

Mars Rigisamus

BY R. G. COLLINGWOOD, F.S.A.

THE bronze plate here illustrated (Plate XXII, fig. 2), $2\frac{3}{4}$ in. long by $1\frac{5}{8}$ in. high,¹ was found at Chessels, West Coker, Somerset. It was formerly in the possession of the late Mr. J. Moore, whose executors presented it to the Yeovil Museum; being lodged for a while at Taunton Castle, it was kindly sent to me by Mr. H. St. George Gray, F.S.A., in order that I might make the drawing now reproduced; for although the object has been described,² no illustration of it has been published.

The inscription, which is 'punctured' with a sharp punch, indenting the metal in small, sometimes minute, depressions, reads:—**DEO MARTI RIGISAMO, IVENTIVS SABINVS V.S.L.L.M.**³ 'To the god Mars Rigisamus, Iuentius Sabinus pays his vow gladly, willingly, deservedly.' The first word has been at first written, very lightly, **DO**, and then altered to **DEO**; the same mis-spelling is found elsewhere, e.g. painted on a jug in the British Museum. The epithet **RIGISAMO** is written more heavily and clumsily than the rest; but I cannot be sure either that it is written by a different hand, or that it has been added as an afterthought, although it is rather crowded in the line-spacing.

¹ A Roman bronze plaque of exactly the same dimensions as the West Coker specimen, inscribed to Aeclania Primitiva was described by the late Professor Haverfield in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lxxiii, 60–62.

² By Mr. Moore in the *Journal, British Archæological Association*, xix (1863), 322; thence by Huebner in *Corpus Inscr. Lat.* vii, no. 61, also in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1864, p. 60.

³ V(otum) S(olvit) I(aetus) I(ibens) m(erito).



Fig. 1. Bronze Statuette of the god Mars Rigisamus
(Scale $\frac{1}{4}$)



Fig. 2.—Inscribed Bronze Plate belonging to the above
(Scale $\frac{1}{4}$)

FOUND AT CHESSELS, WEST COKER, SOMERSET

From Photograph and Drawing by Mr. R. G. Collingwood, F.S.A.

The name 'Mars Rigisamus' is typical of a great number of inscriptions in which Mars is worshipped with a Celtic epithet. Caesar, in a well-known passage (*Gallie War*, vi, 17), says that Mars was one of the favourite gods of the Celtic Gauls. This means that he found them worshipping an armed war-god whom he equated with Mars; and when the Celts came under Roman rule they accepted this equation, but continued to address their war-god by his Celtic name or names. There seem to have been a great many of these Celtic war-gods, all of whom came to be identified with Mars, and accordingly we find a large variety of Celtic epithets attached to his name. Rigisamus occurs both in Britain and in Gaul; and I am indebted to my colleague Professor J. R. R. Tolkien for the substance of the following explanation of the name, which is in substantial agreement with that long ago proposed by the late Sir John Rhys in his Hibbert Lectures (1887).

Rigisāmus is clearly derived from *rīx*, *rīg-*, king. It is probably a superlative, as if one should derive a Latin *regis-simus* from *rex*; analogous forms are actually found in Greek. The superlative suffix (*i*)*samos* in British seems implied by the Welsh, and is analogous to the Latin; it seems to recur in other names like Uxama 'highest', Belisama 'most fair', etc. We might therefore translate Mars Rigisamus as 'Mars, King of Kings'.

Iuentius is a mis-spelling of a common type for Iuuentius (Juventius).

Plates of this kind were often attached to statues. In this one, there is a nail-hole in the middle, which is part of the original design, because a space is left for it in the middle of the name, thus: **IVEN O TIVS**. This nail, I suppose, fastened the plate to a block of wood, on which a statuette was mounted; the whole thing must have looked rather like the statuette of Mars in the British Museum¹; but, to judge by the style of the plate and lettering, it must have been distinctly inferior to that in quality.

By good fortune, it happens that we can produce the very statuette itself (Plate XXII, fig. 1). In the same field in which

¹ *B.M. Guide, Roman Britain*, plate viii.

the inscribed plate was found, among unmistakable relics of a Roman villa, Mr. Moore also discovered a bronze statuette about 3 in. high, which he recognised as a representation of Mars and described and figured.¹

The god is represented in a style distantly derived from the Greek Ares: nude, except for a helmet, which however, with its cheek-pieces and crest, is on the whole more Roman than Greek in form; beardless, like the young Ares and unlike the Roman Mars Ultor; the right hand resting on his spear and the left on the rim of his shield—not, as Mr. Moore thought, grasping the shield by its handle: the attitude is one not of combat but of repose. The statuette has been cast by the *cire perdue* process and roughly finished with various tools, including a round file, a flat file, and a graver. Alike in the modelling and in the metal-working, the level of taste and skill is extraordinarily low; of all the Roman provincial bronzes I have ever seen, this is easily the worst from every point of view, and more than justifies the remarks which have been made² on the technical and artistic badness of metal-work in the south-western region of Roman Britain.

That this is the statuette to which the inscription belongs, is proved by the pointed plugs under the feet, which can only have been intended for thrusting into a block of wood—the same to which the inscribed plate was nailed. Thus, except for the wooden block, which can readily be restored in imagination, and except for a shield a little larger than a penny and a spear made of 4 in. of bronze wire, we have in these two bronzes a complete ‘cult-object’, giving us valuable evidence of the spiritual condition, artistic and religious, of the Romanised Britons who lived in the comfortable country-houses of Somerset.

¹ *Journal, British Archaeological Association*, xviii (1862), 392–5 (plate facing p. 394).

² *Archæologia*, lxxx, 48–49, 55.