

# THE FACE OF THE ROMAN PAST



I am missing being at the the Binchester excavations this summer [\[Link\]](#), not least because they have thrown up a remarkable sculpted head in sandstone [\[Link\]](#)



It is quite reminiscent of one found at the outpost of Benwell on Hadrian's Wall back in 1862 and identified as the Celtic god Antenociticus:



Another indication of how evocative and rich are the remains of these Roman borderlands, a witness also to the complex cultural interactions that went on at this edge of empire.

Here is what David Petts, one of our faculty excavation managers, has to say:

The head ... was found in a dump of late Roman refuse that had been thrown into one of the rooms of a probable bath-house in the civilian settlement that lies outside the Roman fort at Binchester. This building was terraced into the hillside and all the rooms we've looked at have been filled with massive deposits consisting mainly of alternate layers of butchery waste and rough stone surfaces. These dumps are around 6' in depth. The head was part of one of these stone layers and as such is clearly not in its original context. However, there is reason to believe that it may have originated from this general area. A couple of years ago we found part of an inscription nearby that appears to record the dedication of a small shrine by the commander of the cavalry regiment based at the fort. In the same sequence of late Roman dumping we also found a small Roman altar, and earlier this week we found a fragment of a pot with an applique pottery wheel on it that may have ritual connections to the cult of the Romano-Celtic 'wheel god' perhaps best known from the north of England in his guise as Taranis. This all suggests some ritual activity in the immediate area or more likely within the bathhouse

itself. However, at some point, probably by the 4th century, the bath and shrine had fallen out of use and the head ended up incorporated into these waste deposits. The head itself is sandstone and reasonably well carved although not of the highest order of Roman sculpture. This can be seen clearly when compared with its closest parallel, the head of Antenociticus from the Roman fort at Benwell on Hadrian's Wall. ... despite the broad similarities with the Antenociticus head, I don't think we can say that the Binchester head is meant to represent him. Nonetheless, they are both clearly drawing on the same broad artistic repertoire that combines both classical and more indigenous Romano-British artistic styles.