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A LOST LATIN INSCRIPTION FROM THE BANKS OF THE TIGRIS

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## A LOST LATIN INSCRIPTION FROM THE BANKS OF THE TIGRIS

In 1943 while working in northern Iraq, a British engineer discovered a Latin inscription on the west bank of the Tigris some 3 km. south of Mosul. Thirty years later, in a letter to Professor David Oates, he reported this discovery together with a brief description of the stone and text as far as he could still recollect them. Subsequent enquiries in Iraq by Professor Oates failed to discover any knowledge or trace of it and the only record now of this text is Professor Oates' own recollection.<sup>1)</sup>

The stone was said to have borne an image or an eagle in relief and, below, the words *occuli (sic) legionum*. The find spot is a bend on the River Tigris just below Mosul, at a point where the modern road rises to pass along a bluff overlooking the river. No structures have been reported there and, although he frequently flew from the airfield at Mosul, Stein's aerial survey seems not to have searched downstream of that city.<sup>2)</sup>

Despite the absence of any known remains apart from the inscription, the location would certainly have marked a suitable place for an outpost describing itself as 'The Eyes of the Legions'. Although there are no certain Roman remains in the vicinity, Mosul, opposite ancient Nineveh, stood at one of the most important crossing points of the Tigris. It developed as a great town in the early Middle Ages, supplanting Nineveh itself, but there is no reason to doubt that it must have been an important place from very early times.<sup>3)</sup> Indeed, Professor Oates argued many years ago that Mosul was probably the site of the *Ad Flumen Tigrem* of the Peutinger Table.<sup>4)</sup> Stein had already identified what he believed to be three Roman forts along the route leading into Mosul from the north west, and saw the route itself as a Roman road.<sup>5)</sup> Neither are proven, but the discovery of the present text and the proposal to see Mosul as *Ad Flumen Tigrem* make both of Stein's identifications more plausible. Finally, one must consider the possibility that the stone might have been moved from its original spot, though it is unlikely that it would have been brought far - probably from Mosul at most. Against that possibility one must set the fact of the region being one of plentiful stone with no need for stone-robbing.

1) I am very grateful to Professor Oates for bringing knowledge of this text to my attention and for allowing me to publicise it.

2) S.Gregory and D.Kennedy, *Sir Aurel Stein's Limes Report*, Oxford (BAR, International Series 272) 1985,116.

3) D.Oates, *Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq*, London 1968, 21.

4) Oates, *op. cit.* 77.

5) Gregory and Kennedy (Stein), *op. cit.* 113-8.

There is no way of dating the text other than by reference to the known periods of Roman rule in the region. Roman troops operated in the area very briefly in the last years of Trajan's reign, and half a century later again during the campaign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. Trajan at least may be seriously considered since he annexed the region as a province and must have ordered the construction of permanent military installations though there would have been little time for much to be done before abandonment of the area; Marcus Aurelius' ambitions seem always to have been more modest, aiming to control only up to the River Khabur rather than the Tigris.

There is a third alternative. A lengthy period of Roman Rule began c.199 with the annexation of the region by Septimius Severus as part of the new Roman province of Mesopotamia. The military history of the province is sketchy.<sup>6)</sup> However, we know that two legions were established in garrison, at Singara and, probably, Nisibis. Legions remained in garrison thereafter. For the north eastern region with which we are here concerned, in the generation which followed, a major fort was built east of Singara at Ain Sinu and a 'Barracks' next to it; finally, not later than the reign of Gordian III (238-44) a regiment of infantry, the cohorts IX Maurorum was installed inside the caravan city of Hatra to the south.<sup>7)</sup> The region was lost to Rome in the upheavals of the mid-3rd century but was recovered by Galerius in 298-9 at which time Rome also acquired new tracts of territory across the Tigris after which an outpost at that spot would make less sense.<sup>8)</sup> All, however, from the Khabur eastwards, was finally lost by the terms of Jovian's peace with the Persians in 363 after the disastrous campaign and death of Julian.

