence to draw a fuller picture of a cult?

4 The power – and temptation – of names

Gods which appear on only a handful of inscriptions (or, worst of all but hardly uncommon, a single one) pose a double problem. On the one hand, the very fact of name gives us a sense of being on firm ground. So much of archaeological and art historical scholarship starts, almost unconsciously, from a place of identification: what is this pottery fabric? Which god, which emperor, does this statue depict? Once a thing has been labelled, then and only then can we start, it sometimes seems, to move on to analysis. So a name on an inscription leap-frogs, as it were, this first step. Yet for gods known only through a small corpus of epigraphy it rapidly becomes clear that the name alone offers us less than we might hope. This altar is dedicated to Cocidius – very well, who was Cocidius, and what did he mean to his worshipers? Absent (all too often) insight into iconography, mythology, religious architecture, or archaeology of specific rituals, how do we begin to turn this mirage of knowledge into a deeper understanding? Unsurprisingly, scholarship has zeroed in on analysing the only thing it has, the name, in the hope that by understanding the name, we can start to understand the god.

Etymological analyses of theonyms have a lengthy history in scholarship. For Roman Britain, debate over the origins and meaning of deity names was already an important feature of antiquarian writing by the 18th century. The early antiquaries generally did not hesitate to draw on far-reaching – often far-fetched – comparisons for their interpretation of Romano-British antiquities, with John Horsley, for instance, in his seminal epigraphic discussions in *Britannia Romana*, giving due weight not only to potential British linguistic roots for the god Belatucadrus, but also to the possibility that the name stemmed from Baal, or from Belenus.³⁴ By the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, with the development of linguistics as an academic discipline, analyses of local theonyms in the northwest provinces increasingly centred on Celtic or Germanic roots. Thus we see, for example, Emil Hübner commenting in an 1885 paper on the Germanic associations of the deities Mars Thincsus, Beda, and Fimmilena from Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall,³⁵ or J.R.R. Tolkien (in his academic persona) discussing the Celtic roots of Mars Nodens' name at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire.³⁶

This sort of commentary, varying from lengthy discussions to short glosses, has remained prevalent in modern discussions of local gods in western provincial contexts. Eric Birley, for instance, in his still-foundational *ANRW* article on the deities of Roman Britain, gives translations for almost all Celtic theonyms and epithets that he mentions (e.g. Apollo Cunomaglos, 'hound-lord', or Ialonus, 'god of the meadow-land', citing *RIB*)³⁷, and this sort of name-gloss remains standard in scholarship on provincial religion. The biggest forum in recent years for extended analysis of deity etymologies has been the work stemming from the *Fontes epigraphici religionum Celticarum antiquarum* (F.E.R.C.AN) project, and its associated workshop proceedings.

These etymological discussions in turn are tied to broader concerns regarding the role of deities, their possible spheres of power as reflected in their theonyms, and, all too frequently, the perceived insights their names give us not only into society of the Roman provinces, but into *pre-Roman* societies and pantheons, and indeed more often than not *post-Roman* religious contexts as

³⁴ Horsley 1732, 261–262.

³⁵ Clayton et al. 1885, 155–166.

³⁶ Tolkien in Wheeler, Wheeler 1932, 132–137.

³⁷ Birley 1986 *passim*.

well. Mars Thincsus, for example, known from Housesteads fort, has been claimed from his discovery as evidence for an early incarnation of Tyr, and his attribute of a goose, shared with other depictions of Mars from the northwest provinces, treated as evidence of the distribution of Tyr's worship in the Roman period.³⁸ In the case of Cocidius, debate has centred on whether the Coc- prefix is related to Celtic roots meaning 'Red' (as, for instance, the modern Welsh *coch*), allowing the god's name to be translated along the lines of 'the Red One'. Red, with its associations of blood, has been seen as particularly appealing or apt as an etymology, given Cocidius' apparent associations with Mars in both epigraphic and iconographic material. Most 20th-century scholarship nevertheless reluctantly eschewed this etymology (while acknowledging there were no other obvious roots), on the grounds that words leading to -ch in later British Celtic languages require -cc- spellings in Latin forms, and none of the extant epigraphic material records the name as 'Coccidius'.³⁹ More recent scholarship, however, has been unconcerned with this problem, with de Bernardo Stempel, perhaps the most prolific recent voice on Celtic etymologies for theonyms,⁴⁰ glossing Mars Cocidios [sic] unproblematically as 'the blood-reddened Mars'.⁴¹ Likewise, Delamarre in his *Dictionnaire de la langue Gauloise*, a standard reference, groups Coc- and Cocc- names together as meaning 'scarlet' or 'red'.⁴² Orthography, particularly for languages without established writing traditions, can often be flexible, and the corpus for Cocidius is small. We should therefore not necessarily expect perfect orthographic alignment with expected sounds, in particular when it comes to geminate consonants,⁴³ and 'red' can be held to be the most likely meaning behind the name.⁴⁴

³⁸ Initial equation established by Clayton et al. 1885, 157–158; de Vries 1935, 170–175; with Werner 1941, 35–43 making the wider claims for goose iconography. The link between Thincsus and Tyr is now routinely claimed in modern literature.

³⁹ Williams in Richmond, Crawford 1949, 34; Ross 1992 222–223; Rivet, Smith 1979, 263.

⁴⁰ Amongst a lengthy bibliography, see especially de Bernardo Stempel 2003; Spickermann, de Bernardo Stempel 2005; de Bernardo Stempel 2007; de Bernardo Stempel 2010; de Bernardo Stempel, Hainzmann 2020a; de Bernardo Stempel, Hainzmann 2020b; de Bernardo Stempel 2022. De Bernardo Stempel's work plays a fundamental role in the overall methodologies and outputs of F.E.R.C.AN and the scholars affiliated with the project and its various workshops and proceedings.

