



# A Scato-sexual Message: The Secundinus Stone with Phallus from Vindolanda\*

By ALEXANDER MEYER, ALEX MULLEN and JOONAS VANHALA

## ABSTRACT

*The Secundinus stone, with its combination of carved phallus and text, was found in 2022 in excavations within the stone fort at Vindolanda. We consider comparanda for the imagery from Vindolanda, Britannia and further afield, and textual parallels particularly from Pompeii. We offer several possible interpretations of the object and prefer an analysis which takes the text, SECVNDINVS CACOR, as it is carved. This interpretation would add an otherwise unattested verbal form to the Latin scato-sexual vocabulary.*

**Keywords:** carved phallus; Hadrian's Wall; inscription; Latin; Pompeii; Roman; scato-sexual vocabulary; Vindolanda

## INTRODUCTION

On the afternoon of 19 May 2022 a stone was excavated at Vindolanda Roman fort. It soon made headlines around the world thanks to its striking image and message, the combination of a phallus and, apparently, a carved insult. It was widely presented as reading SECVNDINVS CAC<AT>OR 'Secundinus, the shitter'. This article sets out in more detail the context and possible interpretations of what is a rather unusual stone and offers an analysis which takes the text as it is carved, SECVNDINVS CACOR, and justifies understanding the second word as an otherwise unattested verbal form in Latin.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Excavators at Vindolanda in Northumberland recovered a roughly rectangular sandstone facing-stone, measuring 20 × 45 × 20 cm (height, width, depth), in May 2022 (FIG. 1). This stone was found in the

\* Special thanks are due to Andrew Birley, who wrote to us about the stone on the afternoon of its discovery, for agreeing to let us publish it and for discussing its archaeological context with us; to Barbara Birley for providing access for us to autopsy, photograph, scan and draw the inscription; to Rob Collins, Mark Hoyle, Roger Tomlin, Penny Trichler and Rhys Williams for permission to use their scans, drawings and images. We are also grateful to James Clackson, Roger Tomlin and the anonymous reviewer for advice. Alex Mullen gratefully acknowledges funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 715626 ('LatinNow'). The authors record no conflicts of interest.



FIG. 1. Photograph taken soon after the Secundinus stone was excavated. (© Vindolanda Trust)

rubble packing of a former beam slot in the south-west quadrant of the surviving stone fort approximately 30 m south of the third-century A.D. *principia* (FIG. 2). The slot lay beneath the heavy clay and cobble foundations of a later stone-built fourth-century cavalry barrack, which probably dated to the period after A.D. 370.<sup>1</sup> The slot itself had been cut through the floors and walls of three previous stone structures, an Antonine barrack (c. A.D. 160), a third-century infantry barrack building (c. A.D. 213–280) and a third-century *schola*. The later fourth-century cavalry barrack provides a *terminus ante quem* for the beam slot c. A.D. 370, while the disturbed remains of the Antonine fort (c. A.D. 160) and of the Severan stone fort (c. A.D. 213) provide a *terminus post quem* in the early third century.<sup>2</sup> We may, however, push the date of this beam slot later, since the beam slot cuts through buildings which were abandoned c. 270 and there is no evidence of further occupation of this area of the fort until c. 305. The excavators suggest that the beam slot is likely to have been created in the early fourth century.

The beam slot was not, however, the original context for the stone. Rather, the stone was removed from its original location and reused for the early fourth-century construction. It is, therefore, difficult to date the stone itself based on archaeology alone. Its grey sandstone is characteristic neither of the Antonine stone fort nor of the Severan fort at Vindolanda, both of which use quarried-to-order,

<sup>1</sup> The fourth-century building's ceramic assemblage includes a great deal of Huntcliffe and Crambeck ware pottery, which can be dated to the period c. A.D. 370–420, as well as numerous fourth-century coins and brooches.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the most recent phasing of Vindolanda, see Birley and Alberti 2021, 10. For an earlier, more detailed, treatment, see Birley 2009.





FIG. 2. Aerial photograph of the area from which the Secundinus stone was recovered, with the findspot marked. The top of the photograph is roughly north. Photograph by Penny Trichler. (© *Vindolanda Trust*)

regularly sized stones.<sup>3</sup> It might, therefore, be better associated with the post-Severan phases of Vindolanda, which utilise much more varied stone. In sum, the archaeological evidence suggests that the stone was created and inscribed sometime in the third century before being redeposited as rubble fill in the beam slot before c. A.D. 370. This dating is not contradicted by the image or the writing on the stone, and indeed the peak period for phallus depictions by the military communities in northern Britannia, based on dated examples, appears to be A.D. 193–230.<sup>4</sup>

The reuse of inscribed stone in later construction, or even as fill, is not uncommon at Vindolanda. For example, an altar to Fortuna (*RIB* I 1684) was reportedly reused as a hypocaust pillar on the site,<sup>5</sup> pieces of a Caracallan dedication panel (*RIB* I 1705) were found reused in the side of a drain in the late *principia* and east granary, and a tombstone (*RIB* I 1713) was built into the east gate of the last stone fort on the site.<sup>6</sup> Most notably, a dedicatory inscription to the *dea Gallia* (*RIB* I 3332) was reused in a drainage channel outside the south-west corner of the second, Severan, stone fort. As in the case of the Secundinus stone, this reuse was probably fourth century, but the stone itself is characteristic of the third century.

