Ritual on the Edge: The dialectics of religious expression on the frontiers of Roman Britain

Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which we can use epigraphic expressions of ritual activity by soldiers serving on the Roman-British frontier to think about the dynamics of power, religion, and identity in border contexts. I wish to begin, however, with a programmatic caveat. What follows is, fundamentally, a thought experiment in what happens when we try to apply a strict method of analysis – in this case the dialectical model – to a body of material. Two points, then, must be taken into account throughout. First, my discussion will in many ways be essentially speculative and experimental. It will be designed to provoke questions and prod the material into suggesting new answers, but it is largely concerned with 'what-may-have-been' rather than with 'what-certainly-was'. Second, like any model, a strict dialectical approach will in some ways simplify and streamline the messiness of reality, and consequently I neither expect nor desire it to be the last word on any of the evidence I will be discussing. However, by choosing what is in many ways a self-consciously artificial lens through which to analyse the dynamics of Roman religion on the frontier, I seek to move myself – and us - out of comfortable, well-worn tracks of thought, and force us into new perspectives on the evidence.

The core of my discussion will be focused on a small group of religious dedications from Housesteads fort on Hadrian's Wall. Set up by soldiers serving at the fort, these inscriptions record moments of self-definition by the dedicators as worshippers, as soldiers, and as members of ethnic groupings. As such, they give us the opportunity to pose questions concerning the dynamics of conflict, contradiction, and attempts at resolution which may underlie these seemingly static mo(nu)ments of religious self-expression. But my analysis of these specific stones should be understood as placed within a broader discourse concerning the nature of frontier societies generally, and northern Roman Britain specifically. Border zones such as the Hadrian's Wall region - places in which society is inherently in flux, and groups are constantly placed in opposition to each other, and redefining themselves in the process - are peculiarly suited to a dialectical analysis, since such an analysis forces us to move beyond easy narratives of 'blending' and hybridity, and to confront the ways in which unequal power relationships, unstable structurings of societies, and even uncertain ownerships of the physical landscape demanded conflict, compromise, and transformation from both people, practices, and beliefs.

To this end, I will use the epigraphic material to examine how it can ask us to think about several different, discrete, dialectical relationships, in particular the opposition between 'Roman' and 'native' deities and ritual practices, 'military' versus 'ethnic' self-identifications, the conquered versus the conqueror, and the institution of the Roman army versus the autonomy of the individual or sub-community. I shall be considering too the ways in which the epigraphic form and the epigraphic landscape can be seen as both containing and directing the articulation and negotiation of these sources of social and religious tension.

The Inscriptions

Housesteads lies in the central section of Hadrian's Wall; like other forts in the region, it was garrisoned by auxiliary units rather than by legionaries. The soldiers at Housesteads belonged to units originally levied in the Rhine region and in Gaul; we do not know the

earliest garrisons for certain, but by AD 200 (and possibly earlier) the *cohors I Tungrorum*, First Cohort of Tungrians, was the primary garrison at the site.[1] The *Notitia Dignitatum* records the First Tungrians still at Housesteads in the early fifth century AD – that is, until the end of the Roman occupation of Britain.[2] At various times, the epigraphic record shows that they were supplemented by smaller units like the third-century *cuneus Frisiorum*, or 'wedge of Frisians', who form the principal focus of this paper. Communal military religious activity seems to have been clustered on Chapel Hill, a low hill to the south of the fort and its *vicus*, or civilian settlement. It is here that the majority of large altars from the site have been found, along with several shrines, including a temple to Mithras (mithraeum) at the hill's western edge. My discussion in this paper focuses on one of the cults attested on Chapel Hill, centred on the veneration of the deities Mars Thincsus and the Alaisiagae.

Three inscriptions associated with this cult have been found, along with a sculptured arcuate lintel and possibly the remains of a small shrine.[3] Since a detailed close reading of the texts is necessary to my analysis, I lay them out here in full.

The first inscription, an altar with plain sides and measuring 35x86cm (14x34 inches), reads:

> *Deabus* | *Alaisia*|*gis Bau*|*dihillie* | *et Friaga*|*bi et N(umini) Aug(usti)* | *n(umerus) Hnau*|*difridi* | *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*
>
> 'To the goddesses the Alaisiagae, Baudihillie and Friagabis, and to the Divinity of the Emperor, the unit of Hnaudifridus willingly and deservedly fulfilled its vow.' (*RIB* 1576; translation after *RIB*.)

The second altar, narrower but taller at 56x127cm (22x50 inches), is more elaborately decorated, with two wheels and the bust of a deity on its front, a knife and axe on its left side, and a jug and patera on the right. It reads:

> *Deo* | *Marti et duabus* | *Alaisiagis et N(umini) Augusti()* | *Ger(mani) cives Tuihanti* | *cunei Frisiorum* | *Ver(covicianorum) Se(ve)r(iani) Alexand*|*riani votum* |*solverunt libent[es]* | *m(erito)*
>
> To the god Mars and the two Alaisiagae and to the Divinity of the Emperor the Germans being citizens of Twenthe of the formation of Frisians of Vercovicium, styled Severus Alexander's, willingly and deservedly fulfilled their vow. (*RIB* 1594; translation after *RIB.*)

The reference to Severus Alexander almost certainly dates this inscription, and probably the final one, to between AD 222 and 235. The final inscription is not an altar, but rather a tall pillar, probably the left-hand door jamb to the shrine. The front and left sides are undecorated; on the right side is a female figure. The text reads:

> *Deo* | *Marti* | *Thincso* | *et duabus* | *Alaisiagis* | *Bede et Fi*|*mmilene* | *et N(umini) Aug(usti) Ger*|*m(ani) cives Tui*|*hanti* | *v(otum) s(olverunt) l(ibentes) m(erito)*

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[1] Alan Rushworth, *Housesteads Roman Fort: The Grandest Station* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2009), 283–4.
[2] James Crow, *Housesteads* (London: B.T. Batsford/English Heritage, 1995), 59.
[3] John Clayton, W. Thompson Watkin, Emil Hübner, and George Stephens, "On the Discovery of Roman Inscribed Altars, &c., at Housesteads, November, 1883," *Archaeologia Aeliana, 2nd Series* 10 (1884-1885): 148–72; Alan Rushworth, "Franks, Frisians and Tungrians: Garrisons at Housesteads in the 3rd Century AD," in *LIMES XX: XX Congreso Internacional de Estudios sobre la Frontera Romana*, ed. Angel Morillo, Norbert Hanel and Esperanza Martin (Madrid: Edicions Polifemo, 2009), 1147–8.