⁴¹ de Bernardo Stempel 2007, 79. See also de Bernardo Stempel 2003, 58, where she explicitly cites the Latin '*cocum*' as the root (as a loan-word into British Celtic), and relation to the modern Welsh *coch*.

⁴² Delamarre 2003, 120–121.

⁴³ See Cotugno, Marotta 2017; Zair 2023 182–201 for some of the complexities that can be involved in gemination and representing double consonants orthographically.

⁴⁴ What is at issue here is the lenition/spirantization of consonants in British Celtic by the early Medieval period. -cc-, from both Celtic sound developments or Latin loanwords, results, probably around the mid-sixth century, in -ch-, whereas -c- results in -g- (Jackson 1953, 565–567). So, strictly speaking, the earlier 20th-century scholars were correct that the lack of -cc- in our epigraphic record for Cocidius is a potential stumbling block for the assumption of *cocc-* (later *coch-*), which itself makes its way into Celtic languages as a loan-word from the Latin *cocum*, stemming from the Greek *kókkos*, relating to red dye substances (Delamarre 2003, 121). However, it is hard to know exactly how these rules will play out in 'real world' examples of epigraphic language, particularly when the linguistic backgrounds of the dedicators are largely unreconstructable and the chronology of dedications imprecise. In addition, with Cocidius more than other gods on the frontier, the spelling of the name seems fairly standardized across the epigraphy – raising the possibility that dedicators are imitating earlier texts/spellings, rather than choosing spellings based closely on pronunciation. This would mean that one dedicator's initial choice to spell with a -c- rather than a -cc- could easily replicate itself, regardless of the various pronunciations in use. A telling opposite case is Hvitir/Veteres, where the aspiration of the initial consonants in much of the epigraphic orthography probably *does* reflect in some way the pronunciation patterns of Germanic-speaking individuals on the frontier, and where the epigraphic habit evinced by dedicators – almost universally small 'personal' altars, possibly carved by the dedicators themselves, with considerably more idiosyncratic language and spelling variants than that of Cocidius – could be seen as enabling this sort of orthographic variety. I am very grateful to Alex Mullen for discussing the

Where this gets us is another story. Moving from linguistic analysis to religious interpretation is not straightforward, and much scholarship on the Roman West, I would argue, has been mired in problematic assumptions and overly simplistic frameworks. As I have pointed out elsewhere, even when etymologies are secure, they likely give very little insight into the deity's nature and power. Knowing that Christ means 'the Anointed One' gives minimal – and unrepresentative – information about the role of Jesus with Christianity.⁴⁵ Even more fundamentally, however, the (relatively) straightforward linguistic dichotomy between Latin and Celtic (or Germanic) theonym roots stands in opposition to our increasingly sensitive and complex narratives for the construction of Roman provincial society. It is evidence that slots much more easily into simplistic binaries of 'Celtic' and 'Roman' identity, and outdated models of Romanization. This means that theonym-driven discussions of religion in the north-west provinces either wind up lapsing into those binaries *ab initio*,⁴⁶ or engage in valiant, but usually vain, contortions of argument in an attempt to make evidence mesh with outlook.⁴⁷ This has been particularly true of the work stemming from the various F.E.R.C.AN workshops over the course of the last 25 years. Issues with the F.E.R.C.AN project have been well-highlighted by Raepsaet-Charlier, and do not need extensive rehearsing here.⁴⁸ For me, the fundamental problem is that the linguistic foundations of the project, and its exclusive focus on Celtic roots, artificially isolate the study of linguistically Celtic deities from the study of the rest of our evidence for provincial cults and perpetuate a Roman/Celtic binary for religion which in no way reflects the social reality of the Roman West.

The notion of a relatively unified Celtic culture in the west underlying a Romanized veneer, now outdated for most archaeologists,⁴⁹ but still heavily (and regrettably) prevalent for the study of provincial religion, is not only implicated in linguistic analyses of deity names. It is also the mentality that enables the second temptation I described above: cobbling together unrelated, scattered, material into a single coherent picture, in an attempt to find (or rather construct) more evidence for the worship of provincial deities. We can see this easily with Cocidius, where the god has been unjustifiably linked to a wide range of material, predominantly iconographic, from the northern frontiers of Roman Britain. The sculpture of northern Britain is admittedly challenging, particularly

lenition/gemination issues with me and providing expert guidance on the literature cited above, and to Alexander Rome Griffin for insight into the epigraphic patterns of Hvitir/Veteres and permission to draw on his ongoing doctoral research – any errors of linguistic interpretation or epigraphic supposition remain my own. (For H-aspirations in Veteres inscriptions, see Birley 2008, 35–36; Cotugno 2019 supports the argument that initial h- forms in Romano-British texts reflect continental language patterns in local populations.)

⁴⁵ Cousins 2020, 192.

⁴⁶ e.g. Birley 1986; Aldhouse-Green, Raybould 1999; Spickermann, de Bernardo Stempel 2005; de Bernardo Stempel 2007; Cotugno 2022, 49–57.

⁴⁷ e.g. Zoll 1995a; Zoll 1995b; Häussler 2005; Häussler 2008; Spickermann, Hainzmann, Mathieu 2013; Spickermann 2018. A notable exception to the rule is Derks 1998, 94–115.