#### THE IMAGE AND TEXT

At the bottom left of the stone, at the beginning of line 2 of the text is the deeply carved image of a phallus, missing half of its lower testicle through damage (*FIG. 3*). This form of phallus can be assigned to the ‘Rocket’ category of Collins’s 9-type phallus typology, i.e. ‘straight shaft of oblong or (sub)triangular form; testicles at shaft base’.<sup>7</sup> This is by far the most commonly attested type along Hadrian’s Wall, with 35 published examples collected by Collins before the discovery of this stone (the next most common type has only six).<sup>8</sup>



FIG. 3. Secundinus stone, Drawing by Mark Hoyle.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the construction style of the Antonine and Severan phases at Vindolanda, see Birley and Blake 2007, 22–30. For detailed analysis of the stone used at Vindolanda and its origins, see McGuire 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Collins 2020, 285.

<sup>5</sup> See the comments in *RIB* 1684.

<sup>6</sup> *RIB* 1697, 1697 and 1709 were found ‘among loose stones’. Note also *RIB* 3364, the tombstone of Titus Annius which was reused in the bath house of the fourth-century *praetorium*.

<sup>7</sup> Collins 2019; 2020, 282–4.

<sup>8</sup> Collins 2020, 283; see also Parker 2017.



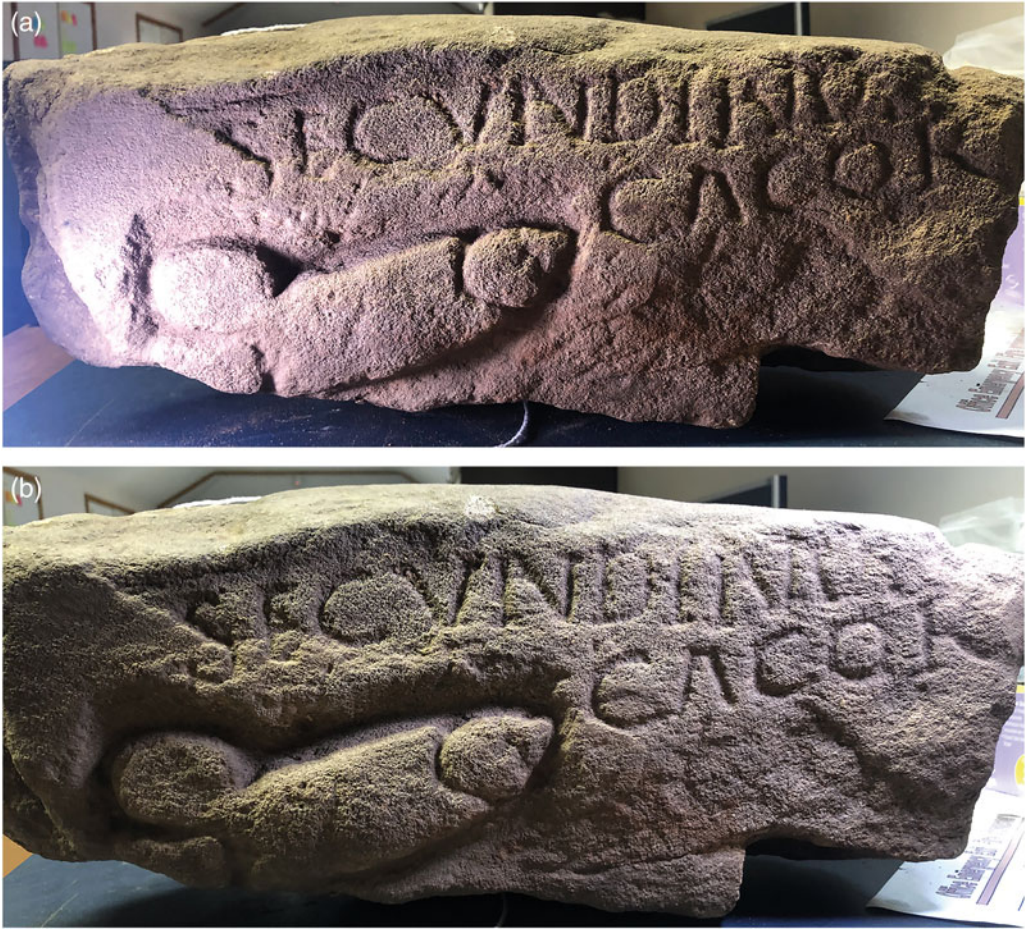


FIG. 4. Text on the Secundinus stone with raking light from different directions. Photographs by Alexander Meyer.

The text is crudely cut into the stone with capital letters reaching varying depths of 1–3 mm. The letters are roughly 2.5–3.5 cm in height and cover two lines, the second starting roughly half-way along underneath the first (FIG. 4).<sup>9</sup> There are possible hints of lines that may have been ruled to help with the *ordinatio* of the text, around the first V for example, but we put little weight behind this interpretation since the letters have very clearly not been carved on straight lines. The two lines of text are nearly parallel, but the bottom line rises slightly relative to the first as it moves to the right. This is not the work of an experienced stone carver, though the author has deployed serifs which suggests awareness of epigraphic forms. As we have seen, the stone was later used as fill for a beam slot and it seems unlikely that it was cut for this purpose, so what has been excavated is probably roughly what was used sometime in the third century for this textual and visual message. The damage on the stone which affects the

<sup>9</sup> For a 3D model of this stone, see <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/secundinus-graffiti-stone-ad0d8f637f944c09a4514f288da83c75> (accessed 14 July 2023).

end of the first line of text and the bottom left of the phallus carving is likely to have resulted from rough handling in its reuse, though the damage may also have occurred whilst the block was in its primary position. Due to the properties of the sandstone itself, the stone may have flaked or crumbled in the opposite corners because of surface leaching of the matrix, or a subsurface cavity or fault, for example. From the evidence available it is impossible to say whether the stone functioned as a facing-stone for a period before the addition of the phallus/*Secundinus* text, but the apparent area of working on the upper left-hand side of the stone which seems unrelated to the text may suggest that it was. The contemporaneity or otherwise of the image and text will be discussed below.

