

Regina and Barates - A Tale of the North-West Frontier

by Bronwen Riley

South Shields, Saturday 19 October 1878

A labourer digging a foundation for a wall at Mr Grieves's soda water factory, located between Bath Street and Ingham Street, strikes a large stone with his pick. Clearing the earth around it, he uncovers an ornately carved slab of sandstone lying face up. As it is lifted from the ground, it breaks into four pieces. The *Newcastle Courant*, which reports the discovery the following Saturday, does not relate the name of the labourer, nor his reaction to this surprising discovery, but identifies instead his employers, the builders Messrs A and P Marshall.

On the following Friday the fragments are taken to the museum at the town's library, where many people flock to see what has by now been identified as a 'nearly perfect memorial stone to a Roman lady'. They much admire the sculptor's skill in executing the dead lady's drapery, and regret that her face has been hacked away. The object of their gaze sits on a wicker chair within a smart interior. A distaff and spindle rest in her lap and with her right hand she holds open the lid of a lockable box, which stands on the ground beside her. At her left lies a basket of wool.

Everyone appreciates how clearly cut are the letters of the Latin inscription at its base:

D M REGINA LIBERTA ET CONIUGE BARATES PALMYRENSIS NATIONE
CATUALLAUNA AN XXX

The letters reveal that the woman was called Regina, which means Queen, and that she came from the southern British Catuvellauni tribe whose capital was Verulamium (St Albans). She was a freed slave who married a man from Palmyra called Barates. She died at the age of 30.

But below the Latin runs a line of strange characters that mystify one and all. A message is sent to that great scholar of Hadrian's Wall, the Rev. Dr Collingwood Bruce, who lives close by in Newcastle, in the hopes that he might be able to view the find at his earliest convenience.

Society of Antiquaries, Newcastle upon Tyne, Wednesday 2 July 1884

Dr Bruce presents his much-anticipated paper on discoveries made during the excavations at the Roman fort in South Shields between 1874 and 1876 to the members of the oldest provincial antiquarian society in England.

When he turns his attention to Regina, that chance find by anonymous workmen in an area southwest of the fort, he describes her almost as if she were a young woman of his acquaintance. 'We have reason to believe,' he says, that the hacked-off face of the lady represented 'features of peculiar beauty' (although he does not explain what that reason is). Her hair falls 'in ringlets' at the back of her neck and she is 'engaged in those pursuits in which English ladies of the present day occupy their leisure time'.

While finding it a little odd that a slave should have been called Regina, he is too much of a scholar to speculate on what 'queenly graces of the mind and person of the British serf enchained the affections of the far-travelled Barates'. Fresh from his co-editorship

of *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*, so recently published by the Newcastle Antiquaries, he paints Barates in almost chivalric terms, as one who gave Regina the 'priceless bond of freedom'... and imagines her triumphant, the first act of her newly liberated status 'to give a favourable response to the entreaties of her benefactor to yield her hand to him'. Dr Bruce at last reveals that the baffling characters beneath the Latin are Palmyrene Aramaic. William Wright, the eminent Syriac scholar and professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, has translated them: 'Regina, the freedwoman of Barate, alas!'

Arbeia, Hadrian's Wall, late 2nd century AD

Barates the Palmyrene stands before Regina's tombstone. The stonemason, a fellow Syrian, has done a good job and written the correct formula for the dead in their home language. Regina, his freedwoman. Rest In Peace. She looks quite the fine lady in that fancy setting with all her best British clothes. She would be pleased.

Barates shivers in the sea-salt wind, wrapping his thick woollen cloak more closely around himself. Regina's birthplace was on this island, 280 miles south. His native land is 1,000 times as far away: Palmyra, that ancient desert city at the crossroads of empires, where caravans carrying silks and spices from Arabia, Persia, India and China arrive into an oasis of springs and gardens after relentless days of sun and sand.

Camels! How to explain them to someone who has never seen them? Hunchbacked horses? Latin is his third language, after Aramaic and Greek, and he has to translate from Greek into Latin in his head before he speaks it. She spoke her native British and the rough, slipshod soldiers' Latin of the Wall, full of western dialect. At least she spoke a slave's version of it – she only knew the imperative tense; perhaps that was why they called her Regina.

He never quite understood her story. People from her part of the world had been deployed to work on the Wall after some catastrophe or other. Perhaps they brought her up here to sell – a spare girl of poor parents; an orphan; a slave's child. With so many unattached men on good wages in the military zone she was worth more here than down south. It causes less trouble for soldiers to hook up with girls from further away than to take all the locals. Only the senior officers are allowed their wives and there are never enough women to go round. All Barates knew officially about Regina was on the slave trader's certificate: her health, her place of origin and her age.

Young slave women have threefold value – work, sex and children. They seldom earn their freedom before 30. Too bad Regina died at that age. He was fond of her. There was no shame in falling for a slave, was there, when the great heroes of Troy had done the same – had not Achilles loved his Briseis?

