

Review: *A Cult Centre on Rome's Northwest Frontier*

Maryport has long been an iconic site for the religion of the Roman army. Its famous 'series' of altars, discovered in pits on a hill some 300m outside Maryport fort by 19th-century excavators, formed the basis for an influential theory of military religion that posited a standardized ritual calendar for army units, in which annual vows to Jupiter were accompanied by the ritual burial of the previous year's dedication. The antiquarian nature of the excavations, however, left many questions marks concerning the altars' original contexts and the circumstances of their burial, and in 2011 the Senhouse Museum Trust initiated a new project, led by Ian Haynes and Tony Wilmott, in an attempt to elucidate these issues. The results were almost instantly paradigm-shattering. By the end of the first season, it was clear that that the altars had *not* been ritually buried, but rather were rubble packing for a complicated series of late Roman post pits. Subsequent seasons of excavations revealed a complex history of activity both at the hilltop site (Site 1), and at an area 100 m to the south (Site 2), where antiquarian excavations had uncovered two buildings, one circular, and the other clearly a temple of classical form.

The basic outline of the debunking of the Maryport altar narrative has been widely known for almost a decade, thanks to interim articles and conference papers, but now, with this volume, we have the full accounting. (Ironically, however, given the project's origins, the altars' original location before being placed in the post pits is one of the few things that still cannot be determined with any certainty.) Briefly: what we now clearly have at Maryport is a complex of religious buildings (Site 2), which grows up from the mid-2nd century AD onwards and which is oriented towards the Site 1 hilltop, i.e. the highest point in the surrounding landscape – and *away* from the fort itself. The complex reaches its fullest development in the late 3rd century, with the construction of the classical temple (surprisingly late, compared to other such structures in Britain), before falling out of use in the 4th. Other features at Site 2 include the base of what was, judging from the depths of the foundations, a substantial free-standing monument, and a building interpreted as a possible entrance to the complex. Site 1, meanwhile, seems to have been left open for much of the Roman period, before the digging of the post pits in, at the earliest, the late 4th century. It is clear that the post pits represent a series of timber structures, but the exact form and function of these buildings remain enigmatic. Nonetheless, together with a number of 4th/5th century graves lying to their north, they constitute important, if still opaque, evidence for the late Roman and immediately post-Roman life of Maryport.

This is all laid out with impressive clarity in the report, with some of the best photographs of excavation I have ever seen. (The production quality can be a little more variable when it comes to the finds illustrations, although the finds are consistently and impressively placed in their archaeological contexts throughout.) The report is also an exemplar of how to engage critically and constructively with antiquarian excavations. Most importantly, however, as befits the first monograph-length report focused on religion on the Romano-British frontier, *A Cult Centre on Rome's North-West Frontier* not only overturns a vision of army religion: it also stakes claims to new ones. To this end, the concluding chapter by Haynes is deliberately provocative. Through such suggestions as a solar significance to Site 2's orientation (towards the summer solstice), or the identification of the free-standing monument as a Jupiter Column, Haynes moves us towards a military religion that is stranger, more flexible, more heterogeneous, and more embedded in *landscape* that much scholarship has hitherto allowed. The interpretations put forth are designed to be debated, and will be. (I, for one, wish I could believe in the Jupiter Column, but remain unconvinced.) Without question, however, the work of Haynes, Wilmott, and their collaborators has

ensured that Maryport will remain as iconic for military religion as ever – while more dynamic than ever before.

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