

THE ROMAN ARMY IN SCOTLAND

Use this worksheet to make your own Mithraic altar

The cult of Mithras was widely practised throughout the Roman Empire, and based upon the archaeological evidence was particularly popular amongst the soldiers of the Roman army: Many buildings where he appears to have been worshipped - known as Mithraea - have been found associated with Roman settlements. However, it was only in 2010 that the first - and so far only - Mithraeum was discovered north of Hadrian's Wall, at Inveresk and associated with the nearby Roman fort at Musselburgh.



This reconstruction illustration, *left*, by Alan Braby shows what the interior of the Mithraeum might have looked like when it was in use. If you want to get more of a feel for what mithraic worship might have involved, English Heritage have made a short video which re-imagines just such a ceremony, based upon the archaeological remains of a Mithraeum at Carrawburgh, on Hadrian's Wall. Search 'Tales from English Folklore: The Cult of Mithras' on YouTube to find it.

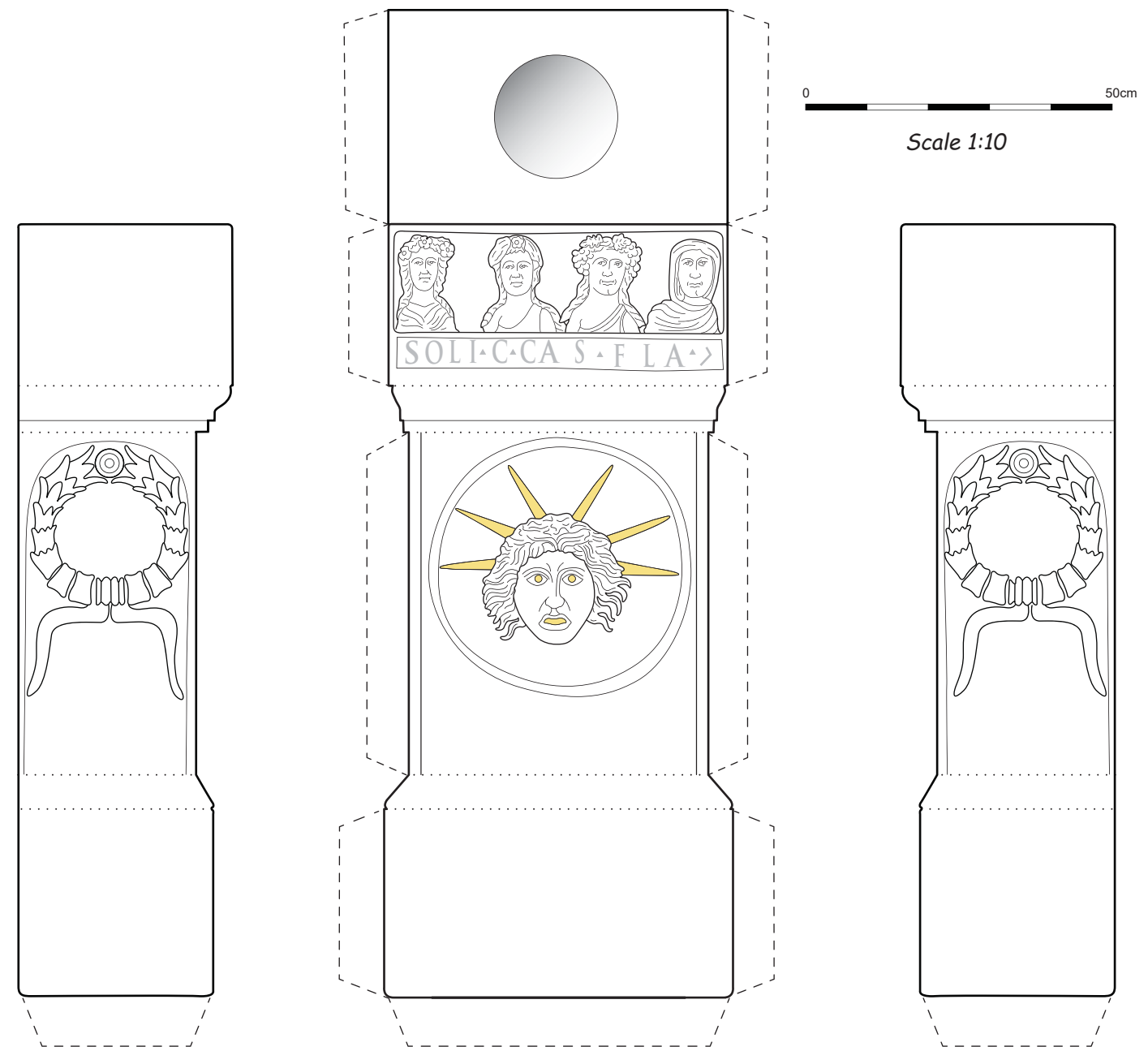
The altar that you see here, *right*, was one of two found at Inveresk. It is thought to depict the god Sol, (Sun), who was considered Mithras's father. Originally a Persian God that the Romans adopted as their own, Mithras was also known as a Sun God and was therefore associated with renewal and great power. Partly because the ceremonies were held in secret we don't know the details of what those worshipping him specifically believed. However, it is thought

that rituals involved feasting, and we believe that those who worshipped him made oaths and sacrifices in return for his help in their own lives and to bring them good fortune generally, for example, a promotion through the army ranks. Indeed Mithraism had its own ranking system, with initiates potentially advancing through seven ranks. However, it is probable that those who had advanced to the highest level were only ever going to be people who already had important status in their everyday lives, such as an army Centurion, who would make sure that people who they saw as less important would only remain at the lower levels of initiation. The Centurion who paid for this altar was called Flavius, which we can tell from the inscribed dedication:

SOLI C CAS FLA >,

'To the Sun, the centurion Gaius Cas(sius) Fla(vianus) (dedicated this altar).'
(the '>' symbol is a centurion mark).

Further reading: 'Scottish History: The Romans In Scotland', Publisher: Wayland, 1998, by Richard Dargie. Providing an insight into Roman life in Scotland through archaeological finds and information, this book examines the effect that Roman culture had on the Scottish people as well as introducing the Celts and how they lived. Roman sites such as Hadrian's Wall are also covered. The book explains why the Romans invaded Scotland, their military tactics and why they had to leave.



Images are based upon a 3D laser scan of the altar by AOC Archaeology.

The image of Sol is further dramatised by the fact that incisions had been made through his eyes, mouth and around his head, allowing a 'back-light' to illuminate his features. The frieze along the top shows four women who represent the seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, reinforcing the theme of renewal which is dependent on the sun itself. Note the depression in the top of the altar which would have been used to make offerings to Mithras.

To make your own Mithraic altar simply cut out the template, score along the dotted lines, then fold and glue the tabs to the interior of the corresponding altar face, and then fix to a cardboard base. Traces of red and white paint have been found on the inscriptions, so remember to colour in your Mithraic altar which would originally have been very bright and colourful!