> To the god Mars Thincsus and the two Alaisiagae Bede and Fimmilene and the Divinity of the Emperor, the Germans, being citizens of Twenthe, willingly and deservedly fulfilled their vow. (*RIB* 1593; translation after *RIB*).

The arcuate lintel, *CSIR* I.6, 161, shows Mars standing with a spear and a shield, and a goose on his right; on either side are nude male figures carrying wreathes and objects usually identified as torches.[4]

These objects and their inscribed texts can be read as the physical manifestation of, and if not the end-result of, then an interim report on,[5] multiple dialectical relationships. I now wish to explore these relationships in turn, starting at the end of the texts, with the statements of identity that the dedicants make about themselves. The conflicting levels of 'belonging' and group identity which the inscriptions express are key to understanding the social perspectives and tensions which informed the dedicants' choice of deities to venerate, and how they venerated them. At the same time, by examining human identities before the divine ones, we can lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of how religion was being used by these soldiers to provide a divine framework for their temporal lives.

Dialectics of Human Identity

Two different groups appear to be responsible for the construction of the inscriptions. The men who set up *RIB* 1576, whom I shall not discuss here at length, identify themselves only as the *numerus Hnaudifridi*, presumably a small-scale unit of soldiers attached to Housesteads fort, demarcated only by the name of their commanding officer, Hnaudifridus (a name of Germanic origin). The dedicants of *RIB* 1593 and 1594 are also members of a non-cohort military unit, but give us considerably more detail than the *numerus Hnaudifridi* about how they wished to self-represent. The fullest statement of identity comes on *RIB* 1594: these men are '*Ger(mani) cives Tuihanti | cunei Frisiorum | Ver(covicianorum) Se(ve)r(iani) Alexand|riani*'.[6] There is a lot going on here. We have an ethnic indicator (*Germani*), a statement of civic identity (*cives Tuihanti*), and an assertion of belonging to a military unit, which itself is further distinguished by additional indicators of ethnicity (*Frisiorum*), locality (*Vercovicianorum*, 'men of Housesteads'), and political loyalty (*Severiani Alexandriani*). Viewed through the lens of dialectics, what do these choices of self-identification imply about the dynamics of community- and group-belonging which these men had to negotiate?

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[4] John C. Coulston and Edward J. Phillips, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani Corpus: Great Britain, Volume I, Fascicule 6: Hadrian's Wall West of the North Tyne, and Carlisle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1988), 65. Wreathes and torches customarily go together, particularly when held by Victories. However, as Toynbee notes, the objects on CSIR I.6, 161 are unusually pointed and tapered (Jocelyn Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 142); it may be worth asking whether the sculptor here has (either deliberately or through a misreading of other iconography) transmogrified the torches into swords.

[5] This is a point I will return to at the end.

[6] Rushworth has argued that the inscription should be emended to read '*Ger(mani) cives Tuihanti | (et) cunei Frisiorum*', and thus understood to be set up by two separate groups, with '*cunei*' becoming a nominative plural rather than a genitive singular ("Franks, Frisians and Tungrians", 1148–9). However, given the presence of two ligated '*et*'s on the inscription already, I find the assumption that the epigrapher(s) would have left it out here to be implausible, especially since, if they wanted '*cunei Frisiorum*' to be on a single line, they could have easily abbreviated it to '*et cunei Frisior(um)'*. I therefore adhere to the traditional reading in this paper.

All individuals possess multiple levels of identity. The layered and often self-contradictory identity of an individual can have components that range from a unique personal history to a simple, yet powerful one-word label joining the individual to a larger group (e.g. 'Roman'). It is not surprising, then, that the men who set up *RIB* 1594 could draw on a range of terms that they felt described them. The epigraphic medium, however, lends a particular type of significance to the terms displayed here. Inscriptions are by their very nature public monuments, serving not merely as a form of self-expression, but specifically as a statement to be viewed by *others*. The terms these men have chosen are therefore not neutral or straightforwardly descriptive; rather, they are deliberate self-fashionings and self-conscious statements of belonging (and conversely also of exclusion). We can therefore use them to think about the underlying tides of community-formation and social pressures which were tugging at the dedicants and the way they perceived their position in the world.

From Marx to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the use of dialectical approaches has historically been entwined with the critical examination of power structures and their (often negative) effect on people's lives and social ties. It is fitting therefore, to begin this discussion by acknowledging the effect of the institution of the military on the lives of these men.[7] In the eyes of the state, and almost certainly of those around them, the men who set up *RIB* 1594 were soldiers first and foremost, cogs in the military machine of the Roman empire. They would have been dressed in clothing, and wearing paraphernalia, which would have signalled to outsiders their status as (potentially) violent enforcers of Roman imperialism (while to 'insiders' the precise nature of their clothing and equipment would have given clues to their specific position within the structure of the army).[8] That these men recognized that their position as soldiers was an important part of their lives is shown by the fact that they chose to include the title of their unit on the dedication. Yet even within that title, we already receive hints about the multivalent reality which underlay the seemingly straightforward role of soldier. The base title of the unit to which they belong, *cuneus Frisiorum*, indicates that these are men who are in fact on the fringes of the army power complex. The majority of soldiers serving on Hadrian's Wall were auxiliary troops like the First Cohort of Tungrians, already one step down in the army hierarchy from the legionaries, and drawn from the conquered peoples of the empire. Originally, most would have also been lacking in Roman citizenship. The men of the *cuneus Frisiorum* were more marginal still, belonging to a category of unit conventionally described as 'irregular.' The accuracy of this term has recently and rightly been challenged by Ian Haynes.[9] Nonetheless, the fact remains that the *numeri* and *cunei,* although an 'integral part of Rome's armies,'[10] were still socially peripheral within the military in many ways: not part of the regular hierarchy of auxiliary *cohortes*, almost certainly smaller-scale, and probably more *ad hoc* in their command structures.