1 SECVNDINVS

2 CACOR

Preferred interpretation:

*Secundinus* / *cacor*

Alternative interpretation:

*Secundinus* / *cac<at>or*

The first N and the second N of the first line are differently executed, with the second displaying a (no doubt unintended) gap between the first vertical cut and the diagonal. The first V is angular, the second is much less angular and almost resembles one of the forms of Old Roman Cursive O (which might be described as curved and un-joined).<sup>10</sup> The fact that there is a trace of an s-shaped final letter confirms that the first line should be read *Secundinus* and not *Secundino*. The only remaining trace is the bottom curve of the S; most of the rest of the letter has been lost through damage to the upper-right corner of the stone, which is probably unrelated to any carving activity (see above).

The reading of the second line, epigraphically speaking, poses no problems. We read CACOR, with the A without cross-bar, a common phenomenon, particularly in the less professionally executed lapidary inscriptions (e.g. from Vindolanda: *RIB* I 1684, 1689, 1692). A horizontal line through the C seen in some photographs is not to be taken as part of the text (see FIG. 12): it is much less deep than the surrounding letters and a lunate E would create a nonsense word and conflict with the angular E in the first line. Although we raise the outside possibility below that the two words might have been added at different times, the carving looks likely to have been carried out by the same individual. The most straightforward interpretation of this text would be to assume that the stone-cutter has missed out the middle of the word CACATOR, either by mistake or deliberately to squeeze the message onto the stone, creating an insult along the lines of ‘*Secundinus* the shitter’.<sup>11</sup> But this kind of mistake seems unlikely, since the CACOR = CACATOR theory would be based on haplography, which would rather have resulted in CATOR. If there is a logic to be found instead in a deliberate shortening of the word, perhaps CACAT was avoided as it creates the third-person verbal form. However, the possibility that what is on the stone was what was intended, a much more comfortable assumption, should not be excluded and we should pursue the option that CACOR may be a verbal form. We shall consider the various interpretations below in their broader epigraphic context.

<sup>10</sup> This form is common, for example, in addresses on stylus tablets.

<sup>11</sup> Translations throughout are our own.

## CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATIONS

Phallic images were a common sight in the built environment of Roman cities throughout the Empire. Both in Italy and the provinces phalli were carved in pavement stones and building blocks, cast in terracotta plaques used to decorate buildings, painted in frescoes and scratched on walls as graffiti. The phallus was both an erotic image and a symbol of fertility and good luck. Phallic images and pendants were, alongside these less portable images, also used apotropaically against the evil eye,<sup>12</sup> with the penis described as a ‘lightning conductor’ for bad luck,<sup>13</sup> though the phallus also retained its sexual and physical connotations. Phalli were often carved by stone masons during the preparation of building stones, usually so that the phallus stood out from the surface of the stone, but many are not carved in relief and are instead cut into the face of the stone, as we have with the Secundinus example. Indeed, in Britain over two-thirds are incised and at Vindolanda itself the ratio of incised to relief is now 12:1.<sup>14</sup> Across the provinces, phallic stones were placed near doorways, gates and crossroads and used to decorate, even protrude from, as we shall see, the external walls of buildings.<sup>15</sup> In this regard the phallic image in the Secundinus stone is perhaps nothing out of the ordinary, but the fact that it is accompanied by writing makes it more unusual. Stone-carved phalli with accompanying texts do not appear to be particularly common in the western provinces.<sup>16</sup>

Pompeii offers perhaps the largest number of phallic images with texts. Examples include a terracotta plaque showing a large phallus and the inscription *hic habitat / felicitas* ‘Happiness lives here’ and a graffito next to the drawing of a phallus *Secundilla / felatrix* ‘Secundilla the cock-sucker’ in the atrium of the Villa of the Mysteries.<sup>17</sup> As with the latter example, in several graffiti the phallus is explicitly associated with a sexual act.<sup>18</sup> In other cases the text consists only of a name. If the name is in the dative, the phallus may represent a sexual act involving the named person and a threat of penetration.<sup>19</sup> If the name is in the nominative, the association with, and the meaning of, the phallus is less obvious, to us at least.<sup>20</sup> In principle, the phallus could bear any meaning attached to phalli more generally.

In Roman Britain numerous stone-carved phalli have been identified,<sup>21</sup> including around 60 in the zone of Hadrian’s Wall,<sup>22</sup> and there are now eight stone carvings of phalli with associated text. *RIB* 872, from Maryport, is found on red sandstone next to a rocket phallus pointing towards an eye or vulva, with the text *verpa M(arci) Sept(imi)* ‘the dick of Marcus Septimius’ across three lines (FIG. 5). *RIB* 631 from Adel provides the name Priminus and a say-what-you-see *mintla*

<sup>12</sup> For modern scholarship on the apotropaic use of phalli, see Clark 2007, 68–73; Johns 1982, 62–75. For ancient confirmation of the belief in the apotropaic power of phalli, see Pliny, *NH* 28.7.

