



Roman Object Image Card #2: Altar to Coventina by unknown

Sandstone relief carving, 2nd-3rd century AD

Found at Coventina's Well near Carrawburgh 1876. Displayed at Chesters Roman Museum

A story:

A long time ago in the wild and peaty moors of Northumberland, there lived Coventina a beautiful goddess of a spring where the native people and animals visited her and drank the cool, refreshing water. One day Roman engineers arrived and ordered soldiers to build a wall stretching from the horizon where the sun rose to that where the sun set. The soldiers needed fresh water, and they constructed a square wall around Coventina's spring to make a well. They piped the water to their fort and the soldiers and their families visited offering gifts in return for the goddess' help.

Years later the new Christian religion spread throughout the Roman world. Emperor Constantine commanded that the temples and shrines to Roman gods be demolished. People carefully took down Coventina's altars and incense burners and placed them gently in the well. In time the Roman army marched away and was never seen again. For centuries, Coventina and her treasures remained unnoticed and unloved.

Adapted from *Stories from the Northern Frontier* by Newcastle University's Museum of Antiquities

Eventually, Victorian miners discovered a square enclosure with a shaft at its centre. Local landowner and enthusiastic antiquarian, John Clayton led an excavation alongside John Collingwood Bruce, a specialist on studies of Hadrian's Wall. The shrine was found packed with offerings, some rich, some crude, some unique. Some had the name Coventina written on them; a goddess who was unknown before this discovery in 1876. In the past people made offerings in the hope that the gods and goddesses would help heal them or bring them good luck. Have you ever tossed a coin into a well or pool of water and made a wish?

On this altar, Coventina is shown reclining on a water lily leaf. The Latin inscription says:

*Deae / Couventinae / T(itus) D(...) Cosconia/nus pr(aefectus) coh(ortis) / I Bat(avorum)
I(ibens) m(erito)*

Which translates as:

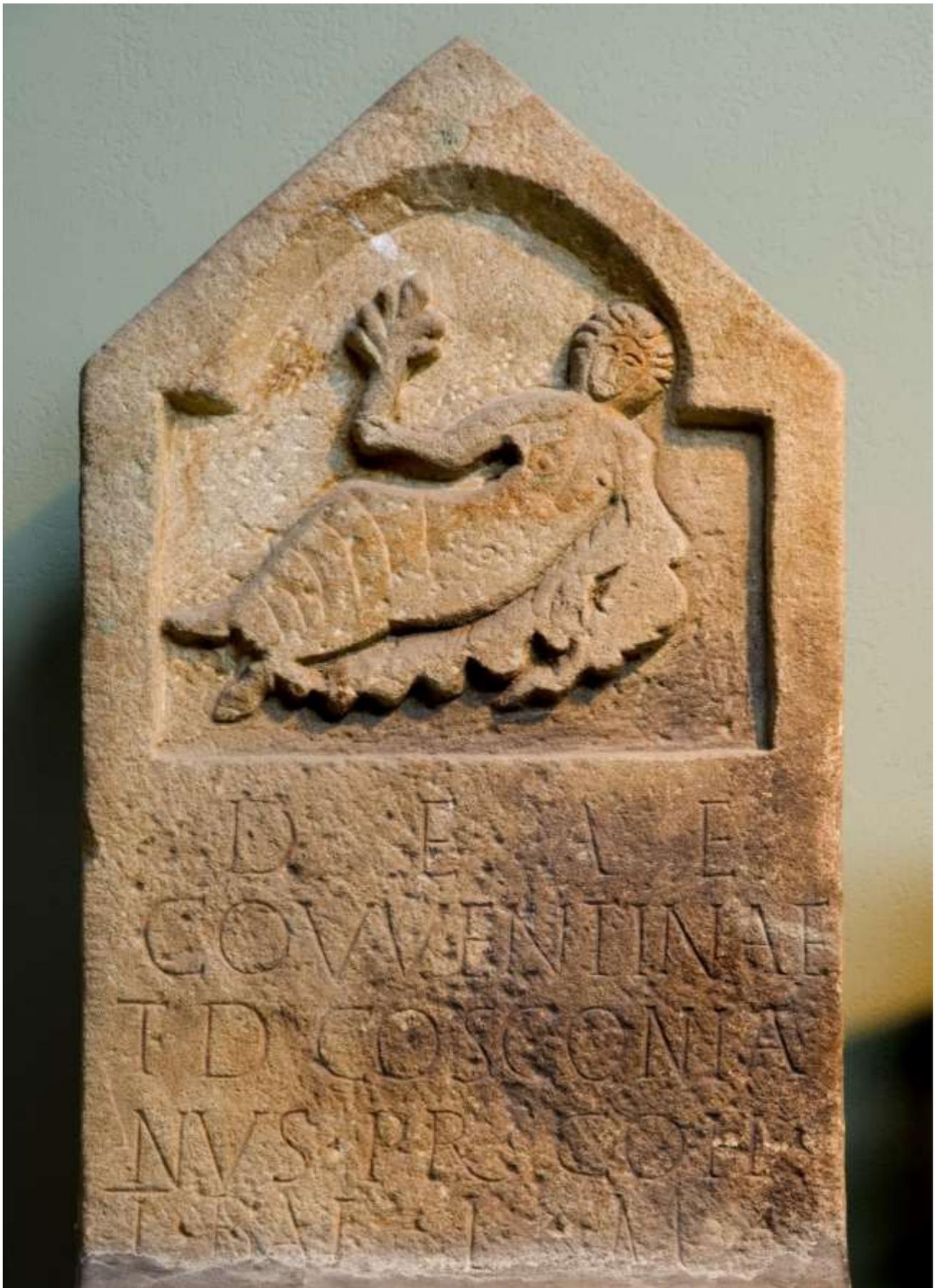
'For the goddess Coventina, Titus D(...) Cosconianus, prefect of the First Cohort of Batavians freely and deservedly (fulfilled a vow)'



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