⁴⁸ Raepsaet-Charlier 2015, 184–192, although I do not share her commitment to polis-religion as a model for Gaul. I also disagree with her assessment of the wider influence of the F.E.R.C.AN project (Raepsaet-Charlier 2015, 188–189, 192). While the F.E.R.C.AN workshops have certainly been the main venue for extended discussion of western provincial religion in recent years, the conversation has largely been a closed one, with citations of their (often hard-to-find) proceedings not progressing far beyond F.E.R.C.AN's own extended circle. I see this as indicating a lack of broader influence (rather than a powerful clique shutting down dissent, as Raepsaet-Charlier would have it). Therein, however, lies the problem: the main forum for discussion of western provincial religion is currently sterile beyond its own precincts, not least because it is founded on shaky academic principles. This means that that the field is increasingly separated from and irrelevant to wider debates in both provincial Roman archaeology and Roman religion. This is an undesirable situation, and one of my aims in this article is to move us toward a more integrated – and rigorous – conversation. See, however, de Bernardo Stempel, Spickermann 2017 for a rebuttal – not wholly convincing – of Raepsaet-Charlier's critiques.

⁴⁹ James 1999; Collis 2003; Webster 2015, 122–124; Hunter et al. 2015.

for connoisseurship-based art history that naturally takes identification as its starting point. While much of the material from the region does draw on classical iconographic traditions, a great deal also does not.⁵⁰ Images belonging to more regional iconographies, e.g. horned gods,⁵¹ or goddesses with buckets,⁵² are almost never accompanied by inscriptions. The converse is true as well: regional deities known through inscriptions are rarely accompanied by secure depictions. It is then understandably tempting to try to match iconographies to names, to take our unlabelled images and map them onto the regional pantheons seen through epigraphy.

There are, however, multiple problems with this approach. The first is that only a relatively narrow portion of the population possessed the epigraphic habit. Given the number of deities attested only by a single inscription, we can be confident that there were many gods on the frontier whose names have not come down to us at all. In this situation, trying to match images only to known names will almost certainly create an overly homogenized picture. Moreover, the iconographic picture is a fuzzy one. Most of these regional images of gods exist on a spectrum. We can see similarities and trends, but few clearly definable 'characters'. Is the heavily phallic, horned god, possibly holding a patera, who is depicted on a relief from High Rochester (*CSIR* 1.1, 324) the same deity as the moderately phallic, horned god with a spear and shield from Maryport (*CSIR* 1.11, 142)? Probably not – and attempting to give either a name unjustifiable. (What is more, as Webster has pointed out, it may sometimes obscure the significance that *rejecting* epigraphic labels may have held for local populations.⁵³)

This has not stopped people from trying. Cocidius himself has often been tentatively linked to horned and martial gods⁵⁴, as has Belatucadrus.⁵⁵ In addition, Cocidius has sometimes been claimed more emphatically as an identification for unlabelled images, with more significant consequences for the narratives that have built up around his nature and worship on the frontier. Richmond and McIntyre argued that a now-defaced rock sculpture of a hunter, known as 'Rob of Risingham', was Cocidius, based solely on analogy with the hunter relief on *RIB* 1207. They used this identification to argue that on the eastern half of Hadrian's Wall Cocidius took on a 'milder' aspect than his martial character in the west: 'The old head-hunter becomes a god of ventry, patron of wild life, a veritable St. Hubert.'⁵⁶ They also identified a hunter on an intaglio from South Shields as the god, an interpretation later reinforced by Henig.⁵⁷ This notion of a 'gentler', 'Silvanus-Cocidius', incarnation in the eastern frontier zone has now become received wisdom.⁵⁸ However, it rests solely on the image on *RIB* 1207: the broader model is entirely a house of cards. Even so, the narrative at least does depend on the attested, albeit very rare, conflation of Cocidius with Silvanus in the epigraphy. Other claims are more tenuous still, for example the identification of the rural shrine at Yardhope, in northern Northumbria (well outside the main distribution of Cocidius' epigraphy), as a shrine to Cocidius, solely on the basis of its rock relief of a naked warrior god.⁵⁹

Ultimately, the motivation behind these attributions is the feeling that understanding can only ever be partial without identification.⁶⁰ The ascription of Cocidius and his regional fellow-deities

⁵⁰ The sculpture from the region is published in *CSIR* volumes for Britain 1.1, 1.6, and 1.11 (Phillips 1977; Coulston, Phillips 1988; Allason-Jones 2023).

⁵¹ Ross 1961; Ross 1992, 172–220.

⁵² Goldberg 2006.

⁵³ Webster 2015, 137–138.

⁵⁴ e.g. Green 1992, 62.

⁵⁵ Mann, Vanderspoel 2003.

⁵⁶ Richmond, McIntyre 1937, 108.

⁵⁷ Richmond, McIntyre 1937, 109; Henig 1971; Henig 1985, 181.

⁵⁸ Phillips 1977, 84; Green 1992, 62; Irby-Massie 1999, 111; though rightly critiqued by Fairless 1984, 235.

⁵⁹ Charlton, Mitcheson 1983.

⁶⁰ e.g. Charlton, Mitcheson 1983, 148.

to these other images, however, is enabled by the ongoing insistence by some corners of scholarship that there is a coherent set of indigenous deities and cosmologies running through the societies of the region: a pan-Celtic religious mentality, which justifies drawing on material not only from across the Roman (and pre-Roman) west, but also from later Medieval Welsh and Irish sources, to paint a fuller picture than our evidence would allow.⁶¹ It certainly does paint a fuller picture – but one that is likely not a rigorous reflection of the past. The challenge – which we have on the whole failed to rise to meet – is to take our scattered bits of evidence and say something both interesting *and* robust about them.