<sup>13</sup> Merrifield 1969, 177.

<sup>14</sup> See Collins 2020, 279.

<sup>15</sup> Many examples can be found at Pompeii; also, among numerous other locations, at the Pont du Gard, Augusta Raurica, El Higuéron, Volubilis and Catterick.

<sup>16</sup> It is easy to comment on the types found in Roman Britain, thanks to the work of Rob Collins, Adam Parker and others, but we were unable to find a systematic collection of stone phalli for the western Roman provinces as a whole.

<sup>17</sup> *CIL* IV 1454; *CIL* IV 9228. Kamen and Levin-Richardson 2015, 241–242 emphasise the importance of female agency in the latter example, whether the intent of the message is more admiring (‘blow job babe’: Levin-Richardson 2013, 332) or disparaging (of penetrated and polluted status).

<sup>18</sup> E.g. *CIL* IV 1666: <hominis facies cum phallo> <hominis facies> *Cenialis / felator* <hominis protome> / <hominis stantis figura>; 1850: <hominis facies cum phallo> *Phoebus / felat*; 2254: <phalli figura> *ratio mi cum ponis / Batacare te pidicaro / ana*; 4926: *NOI / AMV* <caput hominis> <phallus directus versus os capitis illius> / *AMOI*; 5278: *Ling [- -] mentula / Ptolomaeus* <phallus>; 10005: *Fortunata* <phallus directus versus os capitis>.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. *CIL* IV 8346: *IOYKOYNΔO* <phallus>; 8501b: *Paridi* <phallus>.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. *CIL* IV 8933: <phallus> *Cilissa*; 4322: <phallus> *Marcus / Carisius / Muran(us?)*; 2346: <phallus> *Aprilis*, 2342: *Aprilus* <phallus>; 2181: <phalli figura> *IARINVS*.

<sup>21</sup> A handful have even been found on millstones: see Shaffrey 2022.

<sup>22</sup> For the examples along the frontier, see Collins 2020 and Parker 2017.

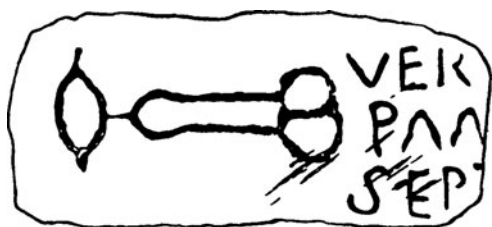


FIG. 5. (above). *RIB* 872, Maryport, drawing by R.G. Collingwood. (*RIB*)



FIG. 6. (right). *RIB* 631, Adel, drawing by R.G. Collingwood. (*RIB*)

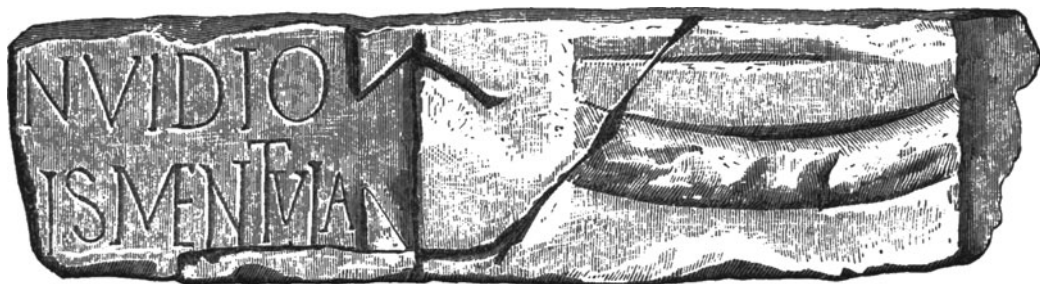


FIG. 7. (above). *RIB* 983, Netherby, drawing by J. Collingwood Bruce (1875).

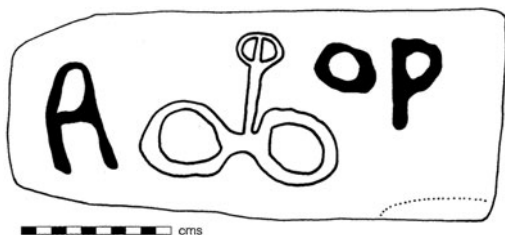


FIG. 8. (above). *RIB* 3256, Piercebridge, drawing by R.S.O. Tomlin. (*RIB*)



FIG. 9. (right). *RIB* 3172, Long Bennington, drawing by R.S.O. Tomlin. (*RIB*)



(*mentula* with raising of the first vowel and syncope of the second), both apparently in the nominative (undated, dimensions  $0.58 \times 0.61 \times 1.30$  m). The text here runs around the phallus (FIG. 6). Another, *RIB* 983, this time with the standard Latin version of the noun, *mentula*, appears in a text on what might have formed part of a stone lintel from Netherby alongside what looks like the shaft of a phallus (FIG. 7). The text has been classified by the editors of *RIB* as a charm against the envious. *RIB* 3256, from Piercebridge, provides a scissor-like rendering of the phallus together with the letter A to the left and OP to the right (FIG. 8). The meaning is unclear, though the letters may stand for a name, and the same letters also appear, in different order, with what may be a snake in *RIB* 3257, also from Piercebridge. Other hard-to-interpret inscriptions include *RIB* 3172 (FIG. 9), from Long Bennington (Lincolnshire), where a small number of crudely carved letters appear with an unusual bi-pedal phallus ridden by a figure possibly with a whip.<sup>23</sup>