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[7] Andrew Gardner, "Thinking about Roman Imperialism: Postcolonialism, Globalisation, and Beyond?," *Britannia* 44 (2013): 11–14.

[8] Simon James, "The Community of the Soldiers: a Major Identity and Centre of Power in the Roman Empire," in *TRAC 98: Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Leicester 1998*, ed. Patricia Baker, Colin Forcey, Sophia Jundi, and Robert Witcher (Oxford: Oxbow, 1999), 18–21.

[9] Ian Haynes, "Ethnic Identity and Archaeology: Case Studies from the "National *Numeri*" of Imperial Rome's Armies,' in *Embracing the Provinces: Society and Material Culture of the Roman Frontier Regions: Essays in Honour of Dr Carol van Driel-Murray*, ed. Tatiana Ivleva, Jasper de Bruin and Mark Driessen (Oxford: Oxbow, 2018), 17–19. I am grateful to Ian Haynes for sight of this paper prior to its publication.

[10] Haynes, "Ethnic Identity," 19.

Their marginal military status probably reflected a precarious position within the hierarchies of the state as well. By the reign of Severus Alexander, the men of the *cohors I Tungrorum*, the dominant unit at Housesteads alongside whom the *cuneus Frisiorum* would have been serving, would in fact most likely have been Roman citizens, a status granted to them and the other inhabitants of the empire by the *constitutio Antoniniana* in AD 212. However, as Frisians, the men of the *cuneus* came from beyond the territory of the Roman empire, and as a result would almost certainly have not had Roman citizenship to begin with. What is more, it is unlikely that they would have been able to obtain citizenship through their military service; unlike auxiliaries pre-212, members of *cunei* and *numeri* do not seem to have been regularly granted citizenship upon their discharge from the army.[11] Therefore, unlike their military peers, these men were not full members of the imperial society for which they fought, nor would they have the opportunity of becoming so. So the title *cuneus Frisiorum* holds within it a conflict between belonging and not belonging, between being incorporated into – and indeed enforcing – Roman imperial militarism, but also being rejected from it. This may even have been reflected in the men's physical placement within the broader fort landscape; it has been argued that this particular *cuneus* may have been quartered outside the fort walls, in a zone of the *vicus* marked out by ephemerally-constructed buildings and the presence of Housesteads Ware, a locally-made pottery type which has been linked to Frisian forms.[12] (A similar pattern has been observed at Birdoswald, where Housesteads Ware has been found in conjunction with extra-mural rectangular timber structures in what seems to be a military annexe to the main fort.[13]) Another suggestion is that the Housesteads Frisians were housed in an awkwardly-positioned eleventh barracks block (Building VII) within the fort, which, although perhaps less marginal than quarters outside the fort wall, would probably still have served to differentiate them from the main cohort.[14]

Yet the other elements of the unit's title nuance – even undermine – their status as Frisian 'others'. Though not the principle unit of the fort, their status as '*Vercovicianorum*' gives them a claim to localness, to belonging to the place itself. This is particularly noteworthy if they were in fact housed outside the fort walls, even taking into account the emphasis in current research on the fluidity of the fort wall as a boundary marker.[15] (At the same time, this sort of geographical specificity may also have served to separate them out from *other* Frisians in the Roman army, with similar 'demonyms' in use for *cunei* of Frisians serving at

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[11] John C. Mann, "A Note on the Numeri," *Hermes* 82 (1954): 501–6; Ian Haynes, *Blood of the Provinces: the Roman Auxilia and the Making of Provincial Society from Augustus to the Severans*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 69. I am also grateful to Myles Lavan for discussing this point with me, and for sharing some unpublished research.

[12] Crow, *Housesteads*, 72; for Housesteads Ware and its connections to Frisian traditions, see Ian Jobey, "Housesteads Ware – A Frisian Tradition on Hadrian's Wall," *Archaeologia Aeliana, 5th Series* 7 (1979), 127–43; Carol van Driel-Murray, "Ethnic Recruitment and Military Mobility," in *LIMES XX: XX Congreso Internacional de Estudios sobre la Frontera Romana*, ed. Angel Morillo, Norbert Hanel and Esperanza Martin (Madrid: Edicions Polifemo, 2009), 817–19.

[13] Tony Wilmott, *Hadrian's Wall: Archaeological Research by English Heritage 1976-2000* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2009), 273–4.

[14] Rushworth, *Franks, Frisians and Tungrians,* 1151.

[15] See, e.g., Andrew Birley, "The Fort Wall: a Great Divide?" in *Breaking Down Boundaries: Hadrian's Wall in the 21st century*, ed. Rob Collins and Matthew Symonds (Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2013), 85–104.

Binchester and Burgh-by-Sands – thus potentially isolating them from their countrymen.[16]) Their title of '*Severi Alexandriani*' – the emperor's own troops – gives them a further marker of belonging which is in direct conflict with their marginal imperial position, and even in indirect conflict with *Vercovicianorum*, since here the belonging is predicated upon large-scale empire-wide connections between people (the emperor and his soldiers), rather than an intimate connection to place. To hold both these scales in their minds at once may well have provoked a cognitive dissonance which, if left unconfronted and unresolved, might have had the potential to weaken the ability of each signifier to structure their sense of belonging.

However, the confrontation of different identity categories is of course not limited to, or even primarily located within, the name of the unit. Their military identity is also set against their ethnic identity of *Germani* and their civic/tribal identity as *cives Tuihanti*. Let us examine the dynamics of each of these in turn.

The precise connotations and implications of the ethnonym *Germani* in Roman imperial society are still debated. We can think about its use here in two ways: first, how the self-identification of these men as 'Germans' fits in with what we understand of the history of the term *Germani* specifically and how and to whom it was applied, and second, these inscriptions' place within a broader epigraphic discourse of self-identification by ethnonym in the Roman empire.