The challenges posed by the Western material is highlighted by comparison with the evidence we possess for the Eastern Mediterranean. Here, the conversation has been transformed in recent years by the work stemming from the 2017-2023 ERC-funded Mapping Ancient Polytheisms (MAP) project, led by Corinne Bonnet (University Toulouse – Jean Jaurès) and focused on the thousands of deity names attested in the Greek and Semitic cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean from 1000 BC to 400 AD.⁶² Its results throw into sharp relief the simplistic nature not only of our interpretations of the significance of deity names for provincial religion in the West, but our very understanding of the nature of those names. Scholarship in recent years on theonyms in both east and west has been particularly concerned with parsing the distinctions between theonyms proper, epithets, and epiclesis, and the theological consequences of assigning different elements of individual god-names to these different syntactical categories.⁶³ For de Bernardo Stempel, for example, ‘Cocidios’ [sic] is not a stand-alone deity name at all, but simply an epiclesis glossing Mars as ‘reddened’,⁶⁴ which means that for her Cocidius is not a god at all – just an explanatory adjective for Celtic-speaking populations of the provinces. How this interpretation aligns with the fact that most dedications, as discussed above, are to Cocidius alone is not addressed – and begins to signal the issues with strict syntactical labelling. Furthermore, as Raepsaet-Charlier has pointed out, this emphasis on strict categorization of naming elements, and in particular the dismissal of epithets as essentially inconsequential glossing, often serves to erase the diversity and polyphony of local cult landscapes.⁶⁵

These name-element categories could have been further reified by the MAP project, in particular by their construction of an open-access database of our evidence for deity names from the eastern Mediterranean. Databases, with their inherent requirements for labelling and tagging, are inevitably in tension with the fuzziness and uncertainty that underlies our evidence for the ancient world. For the MAP project, judgment calls about tagging different god-name elements as theonyms proper, epithets, etc, could easily have become central to the database’s construction, and consequently ‘baked in’ to any future research relying on their datasets. Instead, the project sought, from the beginning, to avoid assumptions about what different elements were ‘doing’, recognizing that understanding how different elements of a name (or ‘onomastic sequence’, in MAP’s

⁶¹ Aldhouse-Green 2018 is the latest extended expression of this vision for Britain. The mindset also runs through many contributions to the F.E.R.C.AN proceedings. Ultimately, much of this is driven by a desire to understand not the Roman period at all, but rather the – heavily romanticised – Celtic societies that came before (and sometimes after) it. For further discussion of the general methodological and historiographical issues see, e.g., Hutton 2011; Bergholm, Ritari 2015; Webster 2015; Wooding 2017; Cousins 2020, 166–173.

⁶² Bonnet et al. 2021b, 10.

⁶³ e.g. Belayche et al. 2005; Lambert 2013; Parker 2017; Kajava 2022. See Bonnet et al. 2018, 570–578; Bonnet et al. 2019 for discussion of the historiography for the Eastern Mediterranean in particular.

⁶⁴ de Bernardo Stempel 2007, 79. See de Bernardo Stempel 2007, 69–73 for her general approach.

⁶⁵ Raepsaet-Charlier 2015, 188.

terminology) were coming together to express a particular conception of a divine entity, was, in fact, the end goal of analysis, rather than a starting postulate.⁶⁶

However, the ability of scholars associated with MAP both to recognize these onomastic complexities, and then to move on to nuanced, sensitive, and lengthy analyses of the complex cultural and religious underpinnings of attested deity names,⁶⁷ was due to the nature and extent of their evidence base. It is not merely that the epigraphic corpus they were drawing on is far larger than that for the north-west provinces – or that those epigraphic texts, particularly for the Greek world, are often much longer and richer in descriptive detail. MAP's geographical and chronological focus meant that they were able to put that evidence into dialogue with a wealth of literary material – from Homer to Pausanias to the Bible – beyond the wildest dreams of Roman (western) provincial archaeologists, along with, often, a parallel abundance of iconographic evidence.

This means that, in some ways, comparison with MAP demonstrates just how difficult – perhaps impossible – it is to use deity names to understand religion in the northwest provinces. For all the project claimed to put names centre-stage, in fact its greatest achievement was moving *past* those names to the social complexities behind them. For the west, all too often, we cannot.

However, while MAP's methodologies cannot serve as a roadmap to a more nuanced framework for religion in the Roman west, we can make Bonnet et al.'s work more useful than simply a sobering (if highly necessary) reminder of the limitations of our own material. MAP's sidestepping of the theonym/epithet/epiclesis issue is well-worth embracing, since it frees us from the straightjacket of linguistic forms dictating a narrow range of theological interpretations, and opens up considerably more flexible and creative conceptions of the possibilities lying behind so-called 'syncretic' names.⁶⁸ Second, the sheer magnitude of their data – the hundreds of appellations over several centuries that, they point out, can often be associated with a single god – underscores not just the futility but the invalidity of trying to construct '*un portrait complet, fiable, définitif*' of a deity from its epigraphy.⁶⁹ Embracing this mutability is equally feasible and desirable for the study of less-well-attested cults and releases us from the frustrations of wanting to construct a complete picture from a handful of puzzle pieces: instead, the possibility of multiple conceptions of divinity across time and space – and the social implications of that sort of divine framework – can, but more importantly *should*, be our primary focus.

MAP's value-neutral approach to deity-names can also be harnessed for the challenges of the western context, in particular to move us past previous scholarship's focus on linguistic origins and indigenous pantheons. Defining 'regional' or 'local' cults, at least to begin with, by geographic criteria instead of linguistic ones – i.e. as cults that are epigraphically attested predominantly in a specific area – allows us to focus our attention more productively on how these cults operated in the Roman period, rather than on the 'dirty window'⁷⁰ they offer onto the Iron Age or indeed the Middle Ages. Crucially, a geographic definition for local deities also allows us to jettison litmus tests of 'indigeneity' for the religious authenticity of regional cults.⁷¹ This, therefore, is the concept of 'regional/local' that underpins my use of those terms in this article.

⁶⁶ Bonnet et al. 2018, 585–591; Lebreton, Bonnet 2019; Guillon, Porzia 2023.