Most pertinently for our Secundinus stone, there are a couple of examples from Vindolanda itself. One, *RIB* 3358, is on buff sandstone and its editor has identified an image of a possible palm-branch and a phallus with the inscription HP III (FIG. 10). This has been expanded as *h(abet) p(edes) III* ‘it’s three feet long’ and interpreted as sexual banter. It was found covering a drain to the north of the *praetorium*. Another, *RIB* 3357, was found on a building stone of buff sandstone re-used in the core of the fort wall (FIG. 11). There is a pattern on the left which may again include a palm branch and, in a recess on the right, a phallus with the letters ESTD underneath it.

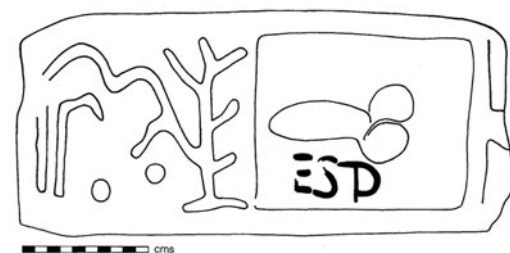


FIG. 10. (left). *RIB* 3358, Vindolanda, drawing by R.S.O. Tomlin. (*RIB*)

FIG. 11. (above). *RIB* 3357, Vindolanda, drawing by R.S.O. Tomlin. (*RIB*)

Although carved in stone in the style of more formal inscriptions, the Secundinus stone more closely resembles ancient graffiti, not least in its reference to defecation which is characteristic of graffiti on walls and other media. There are several examples at Pompeii but we also find a possible example on wall plaster from Alresford, Essex, which may read *cacas{s}* ‘you shit’ (*RIB* 2447.1a), though the reading is uncertain. It seems unlikely that the cramped Secundinus inscription was carefully planned and, judging by the nature of the writing, a professional stone-cutter was probably not involved. Indeed, it seems possible that the text was carved into the stone *after* the stone had been created and deployed, perhaps as a facing-stone, and the

<sup>23</sup> We suggest that the figure may be a pygmy (in the Roman sense of the term), a character often associated with phalli and sometimes apparently deployed in apotropaic fashion: see Clark 2007, 75–81.

phallus and the text may also not have been executed at the same time. An argument could be made that the phallus was produced first, and the text added later, by two different individuals. The squashed alignment of the text supports this, as does the possibility that a small detail of the image of the phallus may be overlaid by one letter of the text. If it is not simply one of several marks which surround the phallus caused by the stone-incising process, the lightly incised line crossing the middle of the first C of *cacor* is possibly part of the design of the phallus (FIG. 12). Similar lines extending from the tip of a phallus can be seen in other examples and are usually interpreted as the phallus ejaculating or urinating.<sup>24</sup>



FIG. 12. Detail of the incision from the tip of the phallus through the letter C of CACOR. Photograph by Alexander Meyer.

<sup>24</sup> See Parker 2021 and Parker and Ross 2016. E.g. *CIL* IV 9250; *CIL* IV 10096d; drawing of an ithyphallic man in the corridor of the large theatre of Pompeii (Langner 2001, no. 1263).

The form *cacor*, which does not, to our knowledge, occur anywhere else in extant Latin sources, is the most puzzling part of the inscription. It has been assumed that the writer intended to spell the noun *cacator* as an insult to Secundinus. The word *cacator*, although relatively rare outside Italy, is attested as an insult in Pompeii,<sup>25</sup> though it is most common in the warning of the type *cacator cave malum* ‘Shitter beware of misfortune’. There are 23 graffiti concerning human waste at Pompeii, most scatological in content, and no fewer than 19 examples using *cac-*.<sup>26</sup> Defecation was often used as a metaphor for anal sex and with the image of the phallus, this would presumably be the intended inference of *cacator*, if this is what we should reconstruct, on the stone from Vindolanda.<sup>27</sup> The person defecating on a penis was the penetrated partner, a position associated with subordination, shame and even punishment. This idea is made explicit in the following passage from the *Priapeia* in which a thief is threatened with anal penetration:

*ad me respice, fur, et aestimato, quot pondo est tibi mentulam cacandum* (*Carmina Priapea* 69.3–4)<sup>28</sup>

Look again at me, thief, and consider what a burden it is for you to shit this dick.

There are examples from Pompeii of phallic images combined specifically with the verb *cacare*, including a large stone phallus protruding from the external wall of a Pompeian private house with the inscription underneath *hanc ego cacavi* ‘I pooped on this [dick]’,<sup>29</sup> and a Pompeian graffito drawing of a phallus preceded by the word *caca* ‘shit!’.<sup>30</sup>

These examples of verbal forms of *cacare* from Pompeii might encourage us to consider the possibility that what we see on the stone is what the writer intended. If we assume that the writer has not made a mistake, *cacor* could be read as the first-person present passive of the verb *cacare* meaning something like ‘I am defecated on’.<sup>31</sup> In this case we could imagine that the phallus itself is speaking. If the phallus was carved first, someone could have added the word *cacor* to turn the phallic image into a conduit for an obscene message: ‘I (the phallus) get defecated’. That an ancient viewer of the Secundinus stone could imagine a phallus speaking in the first person seems plausible. Roman phalli were often depicted with the characteristics of living beings that could act on their own,<sup>32</sup> and inscriptions written in the first person were common, sometimes creating the well-known ‘speaking-object’ epigraphic type.<sup>33</sup> *caco mentulam* was apparently a coarse expression for being anally penetrated,<sup>34</sup> so, in

<sup>25</sup> In the recent excavations of Regio V in Pompeii a new graffito was found which reads *Nicia cin(a)ede cacator*. This is the only known case in which the word *cacator* is undoubtedly used as an insult. See <https://www.beniculturali.it/pompeitemopolio> (accessed 15 July 2023).