It is generally assumed in scholarship that *Germani*, at least initially, was largely an etic category created by classical ethnographers, rather than an identity label which the tribes of the Rhine and trans-Rhine regions would have applied to themselves; as Rives puts it, 'there is virtually no evidence that the Germanic-speaking peoples of antiquity had a common name for themselves or adhered to a common historical tradition'.[17] Our very limited historical evidence – essentially confined to a few vague sentences in Tacitus' *Germania* – implies that if *Germani* was ever an emic term at all, it originally only applied to a single tribal group (Tacitus, *Germ* 2.3). The earliest uses of *Germani* as a category in Roman literature, and in particular its employment by Caesar, emphasize their position as an idealized barbarian 'other' – more trope than reality.[18] The ethnonym, in Roman hands, is as much about defining the Roman as it is about defining the other.[19]

However, as Clay has correctly pointed out, we have a fair amount of epigraphic evidence from the first century AD onwards for members of Germanic-speaking tribes, usually serving

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[16] Binchester: *cuneus Frisiorum Vinoviensium* (*RIB* 1035); Burgh-by-Sands: *cuneus Frisionum Aballavensium* (*RIB* 882-883). See also Marjan Galestin, "*Frisii* and *Frisiavones*," *Palaeohistoria* 49/50 (2007-2008), 701–2; Marjan Galestin, "Frisian Soldiers in the Roman Army" in *LIMES XX: XX Congreso Internacional de Estudios sobre la Frontera Romana*, ed. Angel Morillo, Norbert Hanel and Esperanza Martin (Madrid: Edicions Polifemo, 2009), 839–40.

[17] James Rives, *Tacitus: Germania* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 11. See, however, Cheryl Clay, "Developing the 'Germani' in Roman Studies," in *TRAC 2007: Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, ed. Corisande Fenwick, Meredith Wiggins, and Dave Wythe (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008), 131–50 for an alternative view – though, as far as I can tell, her linguistic arguments for the origins of 'Germanus' are on the whole quite suspect.

[18] Christine Trzaska-Richter, Furor Teutonicus: *Das Römische Germanenbild in Politik und Propaganda von den Anfängen bis zum 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr* (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier: Trier, 1991), 83-87.

[19] Ellen O'Gorman, "No Place Like Rome: Identity and Difference in the *Germania* of Tacitus," *Ramus* 22 (1993), 135.

in the Roman army, using the term *Germanus* to refer to themselves.[20] A possible way of understanding this shift – through a dialectical lens – is that '*Germani*' may have been an identity which was crystallized precisely through encounters with, and in opposition to, '*Romani*'. If we accept that the origins for the name are likely etic, imposed upon an arbitrary group by an outside entity with imperialist ambitions, then perhaps we should think about the self-identifications by '*Germani*' that we see in the epigraphy as active acts of appropriation, and perhaps even reclamation, by those to whom the term had been passively applied. While these men may have initially come to think of themselves as *Germani* through having that term applied to them by another society, by consciously choosing to use it themselves they regain the ability to self-define: an act of imperialism is transformed into an act of agency on the part of the marginal. This is especially true if *Germani* had connotations of 'the barbarian' for the Roman elite;[21] as with the embrace of 'queer', originally a slur, by modern LGBT communities,[22] could *Germanus* have become a badge of pride, an embrace of being outside the establishment?

This is all admittedly quite far-fetched. But what thinking about ethnic identity in these terms does, is give us the opportunity to release ourselves from the straightjacket dichotomy of emic versus etic definitions, and thus also from an over-obsession with *origins*, with ur-ethnicities, as it were – an obsession that with the *Germani* in particular is problematically wrapped up with nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalist concerns with ethnic purity. By seeing the development of '*Germanus*/*Germani*' as an identity in the Roman imperial period as a series of dialectical iterations, an endlessly repeated sequence of definition-by-other, self-definition, and re-definition-by-other, we allow not only for a plurality of views of what constituted 'German-ness', but also turn our focus to the *fluidity* of ethnic identities, rather than treating them as static and unchanging.

This embracing of ethnonyms as a means of self-othering, and consequently of self-definition, is paralleled in the epigraphy of other groups. In an in-depth analysis of the epigraphic evidence, Ivleva has argued for a similar process in the terms used by British emigrants to the continent; there too, she suggests, 'Roman constructs with little self-ascriptive value' were harnessed to allow 'the self-awareness of an ethnic migrant group to emerge'.[23] A key factor with both the *Germani* at Housesteads and the British migrants examined by Ivleva is that both groups are away from their homeland, which means that their identities are necessarily playing out on a larger scale: they are no longer self-defining in opposition to the next village, or the neighbouring tribe, but rather to the next province, or to all the peoples of the empire.

The term '*cives Tuihanti*' also needs to be understood as part of a broader discourse of self-identification, this time at a civic or 'tribal' level, rather than an 'ethnic' one. Although the

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[20] Cheryl Clay, "Before there were Angles, Saxons and Jutes. An Epigraphic Study of the Germanic Social, Religious and Linguistic Relations on Hadrian's Wall," in *Pagans and Christians – from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Papers in Honour of Martin Henig, Presented on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. Lauren Gilmour (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), 47–63; Clay, 'Developing the 'Germani', 132.
[21] Rives, *Germania*, 38.
[22] Adam Galinsky *et al.*, "The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: Implications for Social Identity," in *Identity Issues in Groups*, ed. Jeffrey Polzer (Bingley: Emerald, 2003), 231–2.
[23] Tatiana Ivleva, "Remembering Britannia: Expressions of Identities by 'Britons' on the Continent during the Roman Empire," in *Attitudes towards the Past in Antiquity: Creating Identities*, ed. Brita Alroth and Charlotte Scheffer (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2014), 217.