⁶⁷ See the myriad contributions in Bonnet 2021; Bonnet et al. 2022b.

⁶⁸ cf. Cousins 2021, 203–205.

⁶⁹ Bonnet et al. 2021b, 18.

⁷⁰ Webster 2015.

⁷¹ This mindset can lead even more nuanced scholarship into difficult waters – e.g. Haynes' description of the worship of Hercules Magusanus at Empel as a 'cuckoo cult', due to the slow transformation of rituals there in the Roman period, probably due to returning soldiers' exposure to cult practice elsewhere in the Empire (Haynes 2013, 234–235).

Let us turn now from the general, back to the specific. If Cocidius cannot be justifiably painted as the 'Red God' of the North, a warrior in the west, a gentle forest hunter in the east, the deity of the South Shields gem and of the Yardhope wilds – what are we to do with him instead? And how can we use him as an exemplar for a more nuanced approach to regional deities?

5 *Deo sancto Cocidio*: Power and place on the Romano-British frontier

The evidence presented in Section 2 strongly suggests that Cocidius did play an unusual, and significant, role in the socio-religious landscapes of the western half of the Hadrian's Wall frontier zone. Moving our attention from Cocidius' name alone, to the more holistic patterns in his epigraphy – who is dedicating to him, where (as far as we can reconstruct it), and what other sorts of associations are present in his inscriptions – allows us not only to elucidate Cocidius' own social functions, but also to complicate our understanding of the functions of regional cults more generally.

Several factors mark the cult out as exceptional. The first is the evidence from Bewcastle – whether it is *Fanum Cocidi* or not. The silver plaques deposited in the strongroom of the *aedes principiorum*, as discussed above (2.3), are near-unique testimony to the recognition of a local god in an official setting. In section 2.3, I focused on the plaques within the context of the debates concerning the identity of *Fanum Cocidi* and the evidence they provide for the significance of *Bewcastle* for the cult. Here, I want to turn this around and think about the plaques as a potential indication of the standing of *Cocidius*. The religion of the Roman army as an institution was certainly more flexible than some academic models have allowed for. Nevertheless, the recognition of this sort of god – a deity only attested regionally, and certainly not a god of the Roman state – in this sort of space was emphatically not standard practice. It calls our attention not only to the potential 'quasi-official'⁷² – for lack of a better phrase – veneration of Cocidius on the frontier but also (as the exception, along with *Arnometta* at Brough-on-Noe, that proves the rule) to the fact that this sort of official positioning is usually not how local gods (need to) operate. It is, for the most part, not what is making them interesting or relevant to their worshipers or the communities in which we see them attested.

The sense the plaques give of an unusual position for the god within military religion in the region is only reinforced by Cocidius' stone epigraphy: both the sorts of people setting up inscriptions to him and the contexts of those inscriptions. As noted above, Cocidius' dedicants are often of higher rank. In addition, what we can glean about their career paths often suggests that these are not men who would have come from – or necessarily stayed on – the frontier. Two of the dedicants, for example, are *tribuni ex evocato* (*RIB* 966, from Netherby or Bewcastle, and *RIB* 988 from Bewcastle). *Evocati* were men who had already served a full term in the army before reenlisting.⁷³ They most commonly came from the praetorian guard, although legionary *evocati* are also attested; there is no evidence later than Claudius of an *evocatus* whose original service was in the auxiliaries.⁷⁴ Some *evocati* were promoted to higher ranks on or after their return to service, often as legionary centurions;⁷⁵ becoming an auxiliary commander, however, seems to have been much rarer, with only two other examples known, one of which (*RIB* 1896) is from Birdoswald.⁷⁶ These, then, are men of

⁷² Or 'semi-official', as Zoll (1995b, 131-132) has put it.

⁷³ For discussion, see Domaszewski, Dobson 1967, 75–78; Breeze 1969, 1.352–359, 2.334-345; Birley 1981.

⁷⁴ Breeze 1969, 1.334–339.

⁷⁵ Birley 1981.

⁷⁶ Birley 1981, 25. The fourth was commander of a cohort in Cyrene. It is hard to know whether to assign any significance to the tight British cluster. Breeze (1974, 254) suggests they indicate that 'the opportunities of the praetorians for advancement' were increasing in the 'changing conditions' of the 3rd century – but only *RIB* 1896 is securely dated, and regardless that would not explain the geographic clustering.

established military rank, who likely came to the frontier after having served in Rome itself.⁷⁷ Q. Petrasius Maximus, another Bewcastle tribune, also had a similar trajectory, having been promoted to tribune after serving as a *cornicularius* to the Praetorian Prefects (RIB 989). Meanwhile, the inscription to Mars Cocidius at Lancaster, a geographical outlier dedicated by a *beneficiarius consularis*, is another example of a high-ranking, and mobile, official choosing to make a dedication to the god, plausibly encountered during earlier service on or around the Wall.

We also see numerous dedications to Cocidius set up by legionaries, both individually and collectively (Table 2, expanding on the find-spot information included in Table 1). Like the men discussed above, the legionaries would also have come to Hadrian's Wall from elsewhere, in this case the various British legionary fortresses at York, Chester, and Caerleon, usually on temporary service. Of the eleven known dedications by groups of legionaries from Hadrian's Wall and the outpost forts, six were dedicated to Cocidius, a remarkable proportion, the possible circumstances of which are discussed below.⁷⁸ The sixteen known dedications set up by individual legionaries (almost all centurions, with a few exceptions, including the *miles* of RIB 1577 to Cocidius at Housesteads) are more diverse, but skew towards the gods of the state.⁷⁹