<sup>26</sup> For details, see Levin-Richardson 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Adams 1982, 171–2. One example not mentioned by Adams is *CIL* IV 1884: *qui verpam vissit, quid cenasse illum putes* ‘He who shits a cock, what do you think he had for dinner?’ (trans. Vanhala). For the link between human waste and anal sex at Pompeii, see Levin-Richardson 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Parker 1988.

<sup>29</sup> *CIL* X 8145. The phallus and the inscription are on display in the *Gabinetto segreto* of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 113415).

<sup>30</sup> *CIL* IV 2161, 2162: *NICA // PANTA M // CACA* / <phallus>. These graffiti have perished and there is no photograph of them, so the exact relationship between the text and the drawing is uncertain. For other examples of drawings of phalli used as part of a sentence in graffiti, note: *Onesime* <phallus> / *xurikilla* / *dos* <phallus> *labe Onesimus* / *Onesimi qunulici e[- - ?]* (*CIL* IV 8380); *lige* <mentula ad sin. versa> *Aspasia* (*CIL* IV 10129); *Iuli* <mentula ad sin. versa> *lingis* / *Pacatus* (*CIL* IV 10132).

<sup>31</sup> An abstract noun formation in *-or* based on analogy e.g. with *amo* > *amor* seems unlikely as it would logically produce the meaning ‘shitting’.

<sup>32</sup> e.g. *tintinnabula* and terracotta plaques depicting phalli with body parts such as legs, wings, a head and their own penises, graffito drawings of phallic birds. Cf. van de Wiel 2019, 253–5, who describes these zoomorphic creatures as ‘independent living organisms’.

<sup>33</sup> e.g. *CIL* IV 4429 *M(arci) Iuni insula sum*.

<sup>34</sup> See Panayotakis 2010, 318–19.



principle, its passive *mentula cacor* would reflect the act of penetrating.<sup>35</sup> To combat the reluctance to see a verbal formation *cacor*, which is otherwise unattested in Latin, we might note that an informal text from Pompeii (*CIL* IV 2125, Add. 215) includes the otherwise unattested noun *cacatris* ‘shitress’, which has been interpreted as the verbal root from *cacare* with the feminine agent ending *-trix*.<sup>36</sup> It is precisely in these kinds of informal textual environments where the scato-sexual vocabulary is in play that we should not be surprised to see inventiveness with language.

If we pursue the speaking-phallus option, we need to account for the name Secundinus. If we interpret the phallus as the speaker of CACOR, Secundinus could be the addressee. Though in Classical Latin we would expect a vocative, the use of the nominative for vocative is well attested.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, rather than an addressee, the nominative may have been used simply to encourage the reader to associate Secundinus with the phallus. There are numerous examples where the phallus and nominative name combination is attested and Adams argues that *mentula* is used both in literature and in non-literary texts *pars pro toto*, as, for example, in *non homo, sed uero mentula magna minax* ‘you are not a man but really a big scary dick’ (Catullus 115.8), *Pilocalus mentula* ‘Philocalus is a dick’ (*CIL* IV 1776), *imanis metula es* ‘you are a massive dick’ (*CIL* IV 7089), *mentules* (= *mentula es*) ‘you are a dick’ (*CIL* IV 8931).<sup>38</sup> Indeed we saw an example of the phallus plus nominative name earlier from Roman Britain in *RIB* 631 (FIG. 6). If so, Secundinus could be associated with, or indeed stand in for, the defecated-on phallus either as penetrator or to imply that he has caused the defecation through his own penetration (as penetrated). So we might interpret the meaning as, with Secundinus as addressee: ‘Secundinus, your dick says: “I am pooped on”’ (penetrator), i.e. ‘Secundinus, you are up a shitter’, or ‘Secundinus, my dick (says): “I am pooped on”’ (penetrated), i.e. ‘Secundinus, you take it up the arse’. Or with Secundinus as phallus and penetrator: ‘I, Secundinus, am pooped on’, i.e. ‘I, Secundinus, am the one up your shitter’. As already noted, associating someone with a phallus would not necessarily have been insulting – we have seen that the phallus channelled good luck and virility and in the case of the *pedicator* these associations may remain, but the message becomes more obviously negative if Secundinus is the *pedicatus*.

The different interpretations of the text of the stone do not necessarily exclude one another and could be active at the same time depending on the viewer’s reading of the Secundinus stone. It may be that our trouble understanding what is meant by the message left here may have also been felt by those exposed to it when it was (presumably) visible before its reuse at Vindolanda. Often informal and insulting messages are not fully understood by readers who are not party to the relationships involved. If the writing was added later to an already extant phallus, then the meaning and interpretation of the carved block itself would have evolved over time. With the addition of the writing, whether the noun *cacator* ‘shitter’ or the verb *cacare* (if Secundinus is *pedicatus*), the phallus becomes more obviously a medium for an insult, or a potentially insulting boast if Secundinus is *pedicator*, though it may previously have been viewed simply as an image for good luck and/or fertility.