phenomenon of self-identifying as the '*civis*' (singular) or '*cives*' (plural) of a sub-group – whether tribal, civic, or in some cases even of a province – has yet to be fully studied,[24] it is quite likely that it stems at least in part from the interaction between Roman ideas of citizenship and localized conceptions of identity. It is certainly not, however, as simple a matter as a mutually exclusive dichotomy between being a '*civis Romanus*' and the '*civis*' of a town or tribe; it is clear that localized '*civis*' affiliations were adopted by Roman citizens and peregrines alike.[25] In this particular case, however, it is possible that '*cives Tuihanti*' *is* to some degree intended to be read in opposition to '*cives Romani*'. As discussed above, the men of this inscription came from outside the administrative boundaries of the Roman empire; they were not Roman citizens, and likely had no mechanism for becoming so. The comparative dynamics are different, then. Identities such as '*cives Galli*' or '*cives Pannonii*', to name two examples known from neighbouring Vindolanda,[26] are affiliations which were located *within* the empire and thus equally might or might not intersect with '*cives Romani*'. On the other hand, being '*cives Tuihanti*' instantly precluded also being citizens of Rome. These men, then, are simultaneously both using the terminology of Roman civic identity, but also, through doing so, placing themselves outside of the Roman civic framework. By expressing themselves in these terms, they shift the connotations of their original identity by putting it into explicit dialogue with Roman forms– and also are possibly altering the connotations of '*cives*' as well. This may therefore be understood as a dialectic between the Roman concept of '*cives*' and the original tribal identity of the Tuihanti.

We can see, then, that there are multiple conflicts in the expressions of identity on these inscriptions, which stem not only from the competing demands of ethnic, tribal, and imperial loyalties, but also from tensions inherent to each signifier on its own. These conflicts, and their potential resolutions, need to then be put in dialogue with the deities to whom the inscriptions were dedicated: the one informs the other. But before we can examine this dynamic between religious affiliation and expression of identity, we need to consider what that religious affiliation actually is – i.e. the nature of the deities venerated on the inscriptions, and their relationships to each other. I wish to begin this examination with the god Mars Thincsus. Can a dialectical approach give us greater insight into the nature of so-called 'syncretic' deities?

Dialectics of Divine Nature

A century after Georg Wissowa's seminal article '*Interpretatio Romana*: Römische Götter im Barbarenlande'[27], scholars of provincial religion still struggle to find a compelling method of analysis or interpretation for deities who may be described, simplistically, as mixtures of Roman and indigenous gods – whether that mixture is indicated through double-naming,

[24] Although see Tibor Grüll, "*Origo* as Identity Factor in Roman Epitaphs," in *Social Interactions and Status Markers in the Roman World*, ed. George Cupcea and Rada Varga (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), 139–41; Anthony R. Birley, "*Cives Galli De(ae) Galliae Concordesque Britanni*: a Dedication at *Vindolanda*," *L'Antiquité Classique* 77 (2008): 178–82 for discussion of some of the attestations.
[25] Ralph Mathisen, "*Natio, Gens, Provincialis* and *Civis:* Geographical Terminology and Personal Identity in Late Antiquity," in *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity*, ed. Geoffrey Greatrex and Hugh Elton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 277.
[26] Birley, *Cives Galli*, 179.
[27] Georg Wissowa, "*Interpretatio Romana*: Römische Götter im Barbarenlande," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 19 (1916-1919): 1–49.

the use of hybrid iconographies, or even a combination of name and iconography (e.g. a goddess with a local name, but with exclusively classical attributes and appearance).[28] When the evidence is solely onomastic, the challenges are particularly acute: determining why one Roman god has been chosen over another for double-named deities is often impossible, and attempts to do so far too often are based on broad-brush, even simplistic, interpretations of the Roman god's sphere of influence.[29] (For example, a native deity 'syncretized' with Mars will be interpreted as a pre-Roman god of war.) If the epigraphic evidence is relatively widespread and substantial, it can be easier to make a robust explanatory argument.[30] But all too often the deity in question is attested by only a few, or even a single, inscription. What then are we to do?

This is the situation with Mars Thincsus. Although both the linguistic origins of 'Thincsus' and the identity of the dedicants imply that the deity has its roots in the Germanic-speaking parts of continental Europe, his cult is known only from Housesteads, and indeed the full double-name itself only from *RIB* 1593. Discussions of the god – of which there have been few apart from immediately after the altar's discovery in 1883 – have centred on the possible connection between 'Thincsus' and the Germanic word 'Thing', meaning assembly.[31] Linguistic analyses are, however, probably of little explanatory power, and indeed may mislead us into thinking we know more than we do: for example, knowing the name means 'the anointed one' in fact gives very little insight into the meaning and mythology of Christ in Christianity. Leaving aside the impossibility of fully understanding the power of a deity through linguistic origins alone, the pairing of a non-Latin name with a Latin one is often treated – whether consciously or not – as a neutral or even a positive act. Roman and native are blended into one, a necessary first step on the long road of Romanization. It is an accretive act as well as a syncretic one – by being joined together into a single whole, each deity becomes more than what it was before. But what happens if we see events of double-naming not as sums of addition, not as moments where the two gods are pulled together like the north and south poles of two magnets, but rather as moments of conflict and confrontation? Moments where two divine forces meet in opposition, and, unable to endure side by side, are forced to be changed the one by the other into something entirely new, yet with the originals sublated into it? Does this change our perception of the end-result/interim report we witness in epigraphic double-naming?