The text uses the plural legionum and there were in fact two or more legions in garrison in Mesopotamia from Severus onwards. In practice of course, only one legion was close by, at Singara, and even that was some 130 km (80 miles) away to the west. Since there has never been any hint of any legion stationed closer to the Tigris than Singara, it might be better to regard oc(c)uli legionum as being used in a loose, almost poetic sense, an outpost, possibly of auxiliaries, providing an early warning system for the main legionary forces to the west. It is worth noting, however, that the epitaph of a veteran of the legio I Parthica describes that legion as 'at Singara in Mesopotamia by the River Tigris (πρὸς τῷ Τίγρει ποταμῶι)',<sup>9)</sup> the same manner in which Ptolemy describes it: παρὰ δὲ τὸν Τίγριν καταμὸν πόλει ἀἶδε.<sup>10)</sup>

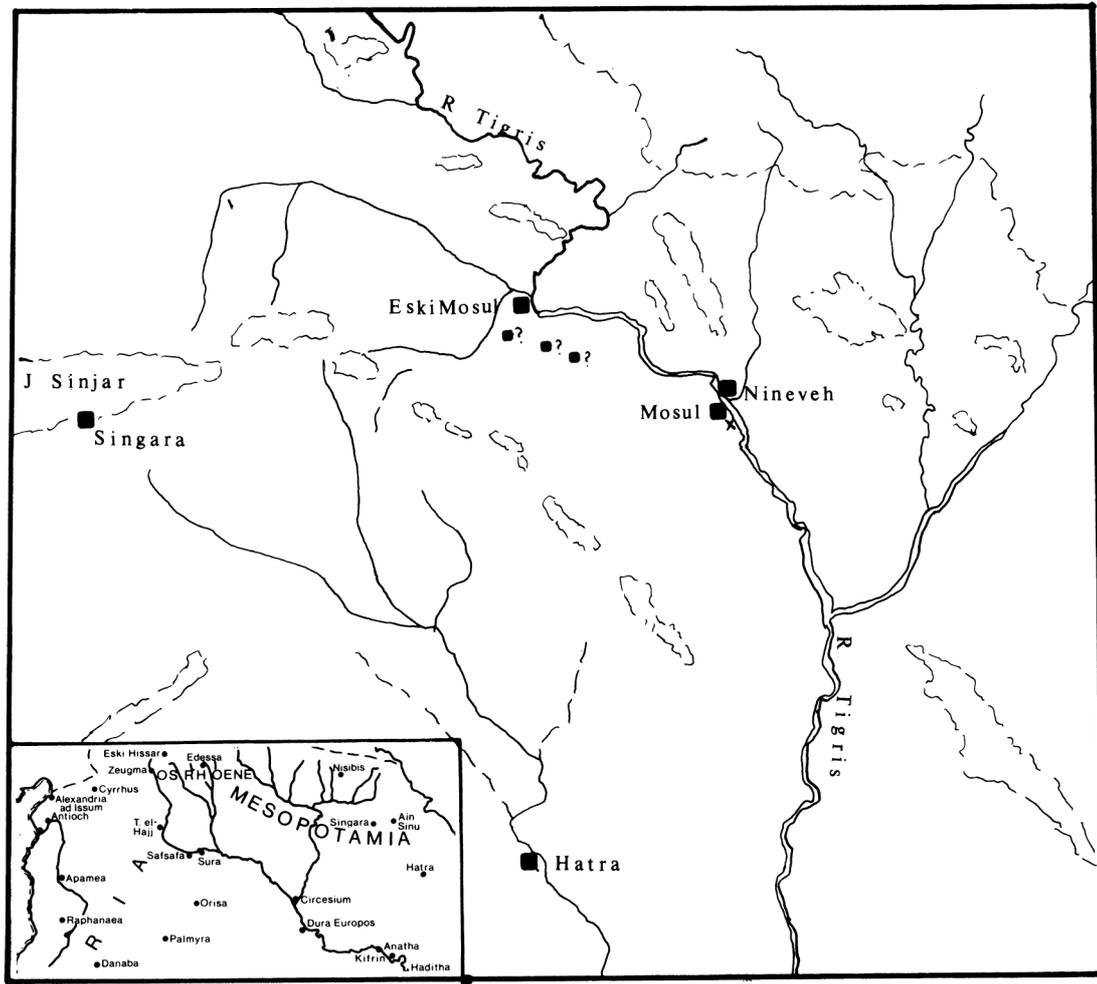
6) D.L.Kennedy, 'The garrisoning of Mesopotamia in the Late Antonine and Early Severan period', *Antichthon*, forthcoming.

7) Gregory and Kennedy, *op. cit.* 396f.

8) Professor Oates observes that the preponderance of Roman coins reported or found on sites in this region are of the early 3rd century.

9) M.Speidel and J.Reynolds, 'A veteran of legio I Parthica from Carian Aphrodisias', *Epigraphica Anatolica* 5,1985,31-5.

10) Geog.,V.17.9.



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