Back home in Syria, the scent of thyme and jasmine hangs in air as warm and enveloping as the desert sand beneath his feet. Here, on the north-eastern edge of Britannia, the salt-sharp wind cuts through his bones and the sand on the beach is as sticky and lumpen as cold British porridge. Scented oils smell more delectable when rubbed into skin warmed by desert sun and fattened on plump dates. What flavour has a date pulled too early off the palm, hidden from many suns in an ocean-tossed barrel and consumed in the rain? Olive oil, scent, silk, spices... in the early days, the commanding officers had to send their men all the way to Londinium to obtain them but now there are what passes for markets here, at places like Coria (Corbridge).

Up here on the Wall, wind and rain are enemies as bitter as the Britons and the Caledonians. At least Barates' house is small and piled high with Regina's woollen blankets. In the fort, the commanding officer's house has a colonnaded courtyard and draughty corridors designed for warmer lands. Regina was always spinning greasy British wool, which fetched a premium outside the province. She made enough to buy her freedom; saving her money in the box he had brought with him to Britannia, the one he had given to her. She earned enough to pay for that handsome headstone...

Britannia, northern military zone, 2nd-3rd centuries

Barates travelled to the north-western most frontier of the empire, to try his luck in this land of mists and moss. Some 10,000 men are stationed up here with money in their purses and limited opportunities to spend it, together with women, children, slaves, and other assorted hangers-on who live in the settlements outside the forts along the great Wall. It is every trader's dream to make good contacts and win army contracts. Import. Export. The military needs vast quantities of corn and cattle, wool and lead, sending the surplus to the legions in Germany.

Keeping the supply chain going is everything on this island, especially up here, that much further away from Rome. Down south, it is different, practically Gaul. After the short sharp shock of conquest, more than 100 years ago now, the southerners accommodated their conquerors quickly, learned their ways, got a taste for their fish sauce and olive oil. The Romans the empire over like to let the native ruling classes appear to do their job for them. In return for ensuring taxes are paid and everyone sticks to the rules, the British tribal leaders get a place on the town council and Roman citizenship. Every town is styled as a miniature Rome, every councillor a would-be Roman senator.

But the Northern British were slow to see the benefits of draughty public buildings and fancy town squares, built at their own expense and filled with statues of their oppressors. Why should they confine their gods in smoky stone temples when they could laugh in clear springs or dwell darkly in deep waters? Standing on the edge of the wind, the northern British cling closer to their freedom from their rocky precipices and bog-bound moors.

It took 30 years or more for hobnailed boots to stamp over their ancestral land, corral their horses, enslave their women and recruit their young men, sending them as far away as Dacia and North Africa; to tax them, take away their grain, their cattle and horses. Even the stags and bears of their forests are rounded up for the circuses of Rome, as savage tribute from the north-western frontier. *Brittunculi*, the Romans patronise them, 'little Brits'. The boots marched into Caledonia but retreated – too far away from Rome, sapping resources when men were needed on other frontiers.

How long will Caledonia continue to taunt both the British and the Romans!

Hadrian, that Greek-loving emperor, restorer of order and army discipline, built the Wall during the 120s to separate the Romans from the barbarians (as they put it). The Wall hacked its brutal way across the narrowest neck of land – 80 Roman miles east to west, west to east, from the North Sea to the Irish Sea – an arbitrary line for the ease of the conqueror, cutting through ancient British landholdings, severing ties of kinship, language, trade and religion; dividing families and tribes between Caledonia to the north

and the rest of Britannia somewhere to the south. Defining the region's history, ever after.

Every day the northern British stare across their lost lands, the traces of their roundhouses still visible, the upturned hearths tearing at their hearts; the shades of their forsaken ancestors beckoning sorrowfully through the mists of memory. The Wall hits the northern Britons hard but the people on its eastern, Tyne side most of all. West, in the land of lakes and mountains and steep narrow valleys, they can better keep themselves apart; waft away on the west wind to Hibernia (Ireland) or across the Solway into Caledonia, into ever more impenetrable mists as their gods dive deeper into their bottomless lakes.

The main route of conquest to Caledonia lies on the other side, via London – Lincoln – York, where the bitter east wind blows in supply ships from the continent, spewing their brutal cargo of arms and men daily into the mouth of the Tyne.

The Wall. A false border, trapping tribes, livelihoods, ancestors, gods under its crushing system of ditches, forts, milecastles and military roads. Some say that borders are inert: dead zones. But they fizz with negative energy, a constant chafing, trapping the tensions they create. Everyone must propitiate the gods when crossing a threshold – whether from outside to inside; from childhood to puberty; life to death. In this age of Hubris, when the Romans act as gods, they demand that the British propitiate them. The British are only allowed to cross the new boundaries of their old land at checkpoints, strip-searched, eyes down.

Who is truly the more fearful? For the Wall does not prove the empire's strength but its weakness; its failure to conquer the whole of the island. It creates disaffection; providing a focus for anger and aggression; a boiling rage to destroy.

Regina lives and dies in chaotic times. Tribes north of the Wall smash through it, killing the commander of a legion and his troops. The wakeful, gum-bleeding governor of Britain, Ulpus Marcellus, who only eats bread imported specially from Rome, crushes them after four years of calculated savagery. Only then can Commodus, that duty-shirking vice-monger of an emperor, claim the title 'Britannicus' and strike his special victory-over-Britannia coins.