Table 1: Dedications to Cocidius by legionaries

RIB number	Dedication	Dedicator(s)	Find-spot
985	<i>Deo sancto Cocidio</i>	Annius Victor <i>centur(io) legioni[s]</i>	On the line of the Maiden Way south of Bewcastle
1577	<i>Cocidio [et] Genio pr[ae]sidi</i>	Valerius <i>m(iles) l[eg]ionis VI V(ictricis) P(iae) F(idelis)</i>	Housesteads, just to the east of the extramural mithraeum
1583	<i>l(oui) O(ptimo) M(aximo) et deo Cocidio Genioq(ue) hui(us) loci</i>	<i>mil(ites) leg(ionis) II Aug(ustae) agentes in praesidio</i>	Housesteads, in the mithraeum
1955	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>milites l[eg]ionis] II Aug(ustae)</i>	Reused in foundations of milecastle 52
1956	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>milites leg(ionis) XX V(aleriae) V(ictricis)</i>	Reused in foundations of milecastle 52; consular date of 262-266 (Gallic Empire)
1961	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>uexil[li]atio] leg(ionis) VI V[ic]tricis</i>	Cottage garden at Howgill, east of milecastle 55

⁷⁷ Almost certainly so in the case of RIB 966, where Paternius Maternus describes himself as *ex evocato Palatino*; Aureunceius Felicessemus on RIB 988 gives no further details about his career.

⁷⁸ The others are RIB 1319 (Neptune), 1320 (Oceanus), 1547 (the Nymphs, in association with Coventina's Well), 1582 (IOM), and 2050 (Matres Domesticae). 'Hadrian's Wall' as defined here includes the Stanegate forts and South Shields, in keeping with the groupings in RIB 3, but I have excluded dedications from Corbridge, which, as the site of two bases for legionary vexillations, represents a slightly different situation.

⁷⁹ These statistics likewise exclude Corbridge, although the social pattern there is much the same – the only dedications by individual legionaries come from a prefect of the vexillation base and two centurions, though interestingly two of these are to the regional god Apollo Maponus (RIB 1120 and 1122).

2020	<i>Deo Cocidio</i>	<i>milites leg(ionis) VI Vic(tricis) P(iae) F(idelis)</i>	Near milecastle 60
2024	<i>Marti Coc(idio)</i>	<i>m(ilites) leg(ionis) II Aug(ustae) c(enturia) Sanctiana c(enturia) Secundini, sub cura Aeliani c(enturionis) cura(uit) Oppius [F]elix optio</i>	Reused in a culvert in through the Wall near milecastle 65

This is a profile of dedicants that looks very different to that of other regional deities on the Wall. Not a single legionary is known dedicating to the *Veteres* or *Belatucadrus*, for instance, nor directly to *Coventina*, though *RIB 1547*, to the Nymphs by a vexillation of the *legio VI Victrix Pia Fidelis*, is probably to be linked to her shrine. Dedications by auxiliary officers to these gods are also rare. The closest parallel to *Cocidius* are the three dedications (*RIB 1327-1329*) to *Antenociticus* at his shrine at *Benwell*, which were set up respectively by a legionary centurion, the First Cohort of *Vangiones* under the command of their prefect,⁸⁰ and a prefect recently granted senatorial status. These altars, however, were in a temple context, where we often see higher-status dedicants, perhaps a reflection of the interaction between temple environments and fort hierarchies,⁸¹ and no inscriptions to *Antenociticus* have been found away from his shrine.

We do not know to what extent these epigraphic patterns reflect the broader demographics of worship to these gods. But epigraphic patterns nonetheless matter, since they are a deliberate signalling of religious affiliation for those with the epigraphic habit. We cannot say that legionary centurions were not sacrificing to *Belatucadrus*, nor that veneration of *Cocidius* amongst rank-and-file auxiliaries was less widespread than that of the *Veteres*. However, we *can* say that these different groups were clearly prioritizing different gods in their epigraphy – implying that different regional cults were playing different social roles in the communities of the frontier.

For *Cocidius* specifically, that role seems to be bound up with both place and power. The significance of *Cocidius* as a god of *place* is not limited to the evidence from *Bewcastle*. A striking feature of the god's epigraphy is how frequently he is linked to military *genii* – and militarized place, to boot. *RIB 1577* from *Housesteads*, for example, set up by a soldier of the *legio VI Victrix Pia Fidelis*, is dedicated to *Cocidius* and the *Genius* of the *praesidium*,⁸² while *RIB 1583*, found nearby, was set up to *IOM*, *Cocidius*, and the 'Genius huius loci' by soldiers of the *legio II Augusta, agentes in praesidio*. Both inscriptions, therefore, emphasize a link between *Cocidius* and the fortified landscape of *Housesteads*. Meanwhile, *RIB 2015*, by a centurion of the 1st cohort of *Batavians*, is seemingly dedicated to *Mars Cocidius* and the 'Genius Vali' – that is, of the Wall itself. This is not a pattern we see elsewhere. Relatively few other inscriptions from Britain are known to *genii* of military places or concepts, and when other deities are included on the inscription, they are invariably the gods of the Roman state, usually *IOM* or the *numen* of the emperor.⁸³ This seems to justify seeing the pattern with *Cocidius* as significant.

⁸⁰ *Cocidius* (*RIB 1872* from *Birdoswald*) and *Antenociticus* are the only regional deities to be given dedications by units using this formula – a dedicatory ritual usually reserved for *IOM* and other gods of the Roman state.

⁸¹ E.g. the three altars set up by prefects at the *Carrawburgh* mithraeum (*RIB 1544-1546*; Allason-Jones 2004, 184).

⁸² This can probably be read as either the garrison, or the fort itself, or both.

⁸³ E.g. *RIB 1262* from the *principia* strong-room at *High Rochester*, dedicated to the *genius* of the emperor, of the standards, and of the unit, or *RIB 1686* from the commanding officer's residence at *Vindolanda*, dedicated to *IOM*, the *genius* of the *praetorium*, and the rest of the immortal gods.