At the core of a dialectical relationship are two opposing concepts whose opposition must be resolved by the transformation – even the dissolution – of both into a new form. A dialectical understanding of the emergence of Mars Thincsus, therefore, requires us to posit that when Mars and Thincs*[32] became present in the same cosmological framework – when

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[28] For valiant attempts to interpret this sort of material, see, e.g., Amy L. Zoll, "Patterns of Worship in Roman Britain: Double-Named Deities in Context" in *TRAC 94: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, ed. Sally Cotton, David Dungworth, Sarah Scott and Jeremy Taylor (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1995), 33–44; Jane Webster, "Necessary Comparisons: A Post-Colonial Approach to Religious Syncretism in the Roman Provinces," *World Archaeology* 28.3 (February 1997): 324–38.
[29] Clifford Ando, "*Interpretatio Romana*," *Classical Philology* 100.1 (January 2005): 42.
[30] e.g. Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices: The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 94–115.
[31] e.g. Hübner in Clayton *et al.*, "Roman Inscribed Altars", 155–66; see also Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1935), 171–175.
[32] I use this notation to indicate that we cannot be certain of the original form, and in particular ending, of Thincsus' name. In what follows, I do assume, however, that some deity Thincs* existed in some form among

potential worshipers became aware of the possibility of venerating each of them – the two deities were seen as antithetical to each other, as unable to co-exist within the same mental religious framework. This take is thought-provoking, since it runs contrary to usual narratives concerning the flexibility and tolerance of polytheistic religions towards the gods of others. What if, rather than an easy absorption and quick, almost unthinking, acceptance, the appearance of a new deity within a polytheistic society's worldview prompted instead discomfort and cognitive dissonance? A dissonance which required active steps to resolve the mental conflict – steps which entailed the transformation not only of the new deity, but of the society's previous religious ontologies and gods as well? One, though certainly not the only, way to envision this is to conceive of two polytheistic societies, each embracing the concept of a cosmos populated with a plurality of divine beings – yet each with a fundamentally different outlook on *what made a being divine*. The encounter of two opposing definitions *specific* to each society (i.e. what precisely constitutes the divine) of a universal umbrella concept *shared* by both societies (i.e. the divine exists and is definable), would then result in a fundamental contradiction. This contradiction might then only be resolved by the transformation of both definitions into a new, more sophisticated understanding of divine nature which simultaneously encompassed and negated both earlier frameworks: in other words, a classic Hegelian dialectic. Within this model, therefore, Mars Thincsus is *not* an equal meeting/melding of Mars and Thincs*, but rather a transcendence of them both.

The sublation of continental cosmologies into the veneration of not just Mars Thincsus but indeed other incarnations of Mars at Housesteads is potentially seen in the iconography of the god at the site. Mars appears more often in the epigraphy and iconography of Housesteads than of any other Hadrian's Wall fort.[33] Furthermore, in at least six[34] of the thirteen depictions of him from the site, he is also accompanied by a goose, an attribute seen in depictions of Mars elsewhere in the north-west provinces of the Roman empire (though the largest cluster by far is this one at Housesteads).[35] Although a detailed examination of the iconography of Mars at Housesteads is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, it may be worth asking whether his importance at this fort is shaped more by local theological conceptions of his nature particular to Housesteads' inhabitants, including the Tuihanti, than by his more general, and obvious, military significance as the Roman god of war.

The dialectical understanding of the transformation of the divine laid out here, however, is entwined with and affected by further sets of dialectical relationships, ones predicated on aspects of power and conquest. As we have already seen above, the spectre of Roman imperialism is present throughout the identity statements of these inscriptions, and below I will return to the power dynamics displayed by the inscription as a whole. For the moment,

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the Tuihanti prior to the introduction of Mars – at least for the purposes of this paper. I am also assuming, again for the purposes of this paper, that the agency for the transformation of Mars and Thincs* into Mars Thincsus came from 'German' worshipers, not from 'Roman' ones (by 'German' versus 'Roman,' I mean here only people who knew Thincs* first versus those who knew Mars first, with no other assumptions concerning ethnic or civic identity). That this was the case can never be known with 100% certainty, but the overall (con)text of the Housesteads inscriptions – the veneration of the Alaisiagae as well, the statements of identity, the fact that these are our only attestations of the 'Germanic' (in the linguistic sense) names – strongly implies it.

[33] This statement is based on personal examination of the epigraphic and sculptural corpora for the Wall.

[34] *CSIR* I.6, 65, 66, 68, 73, 74 and 161 (the arcuate lintel from the shrine of Mars Thincsus).

[35] Marion Mattern, "Die Gans auf den Denkmälern des Mars," *Bulletin des Antiquités Luxembourgeoises* 22 (1993): 93–120, with catalogue.

however, I want to continue to focus on the choices of deities, and of their namings, and on how these may be the manifestations of dialectical power relationships.

When the Tuihanti encountered Mars, prompting the conflict with Thincs* laid out above, their understandings of both deities were not taking place in a power vacuum. Mars belonged to the cosmology of a society – the Roman Empire – which had dominated nearby regions through military force and stood as a major power – indeed probably a potential threat – on the edge of the Tuihanti's presumed homeland in Frisia. The confrontation which led (in this model) to the dialectical transformation of both deities into Mars Thincsus, then, was not a 'fair fight'. Mars' claim to be worshiped, backed up by the might of Roman imperialism, may well have been overwhelming. On the reverse side, however, Thincs* had behind him the weight of tradition, a (we can presume) generations- if not centuries-long chronological depth to his entanglement with the Tuihanti's divine worldview. As we have seen, despite the distinct power advantages afforded to Mars, this confrontation did not result in the simple erasure of Thincs*, nor did it leave Mars unaffected. Nevertheless, in both the resulting dialectical synthesis of Mars Thincsus, and in other aspects of the Housesteads inscriptions, we can see the effects of the confrontation of new power structures with traditional forms on the deities the dedicants chose to venerate. The strength of Roman forms can be seen in the very shape of the dedication, a stone altar with Roman ritual formulae. It can also be seen in the choice of 'Thincsus' – a Latinized version of the in fact unrecoverable (and perhaps only ever oral) name of the original god. This Latinization can also be seen in the title of the Alaisiagae, once again a word with a Germanic root which has been provided with a Latin feminine plural ending.