<sup>35</sup> The passive nature of the verbal phrase itself might create a mental barrier for commentators in assigning this penetrative role to the verb, a barrier reinforced by the standard ‘passive’–‘active’ descriptors used in the categorisation of ancient sexual relations, i.e. we have been taught to associate passiveness with *being penetrated*. Kamen and Levin-Richardson (2015) urge us to rethink the categories and to be more thoughtful in our use of the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’ when discussing ancient sexuality, noting that a penetrated role can have agency, for example. Their ‘Penetration-Agency Model for Roman Sexuality’ can be found at Kamen and Levin-Richardson 2015, 249.

<sup>36</sup> Levin-Richardson 2015, 238.

<sup>37</sup> Nominative in place of the vocative was common in colloquial Latin: see Adams 2013, 211–13, 254; Väänänen 1966, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Adams 1982, 11.

Finally we might wonder who might have been the subject and who might have been involved in the creation and viewing of this stone. We know nothing about Secundinus, though on the balance of probabilities, if he were a real person,<sup>39</sup> given the location, it seems likely that he would have been a military man,<sup>40</sup> though he could of course have been a civilian associate with whom dealings had gone awry (as perhaps in *Tab. Vindol.* 344). Many of the phalli created along the Wall zone of northern Britain were clearly meant to be visible. One third-century example from Vindolanda (Collins 2020, cat. no. 44; App. 1 no. 7) was found in rubble, but examination indicated that its base was designed so that the phallus would apparently fit into a socket and project out from the wall of the west gate of the fort toward the road.<sup>41</sup> Phalli such as these, and others on the pavements of thoroughfares through the forts, were designed to be seen by the military community, their associates and sometimes the broader community. There are also examples that were not designed to be visible to the community, such as those in quarries and drains.<sup>42</sup> In the case of our stone with its as yet unparalleled text, and its deployment of a common image as part of the message – a crucial interplay whether the message and image was carved at the same time or not – it seems likely that this block was meant to be seen. Whatever precise interpretation we prefer, with this cacemphaton the phallus was not simply a lightning rod for bad luck.

University of Western Ontario (A.W.M.)  
[alexander.meyer@uwo.ca](mailto:alexander.meyer@uwo.ca)

University of Nottingham (A.M.)  
[alex.mullen@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:alex.mullen@nottingham.ac.uk)

University of Turku (J.V.)  
[joovan@utu.fi](mailto:joovan@utu.fi)

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CSIR I.6 = Coulston, J. and Phillips, E. 1988: *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani. Great Britain vol. 1 fasc. 6: Hadrian's Wall West of the North Tyne, and Carlisle*, Oxford.
- Adams, J.N. 1982: *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, London.
- Adams, J.N. 2013: *Social Variation and the Latin Language*, Cambridge.
- Birley, A.R. 2003: *The Excavations of 2001–2002: Volume 1*, Bardon Mill.
- Birley, A. and Alberti, M. 2021: *Vindolanda Excavation Research Report Focusing on Post-Roman Vindolanda*, Hexham.
- Birley, A. and Blake, J. 2007: *Vindolanda Research Report, The Excavations of 2005–2006*, Hexham.
- Birley, R. 1973: 'Vindolanda – Chesterholm 1969–1972', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 5th series, 1, 111–22.
- Birley, R. 2009: *Vindolanda: A Roman Frontier Fort on Hadrian's Wall*, Stroud.
- Clark, J. 2007: *Looking At Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 BC–AD 250*, Berkeley.

<sup>39</sup> Intriguingly, as James Clackson points out (pers. comm.), many of the erotic graffiti from Pompeii involve Prima and Secundus (reminiscent of the Priminus (*RIB* 631) and Secundinus on the same from Roman Britain): are these perhaps universal nicknames?

<sup>40</sup> There are three attestations of the name Secundinus in the stone inscriptions published in *RIB*, all of military men, two of them centurions (1225, 2024, 3426). Secundinus is, however, a relatively common name and not used preferentially by the military. There are a further four examples (two certain, two uncertain) on non-lapidary objects from Roman Britain: Tomlin 2016, no. 18, intaglio (Billingford); 2409.32 bronze die (London); 2429.10 (?) bronze belt (Brettenham); 2501.495 (?) graffito (Silchester).

<sup>41</sup> Collins 2020, 288.







<sup>42</sup> See Collins 2020, 288–90.