There is not long to rejoice. A legion in Britain mutinies. The soldiers are separated from the rest of the empire by Ocean, the shape-shifting mass of slithering sea monsters that stir up trouble with every changing tide. It gives the British troops a sense of immunity and unaccountability, making the island a nesting place for demagogues and usurpers of imperial power, and ever open to rebellion.

Pandemic strikes the empire and 2,000 people die in Rome in one single day. Ever-watchful, ever-listening Rumour, swiftest footed of all evils, whispers across the world that criminals are infecting people to order by injecting their victims with tiny poison-coated needles. Eagles scream, owls hoot, fires rage, presaging the death by strangulation of the greatest pestilence of all, Emperor Commodus. The empire plunges into civil war. Newly formed tribes of disaffected Northerners appear from north of the Wall. This time the Romans pay them off: military resources are more urgently needed elsewhere.

A new century sees another emperor, Septimius Severus – north African by birth – make a freshly doomed attempt to capture Caledonia. Arbeia becomes a huge supply

base: the landing stage for continental recruits, the storage centre for supplies, the springboard for war further north.

Another military failure: the emperor dies in York but not before he divides the island into two. The south remains governed from London and is renamed Britannia Superior (Upper Britain) because it is that much nearer to Rome; York is the new capital of the north, which is now called Britannia Inferior (Lower Britain) because it is that much further away.

Arbeia Roman Fort, South Shields, summer 2020

At the beginning of July, the provincial government in London grants the inhabitants of England permission to leave their houses, where they have been confined for months, due to a grievous plague which rages over the British islands and across the whole earth, killing more than 40,000 Britons alone. The devolved parliaments of Wales and Scotland issue their own, more cautious, decrees.

The plague blows in from the east, striking Rome first. The Forum and Colosseum are deserted, weeds growing where lately barbarian hordes gawped and snapped in idle and ignorant wonder at the places where their ancestors were once paraded in chains and made the sport of wild beasts.

In northern Britain, the people of Arbeia – renamed South Shields, but still ruled via London – open their doors to an uncertain future. Regina's monument sits in a museum in the partially excavated ruins of Arbeia's Roman fort. Its four broken pieces are neatly fitted together and backed with concrete. As the only tombstone found in Britain to bear a bilingual inscription, it is deemed sufficiently important for casts of it to be displayed at the Great North Museum in Newcastle and at the British Museum in London.

Heritage passes for industry and entertainment. At Arbeia and other forts along the Wall, in times when there is no plague, amateur actors dress as Roman soldiers and engage in mock combat displays where no one is ever hurt. No one dresses up as Britons. As visitors hurry to watch the show, eager to join the pretence that they are recreating the past, they do not look for long into the broken face of Regina as she holds open the lid of her precious box, trying to set her story free. They do not like to think that Barates bought her as a slave. Britons never will be slaves.

British women have more legal rights than they had either in the second or in the 19th centuries, but Regina has lost even what little status and agency the Victorians granted her. She is no longer the Romantic heroine of Collingwood's imagination – a beautiful British slave with a majestic air, who beguiled a foreign gentleman, and who was elevated by him to respectability and wealth through marriage. She is not even considered to be a Roman lady of fashion: her clothes, jewellery and hairstyle are now recognised as being entirely provincial.

In a cynical age, sugar-coated with sentimentality, Regina's slave name is deemed to be ironic, or a cosily patronising 'Queenie'. Her story has become one of poignant love between two displaced people, careless evidence for a happy mixed marriage in multicultural Britain. Regina's monument tells a heart-warming tale of a homesick migrant from Palmyra, a city so recently fallen into the hands of militant iconoclasts during a still-raging civil war, who freed a British girl, married her and erected a moving monument to her memory.

Syria is entering its 10th year of war with 400,000 dead and more than six million refugees cast out into the world. Families flee their sun-drenched, sweet-scented land of unquestioning guest-friendship to find more frigid terms of hospitality are applied in colder climes. Few gain entry into unwelcoming Britain. For those who do, it is the North East – now one of the poorest regions in Britain – that accepts three times as many refugees in relation to its population as the richest territories, London and the South East.

Britannia herself is blindly, complacently, torn asunder, though not yet descended into war. Demagogues, harnessing Mockery and Superiority to foment Indignation and Mistrust, persuade the people to break off a peaceful and profitable alliance with the Continent. From across the Western Ocean winds blow in fresh unease. Who and what belongs where? And for how long does one have the right to claim a belonging? Some stand proud guard round the many monuments in their towns and cities to a lost British imperial past, while others clamour to destroy them and hand back the spoils of conquest arrayed in their museums.

Outside Arbeia's museum at South Shields, the great River Tyne spills out into the North Sea, pouring over the shipwrecks of lost empires and the toppled statues of disgraced men. Some relics have sunk into the waters of oblivion while others continue to re-surface in the endless rhythm of the tides.

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