But the most telling indicator of the role of imperial power dynamics in the inscriptions is the consistent incorporation of the *Numen Augusti* into the dedicatory formula. This was a conscious choice on the part of the dedicants, with significant implications for the presentation of their religious worldview. Let us look again at the *in toto* dedication of *RIB* 1593: *Deo* | *Marti* | *Thincso* | *et duabus* | *Alaisiagis* | *Bede et Fi*|*mmilene* | *et N(umini) Aug(usti)*. Taken all together, this collection of deities indicates the ways in which the Tuihantiwho set up the inscription were using religious veneration to navigate the conflicting religious pressures of ancestral tradition and imperial power. A dedication to the Alaisiagae alone might be primarily a statement of continuity of ethnic religious tradition. A dedication to the *Numen Augusti* alone might be concerned solely with establishing these men's place within the ritualized power hierarchy of the empire. But when they are joined together, and alongside the already synthesized Mars Thincsus, the resulting whole is considerably more than the sum of the parts. The *Numen Augusti* signals that the Tuihanti, though continuing to worship ancestral deities, are also 'buying in' – at least in this public epigraphic expression – to the religious loyalties of the Roman army. Its very presence transforms the connotations of Mars Thincsus and the Alaisiagae, yet the reverse is also true: their presence does not undermine, but rather nuances the Tuihanti's veneration of the emperor, allowing them to express adherence to, yet not homogeneity with, the umbrella concept of the empire-wide imperial cult.[36]

[36] This sort of interplay between religious engagement with the emperor and other forms of religious activity, is, I would argue, essential to understanding the role of the 'imperial cult' in provincial and military religion more broadly. For a lengthier exposition of my position on the imperial cult, so-called, and how we should approach it, see Eleri Cousins, *The Sanctuary at Bath in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020), 93-94.

Let us now put the two halves together. How do the choices of deities on these inscriptions work together with the identity descriptors, and to what end?

Dialectics of Religion and Identity on the Frontier

As we have seen above, the identity descriptors on these inscriptions suggest that these men were being pulled in multiple directions by competing identities and loyalties. Resolution of these conflicts of loyalty was not merely necessary for their mental comfort, but perhaps even for their sanity, particularly when we take into account the stresses inherent to a military frontier setting. This search for resolution was almost certainly ongoing in multiple ways throughout their daily lives. In these epigraphic monuments, however, we see how religious affiliation in particular could be harnessed as a powerful tool for defusing these tensions and forging contradiction into coherence. The human-level conflicts of identity are first played out, and then resolved, at a divine level. The divine harmony thus achieved – or at least claimed – then provides a cosmological framework within which these men could simultaneously express, and attempt to smooth out, the splintered nature of their lives.

I am not, however, arguing that this group of inscriptions represents the culmination and final resolution of these tensions. Such an argument would be unsound for multiple reasons. First, and not trivially for my goals in this paper, a dialectical approach entails an understanding of society as *process*; dialectical forces are continual and ever-changing. But more basically, viewing these monuments as static expressions of a resolved social situation – as *solutions* – fundamentally misrepresents the function of epigraphy, in particular religious epigraphy. Above, I referred to these inscriptions as 'interim reports' on the social and religious dialectics they express. Here, I want to expand on this point, and also to examine these monuments' place in their wider physical landscape.

The inscriptions display how these men chose to represent themselves at a particular moment in time, the point at which they commissioned the altar and pillar, and possibly the shrine to Mars Thincsus itself (given the fact that the pillar seems to be an architectural element of the shrine). The monuments thus commemorate how they perceived their relationship to their communities and their gods at that specific moment. But of course, the inscriptions do far more than simply passively commemorate. They also actively enact those relationships. By carving into stone how they identify and whom they worship, these men reify relationships which until that point may have only existed as nebulous sensations of belonging and not-belonging. In so doing, both they and the viewers of the inscriptions are forced to reckon with the contradictory layers of identity and dialectical conflicts which have been explored above. This is where the monuments' aspects as 'interim reports' emerges. The inscriptions in some ways can be understood as summing up the dedicators' work to date on integrating themselves into their social and cosmological worlds, and on finding their place within the society of the fort and empire. As such, they become both moments of closure and the beginning of a new iterative cycle of identity construction and community formation. In particular, by making public statements of social and religious loyalty, the inscriptions hold the capacity for bringing the debate about who these men were and to whom they belonged into a broader sphere. They are both the conclusion of an internally located dialectic between religion and identity, and a set of postulates for a new dialectic

between the dedicants and the broader military community, which will result in new identities and social positions for both.

This brings me to the place of the shrine and its inscriptions within the broader epigraphic landscape at Housesteads, which has significant implications for the functioning of the dialectic between the cult's adherents and that broader military community of which they were a part. As mentioned at the start of this paper, these inscriptions were found on Chapel Hill, where the vast majority of evidence for communal religious activity by the soldiers serving at the fort has been found. This includes all of Housesteads' evidence for the performance of large-scale communal military rituals. Four altars (*RIB* 1584-6 and 1588), for instance, have been found dedicated by the First Cohort of Tungrians, under their prefect, to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the Numina Augustorum. This distribution strongly implies that Chapel Hill was the locus not only for the worship of gods such as Mithras and Mars Thincsus by subsections of the military community, but also for the sorts of official group sacrifices to the gods and in honour of the imperial family, which, if the *feriale Duranum* can be believed,[37] would have been almost a daily occurrence in the life of units like the cohorts stationed at Housesteads. The men of the *cuneus Frisiorum* would hardly have been exempt from these rituals. And yet, judging from the findspots of the altars to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the door-jamb at least, if not the altars to Mars and the Alaisiagae (which could have been within the shrine), would almost certainly have been visible from the place where the whole military community would have engaged in officially mandated sacrifice to the titular gods of Rome. Thus at the same time that these men may have been engaging in communal religious activity with their non-Frisian comrades, the inscriptions that they had dedicated in the name of their *ethnos*, their tribe, and their unit may have been standing in the background, representing by proxy their dedicators' potential disengagement and differentiation from the larger group.