This entanglement of Cocidius with the militarized landscapes of the frontier is reinforced by what we can glean about the circumstances of several collective dedications to the god by legionary *militēs*, in particular by a number of altars all linked to milecastles, i.e. fortlets placed roughly every Roman mile along the Wall that served as defended crossing-points through the barrier. The core of the series are *RIB* 1955, 1956, and 2020, all bearing similar texts recording dedications to Cocidius by *militēs* belonging to *legio II Augusta*, *legio XX Valeria Victrix*, and *legio VI Victrix Pia Fidelis* respectively, collectively representing all three British legions. One, *RIB* 1956, bears a consular date dating it to the Gallic Empire (262-266);⁸⁴ it is possible that *RIB* 1955, now fragmentary, included a similar date. Bidwell has convincingly argued that these altars, along with *RIB* 2024, which bears a similar text, should be linked to repair-work to the Wall undertaken during this 3rd-century period.⁸⁵ To these can possibly be added *RIB* 1961, set up by a vexillation of the Sixth Legion, and first noticed in 1808 in a cottage garden near milecastle 55.⁸⁶ Symonds has discussed the broader importance of milecastles as seeming *foci* for religious epigraphy, particularly on the western half of the Wall, and noted the relative frequency of Cocidius.⁸⁷ For him, this is wrapped up with understanding the frontier as a landscape of threat and danger, with milecastles as particularly vulnerable nodes in the system, especially in the west, where, it has been argued, geography and local resistance may have combined to present particular threats to the army.⁸⁸ In this model, Cocidius is being harnessed as a protective deity with power over the local landscape, by soldiers who are feeling precarious and exposed. I agree with this to some degree – in particular the attention on milecastles as places which could be ritually charged. However, I think it also underplays the significance of the legionaries and what they seem to have been doing in these spaces – as well as exactly *how* dedications to Cocidius are harnessing his connection to place. Here, the likelihood that the altars are linked to repair-work is crucial. We can understand the dedications as ritually complementary to the legionaries' deployment of stone and mortar: both the altars and the construction-work are being used to *re-ground* the Wall, and by extension Roman power, into the (perhaps fraught) landscapes of the frontier.⁸⁹

Crucially, this should not be seen as a form of *evocatio*. By the mid-3rd century, when these altars are being set up, any sense of Cocidius as an indigenous god (if he was one) to be 'appropriated' by an incoming force would have long been rendered obsolete. However, there are clearly power structures here, if not those of conquered and conquerors. Rather, the lines are being drawn within the power structures and hierarchies of the Roman army and of frontier society, with Cocidius being put to the use of (often incoming) officers and legionaries, outsiders to some degree within the 3rd-century auxiliary communities of the frontier, but outsiders who bring with them power over those communities. This dynamic may even be present in the *beneficiarius* inscription from Lancaster, which fits into a broader pattern Nelis-Clément has identified of *beneficiarii* deploying dedications to regional deities, perhaps as part of their self-positioning as an interface between local and imperial power hierarchies.⁹⁰ The social impact of Cocidius' epigraphy, in this context, might well take on an oppressive element, rather than a protective one, depending on viewers' relationships with those power hierarchies. This renders his associations with the fortified

⁸⁴ Birley 1936.

⁸⁵ Bidwell 2018, 225; pace Breeze 2003, 151, who believes that the legionaries were manning the milecastles.

⁸⁶ *RIB* 1963, reading 'Deo Co[...]' was also found near milecastle 55, but the text is too fragmentary to claim it as part of the pattern.

⁸⁷ Symonds 2018, 79–81; Symonds 2021, 115.

⁸⁸ Symonds 2018, 80–81.

⁸⁹ See also Cousins forthcoming.

⁹⁰ Nelis-Clément 2000, 35–38. Cf. Cousins 2020, 96–100 on similar dynamics in the epigraphy of *centuriones regionarii*.

landscapes of the frontier – from the Bewcastle *principia*, to the *genii* of the *praesidium* and of the *val(l)um*, to the milecastles – all the more potent and telling.

The intersection of god(s), dedicators, and contexts I have explored here starts to complicate our understanding of the social roles of regional cults, and how varied those roles could be. The epigraphy of the *Veteres*, for example – almost all small, roughly carved altars, with idiosyncratic spellings and dedicators who seem often to be ordinary auxiliaries or people living in military *vici* – is doing something very different socially to the cult of *Cocidius*. Neither cult is adequately explained by simplistic models of '*interpretatio Romana*' or survivals of indigenous cult. Yet both are *local*, and also, of course, *glocal*: part of a regional landscape of divine power in the provinces, in which gods were enmeshed in the construction of local society, a society that in turn is deeply enmeshed with the broader dynamics of empire and of the Roman military.

6 Conclusion: new directions for religious epigraphy in the Roman provinces

I opened this article with the tensions inherent in the study of religious epigraphy: the challenges of understanding what roles inscriptions played in societal and individual relationship with the divine, and the oblique approaches we must take to try and illuminate those roles. This discussion of the cult of *Cocidius* has, I hope, moved the conversation forward on both fronts. Asking what it was about *Cocidius* as a god – what his name signified to people – that meant dedications to him were so often intertwined with the dynamics of militarized power and place has the question backwards. It is the social messaging of the dedications that sheds light for us on the god, not the other way round.

Zooming out, there are a number of lessons here for our approach to the epigraphy of local deities, as well as military and provincial religion more broadly.