- Collingwood Bruce, J. 1875: *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, Newcastle.
- Collins, R. 2019: 'Stone-carved phalli: a typology', *Roman Finds Group Datasheet* 10. <https://www.romanfindsgroup.org.uk/datasheets> (accessed 14 July 2023).
- Collins, R. 2020: 'The phallus and the frontier: the form and function of phallic imagery along Hadrian's Wall', in T. Ivleva and R. Collins (eds), *Un-Roman Sex. Gender, Sexuality, and Lovemaking in the Roman Provinces and Frontiers*, London and New York, 274–309.
- Johns, C. 1982: *Sex or Symbol: Erotic Images of Greece and Rome*, London.
- Kamen, D. and Levin-Richardson, S. 2015: 'Lusty ladies in the Roman imaginary', in R. Blondell and K. Ormand (eds), *Ancient Sex: New Essays*, Columbus OH, 231–52.
- Levin-Richardson, S. 2013: 'Fututa sum hic: female subjectivity and agency in Pompeian sexual graffiti', *Classical Journal* 108.3, 319–45.
- Langner, M. 2001: *Antike Graffitizeichnungen: Motive, Gestaltung und Bedeutung*, Wiesbaden.
- Levin-Richardson, S. 2015: 'Bodily waste and boundaries in Pompeian graffiti', in D. Dutsch and A. Suter (eds), *Ancient Obscenities: Their Nature and Use in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds*, Ann Arbor, 225–55.
- McGuire, M. 2013: *Stone Sources Project – 2012 Report*, Hexham.
- Merrifield, R. 1969: *Roman London*, London.
- Panayotakis, C. 2010: *Decimus Laberius: The Fragments*, Cambridge.
- Parker, A. 2017: 'Protecting the troops? Phallic carvings in the North of Roman Britain', in A. Parker (ed.), *Ad Vallum: Papers on the Roman Army and Frontiers in Celebration of Dr. Brian Dobson*, Oxford, 117–30.
- Parker, A. 2021: 'Phalli fighting with fluids: approaching images of ejaculating phalli in the Roman world', in M. Bradley, V. Leonard and L. Totelin (eds), *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity*, London and New York, 173–90.
- Parker, A., and Ross, C.A. 2016: 'A new phallic carving from Roman Catterick', *Britannia* 47, 271–9.
- Parker, W.H. 1988: *Priapea: Poems for a Phallic God, introduced, translated and edited, with notes and commentary*, London and Sydney.
- Shaffrey, R. 2022: 'Meaning in millstones: phallic imagery on Romano-British millstones', *Britannia* 53, 357–70.
- Tomlin, R.S.O. 1979: 'Roman Britain in 1978: Inscriptions', *Britannia* 10, 339–56.
- Tomlin, R.S.O. 2016: 'Roman Britain in 2015. III. Inscriptions', *Britannia* 47, 389–415.
- van de Wiel, K.E. 2019: *Fascinum: The Apotropaic Phallus of Campania in the Ancient & Modern Imagination*, PhD thesis, University of Warwick.
- Väänänen, V. 1966: *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes*, Berlin.

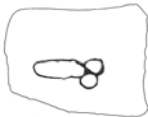






## APPENDIX 1: PHALLI ON STONE FROM VINDOLANDA.

Data from Collins 2020, drawings by Rebecca Lee, reproduced with kind permission.

No. and image	Execution	Type (Collins)	Context	Context date	References
1 See FIG. 11	Relief	Rocket	Found reused in core of fort wall near north-east corner, 1979	Third or fourth century	<i>CSIR</i> I.6, no. 443; Tomlin 1979, 346; <i>RIB</i> 3357; Collins 2020, no. 38
2 	Incised	Hammer	Found in rubble of Severan <i>praetorium</i> , 1969	A.D. 208–211	<i>CSIR</i> I.6, no. 446; Birley 1973, 119; Collins 2020, no. 39
3 	Incised	Rocket	Found fallen from wall of building in vicus, 1871	Third century	<i>CSIR</i> I.6, no. 447; Birley 1973, 119; Collins 2020, no. 40
4 	Incised	Rocket	First course of stone of Severan barrack, set approximately one-fifth of length from south-eastern corner	A.D. 208–213	Birley 2003, 57; Collins 2020, no. 41
5 See FIG. 10	Incised	Rocket	Underside of slab of drain	Early fourth century	Birley <i>et al.</i> 2002, no. 2; Collins 2020, no. 42; <i>RIB</i> 3358
6 	Incised	Rocket	Unstratified in field wall	Post-medieval	SF1814; Collins 2020, no. 43
7 	Sculptural	Kinky Winky	Collapsed fort wall immediately south of the west gate	Third century	SF6000; Collins 2020, no. 44
8 	Incised	Splitcock	Floor of vicus store building	Third century	<i>CSIR</i> I.6, no. 445; Birley 1973, 119; Collins 2020, no. 45

*Continued*

No. and image	Execution	Type (Collins)	Context	Context date	References
9 	Incised	Rocket	Stone forms north side of drain running south-west out of <i>principia</i> , through west door; presumed reused	A.D. 213+	<i>CSIR</i> I.6, no. 444; Collins 2020, no. 46
10 	Incised	Rocket	Building stone in wall collapse on intervallum road from structure built against north face of west gate	Late fourth to early fifth century	SF12801; Collins 2020, no. 47
11 	Incised	Rocket	Building stone in wall collapse on intervallum road from structure built against north face of west gate	Late fourth to early fifth century	SF12801; Collins 2020, no. 48
12 	Incised	Rocket	Building stone in wall collapse on intervallum road from structure built against north face of west gate	Late fourth to early fifth century	SF12801; Collins 2020, no. 49
13 	Incised	Double-Dong	Building stone in wall collapse on intervallum road from structure built against north face of west gate	Late fourth to early fifth century	SF12801; Collins 2020, no. 50
14 See FIG. 3	Incised	Rocket	Rubble packing of a former beam slot in the southwest quadrant of the surviving stone fort c. 30 m south of the A.D. third-century <i>principia</i>	Early fourth century	SF23163, context number V22-66; Current article