The inscriptions' location, then, brings to the fore the dialectic between the institution of the Roman army as a whole, and the individuals and subcommunities out of which it was composed. The army was never a homogeneous force, and discussions of Roman 'policy' are almost always anachronistic and misleading, but the emphasis on communal rituals, particularly in the Principate, does suggest a vested interest on the part of Roman power structures to foster an empire-wide sense of a cohesive military community, focused on loyalty to the emperor and the gods of the state. We have seen how these religious expressions of imperial loyalty impacted the divine framework of the German Tuihanti of the *cuneus Frisiorum*, through their veneration of the *numen Augusti*. But, as always with a dialectic, neither opposing concept remains unchanged. The nature and connotations of religious engagement with the emperor are likewise altered by its incorporation into regional or 'marginal' pantheons like those of Mars Thincsus and the Alaisiagae. By 'buying in', as I put it earlier, to the concept of the imperial cult, and putting it to uses outside of officially mandated rituals, the dedicants in fact take control of what it is and what it means

[37] The *feriale Duranum* is a papyrus document from Dura-Europos which has long been understood to be the religious calendar of the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* stationed at the site (Robert O. Fink, Allan S. Hoey, and Walter F. Snyder, *The Feriale Duranum* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940)), and frequently used as evidence for the festive calendar of the Roman army more broadly. Recent work, however, has suggested that it may be a civil calendar from the *colonia* at Dura (Haynes, *Blood of the Provinces*, 199–200). Nevertheless, even if the *feriale Duranum* cannot be used to reconstruct a universal ritual calendar for the army, epigraphy from military sites across the empire makes clear that communal rituals on behalf of the emperor and the state gods of Rome were ubiquitous in army settings, even if the precise form and frequency varied from unit to unit.

for how they see themselves and their position within the empire. This agency certainly had the potential to be a threat to the institution of the army – but, more cynically, by giving non-Roman members of the military community the space to accept an imperial outlook on their own terms, it could be a bulwark to Roman power by making them complicit in their own subjugation to empire. Dialectically, the notion of a unified army community is first undermined, then redefined, and finally strengthened by the self-expression of ethnic and military subgroups.

Finally, we need to remember that all of these social and religious dynamics that I have examined were playing out in a frontier context. Just as the men were marginal, so was the land itself. Understanding how one fits into an empire – a primary concern, as we have seen, for the *Germani* of the *cuneus Frisiorum* – becomes even more urgent on the edges of that empire. It is on the borders, both physical and social, of a society that 'belonging' cannot be taken for granted: it must be asserted. This would have been especially true for auxiliary soldiers caught between loyalties to homeland and army and needing simultaneously to ground themselves in a British frontier context. It is therefore not surprising that we see such sophisticated, complicated, negotiations of identity in the religious epigraphy examined here. Although I have chosen here to focus on an in-depth examination of these inscriptions alone, other forts in the region naturally have similar evidence for using religion to articulate conflicting identities, including a notable cluster of comparable inscriptions from Birrens.[38] Ritual activity, meanwhile, is an equally unsurprising form for these negotiations to take. Ritual and religion serve to structure everyday experience, and so are potent tools for organizing one's world and understanding one's surroundings. Marx's analogy of the 'opiate of the masses', it has been argued, has long been misunderstood.[39] For the nineteenth century, opium did not merely dull; it could also open up visions of utopia, as it did for the Romantic poets. Thus religion may well resign the powerless to their lot, but at the same time it 'cracks open the merely existent world and offers other possibilities.'[40] We have seen it doing both those things in this paper, and it was this which made it so powerful for the men serving on the frontiers of the Roman Empire.

Concluding Thoughts

I want to conclude by considering how a dialectical approach to this material has enabled us to see the religious activity of these men in new ways, and also what its potential weaknesses have been. As discussed, dialectical approaches are often concerned with the dynamics of power structures, and a dialectical framework here has, I think, helped to delineate a more intricate and multi-faceted way of thinking about the ways in which Roman imperialism shaped both the experiences and the identities of relatively marginal groups like the *cuneus Frisiorum*. In particular, I believe it has usefully drawn our attention to questions of scale: to how relationships with Roman power were navigated at multiple simultaneous levels from the local (e.g. the fort landscape) to the empire-wide (the relationship between the troops and the emperor), and even the global (the interaction between citizenship (i.e. belonging) in the Empire and citizenship outside of it). It has also allowed us to explore the social complexities which may lie behind terms that have often

[38] Haynes, *Blood of the Provinces*, 231.
[39] Andrew M. McKinnon, "Opium as Dialectics of Religion: Metaphor, Expression and Protest," in *Marx, Critical Theory, and Religion*, ed. Warren S. Goldstein (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 11–29.
[40] McKinnon, "Opium," 25.

been glossed over as straightforward and obvious descriptors, for example *'Germani*', and, in particular*,* '*cives*'. These advantages are in addition to the obvious one, which is that dialectics, through its emphasis on conflict, continually forces us to confront the fact that incorporation into the Roman Empire was no easy or straightforward process, but rather was rife with the potential for cognitive dissonance. However, perhaps most valuable has been the way in which a dialectical approach can change our perspective on syncretic deities, and on dedications to multiple gods. By framing syncretism as the outcome of confrontation, rather than the natural result of an all-embracing polytheism, we enhance significantly our ability to explore the role of religion in zones of cultural contact. Where before we essentially had one, rather unsatisfactory narrative of equation between 'Roman' and 'native', now we have a multitude of possible outcomes, depending on the individual cosmological and social contexts. This also helps to bring our discussion of ancient polytheisms more satisfactorily into line with more sophisticated current approaches to cultural change in the provinces, which have long moved past easy models of Romanization. Likewise, dialectics has drawn our attention to the interplay between deities on a single monument, and to ask what deities do together that they do not do alone. This again has the power to enhance our ability to see the social roles of gods not as static, but rather as kaleidoscopic, multivalent, and highly sensitive to context.

What is less useful about a dialectical approach – and the pitfalls of which I have not entirely avoided – is that it has sometimes led me here to think in terms of strict dichotomies far more than I usually would. In particular, 'Roman' has been a relatively monolithic entity in this paper, in a way which sits very uncomfortably. It is here that it is important to remember what I highlighted at the start: that dialectics is only a model, and all models invariably have a trade-off between explanatory power and over-simplification. Outside the bounds of this strict thought experiment, it is necessary to blur the lines of the model, to allow better for the messiness of the world.

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