First, the texts of inscriptions are without question valuable for our understanding of these cults. However, we must be clear about how best to use those texts, and what insights they give us. Simply listing cults attested in a given area often is not very useful, and lends itself to framing provincial religion in terms of crude contrasts between 'Roman', 'Celtic', 'Oriental' etc. The more holistic approach to epigraphic texts championed here, which pays attention to the interplay between gods and dedicators and how those are combining to send a social message, also allows us to move away from the traditional over-focus on deity names and the problems of cultural interpretation that focus has entailed.

This is naturally easiest when, as in the case of *Cocidius*, we have (just) enough inscriptions, with texts containing (just) enough detail, to begin to chart rough patterns, whether of geographical distribution, dedicatory contexts, or dedicator identities. Even cults attested by only a small number of inscriptions, if found in shrine contexts and in relationship with each other, can start to yield these sorts of insights.⁹¹ For cults attested by only one or two scattered inscriptions, however, this becomes almost impossible. Here, I would argue, approaching these cults more conceptually, and thinking about them in the *aggregate* rather than individually, is likely the most productive way forward. For example: What does the general *phenomenon* of epigraphic dedications to rarely attested gods suggest about the religious mind maps of the provinces? What may viewers have made of inscriptions to gods whose names they did not recognize? What are the social implications inherent in the choice – and it is clearly a choice – to set up an altar to a god rarely honoured in the broader epigraphic landscape of a community?⁹²

⁹¹ For the Wall, *Antenociticus*, briefly discussed above, and *Mars Thincsus* (Cousins 2021) are good examples of this.

⁹²Cf. Haynes 2013, 231.

This brings me on to my next point, which is that, while the texts are valuable, a focus on dedications, especially altars, as archaeological objects is also necessary – in particular as objects that both are produced by, and enable, ritual action. Here, we have seen how even the relatively blunt archaeological contexts of Cocidius’ inscriptions can yield insight, for example the communal altar dedications at milecastles by groups of *milites*, and how the *act* of dedication may be working in tandem with the act of repair-work to the Wall. The inscription from then on, of course, becomes both a permanent reminder of that act of dedication, and the locus for a perpetuation of ritual through sacrifice. Even contexts which seem, at first glance, secondary, may be worth considering in light of deliberate ritual action. This is certainly true for the context of the silver plaques in the strong-room of the Bewcastle *principia*. But it may also be true for altars, like *RIB* 1955, 1956, and 2024, which were found re-used in the foundations of milecastles and of the Wall itself. This phenomenon of re-use may often have been a pragmatic recycling of convenient stone – but that does not preclude the possibility that it may also, at least sometimes, have been ritually charged, another way of binding divine power into the landscape.

Academic discourse on the nature of religious dedications, while increasingly (and rightly) focused on epigraphy as a mechanism of communication with both humans and the divine, has also often been focused on moments of creation – the nature of the dedicatory act.⁹³ The reminder that altars are not static texts, but dynamic objects whose lifecycles, from dedication to deposition, are shaped by ritual action and by their roles within social landscapes, is an important corrective to that trend. It also breathes necessary new life into the means by which military community and identity could be constructed through ritual behaviour.⁹⁴ Cocidius’ epigraphy also helps to deconstruct the strict dichotomies of official and unofficial cults – and dedications – that has long underlain scholarship on military religion.⁹⁵ Exploring the ways in which inscriptions could be harnessed by soldiers, both individually and collectively, for both highly localized purposes and in dialogue with much broader dynamics of empire, is likely to be much more productive.

All of this, ultimately, is about doing justice to the societies of the Roman provinces, and the ways in which those societies deployed gods and religion to shape their place in the broader networks of empire. This requires above all a shift in from *where* we see provincial society.⁹⁶ Rather than seeing provincial religion from the perspective of the Iron Age, or from Rome itself, our outlook must be one rooted in the provinces. This is also why it is so important to move beyond an overwhelming focus on the cultural or linguistic origins of gods as ‘Celtic’, or ‘Germanic’, or indeed as ‘Roman’ – a focus which can also lead us to too great an emphasis on un-reconstructable processes of syncretism.⁹⁷ (Syncretism, indeed, has emerged here as a red herring, with the fairly rare attestations of Silvanus Cocidius and Mars Cocidius obscuring, for earlier scholarship, the more nuanced role for the god presented above.⁹⁸) Cocidius and other local deities are more than their

⁹³ e.g. Bodel 2009; Rüpke 2009; Estarán Tolosa, Dupraz, Abersson 2021, 8.

⁹⁴ Cf. Symonds 2018; Cousins forthcoming.

⁹⁵ e.g. Richmond 1962; Stoll 1998; Saddington 1999; Willburger 2017. See Birley 1978 for historiographical context. Haynes 2013, 191–236 remains by far the most important corrective to this model.

⁹⁶ Fitzpatrick 1991, 126–127; Ternes 2005, 411.

⁹⁷ e.g. Marco Simón 2013, 221–224.

⁹⁸ This is *not* to imply that syncretism was not a religiously meaningful act – though its consequences and resonances are often extremely difficult to parse. (For an attempt to do so for Mars Thincsus, see Cousins 2021.) There is also considerably more that could be said about the language of Cocidius’ appellations. The near-ubiquity of *sanctus* on his dedications from Bewcastle, for example, is striking; the epithet is relatively rare in Roman Britain, though noticeably associated with regional deities on the frontier (see Goodburn and Waugh 1983, 73). My point here is simply that our academic attention has been overly drawn to the relatively rare (Zoll 1995a, 36) phenomenon of syncretism, leading us to (over)emphasize Roman-Celtic dichotomies at the expense of seeing the broader social parameters of regional cults.

names, and certainly more than unsatisfactory proxies for Iron Age or early Medieval pantheons, but also less: they are simply themselves, i.e. often-poorly-documented Roman provincial gods. Paradoxically, by not trying to make regional gods more than what they are, we can make more of them.

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