

Roman Epigraphy Highlights

Welcome to the Corinium Museum and this tour on Roman epigraphy! You may be familiar with Roman stonework such as sculptures and architectural features but this tour will be focused on epigraphy or the inscriptions seen on these stone artefacts. Epigraphy can come in many forms and provides key information about the politics, beliefs and practices from the Roman world.

Hypocaust inscribed stone

Here is an inscribed stone from a large building which was found reused in the lining of a hypocaust flue at the Beeches townhouse excavation.

Hypocaust is a system of underfloor heating used by the romans. The floor would have been supported by stacks of tiles and hot air would be pumped through the hollow areas around these to heat the floor above it.

One idea is that this stone formed part of a frieze inscribed with a dedication to an emperor, as on this particular inscription we can see the first line says AVG (an abbreviation for Augustus) which is referring to the emperor. The second line says VIRI which is part of the dedicator's status, perhaps referring to the DUOVIR or 'dioviri iuricundi' who was an annually elected magistrate, rather than referring to part of their name.

You can also see on another fragment on this display (number 2 in the display) the inscription AVGUS(TVS). Epigraphy is also commonly written in abbreviations and this abbreviation 'AVG' can also be seen clearly on coins.



Septimius Stone

This is the Septimius stone with Latin inscriptions on the sides, found on Victoria Road here in Cirencester in 1910. As you can see the stone is broken off and it was found at the base of a Jupiter column like the one you can see to the right and behind you.

Jupiter columns were used to represent and show the religious beliefs of the place that they stood. The translation of this inscription is 'To Jupiter, Best and Greatest, His Perfection Lucius Septimius... governor of Britannia Prima, restored (this monument), being a citizen of Rheims. This statue and column erected under the ancient religion Septimius restored, ruler of Britannia Prima'.

It describes how the column was restored by Lucius Septimius, the governor of Britannia Prima. Britannia Prima was a province within Britannia, one of the twelve dioceses in the Empire introduced by Diocletian and Corinium was likely the capital of this region, with this stone being great evidence for this. The Septimius Stone can provide us with interesting information about the relationship between religion and ruling individuals as a way of establishing power and the significance of religion in Roman life, especially at a time of religious tensions between ancient religion and the rise of Christianity. From this inscription we are able to get an idea of the position Lucius Septimius held during this time as this was built to reintroduce ancient religion, again highlighting the force and dominance that rulers held during this time.



Religious stonework

Next we move on to some examples of religious inscriptions. We're going to focus on the Altar to the Sulviae (the Mother Goddess) which shows it was dedicated by a man called Sulinus. Also in this display you can see other related stonework depicting the mother goddess.

Worship of the mother goddess was one of the biggest religious cults here in Corinium. It is said to be a fertility symbol and can be seen on these other artefacts in the display accompanied by the Genii, which are represented by hooded male figures. A number of sculptures and inscriptions relating to the mother goddess were found together at the site of Ashcroft, suggesting a temple may have been located there. A similar altar was found in Bath dedicated by the same person, where he describes himself as a sculptor. This links interestingly with the worship of Sulis in Bath which you may recognise from Aquae Sulis at the Roman baths. This suggests there may have been worship of the same deity in the surrounding areas with differing variations of the same name.



Acrostic

The introduction of Christianity into the Roman Empire caused large amounts of religious tension. Although this is not stonework, here is an example of a Christian inscription. This was found during excavations on the now Victoria Road in 1836 and was scratched into a piece of painted wall plaster. The meaning of this palindrome is the subject of large debate. Similar artefacts found in Pompeii provide supporting evidence that this is an early Christian inscription. If you are interested in discovering the mystery of the inscription's message you can read the handy sign next to the object!

