

'Roman' Horse Shoes and 'Ox Shoes' from Silchester

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IN the Silchester collection at Reading are certain pieces of ironwork labelled, provisionally, as Roman ox shoes and horse shoes. Not long since, by the courtesy of the Curator, I was permitted to examine these and to make tracings of them. It was very quickly apparent that most of them were probably not of Roman origin. This is important because Silchester is well-known as a very 'pure' Roman site almost entirely free from admixture from other ages. Exactly the same difficulty has arisen elsewhere, for example, at Chester on the Roman Wall, another 'pure' site. The explanation is obvious. The soil over these sites has been grazed and ploughed for centuries. Horses and oxen have cast shoes which were left to work their way down below the plough level and there they have remained until the excavator came along. He had no text book which would tell him how to distinguish a Roman from a mediæval horse shoe and had very likely never seen an ox shoe at all. He could therefore only preserve his finds and wait for someone else to report on them. It is only of late, and chiefly through the pioneer work of Dr. Murray of Churchdown, Glos., that anyone has had the material to make a report possible.

We now know a little, for example, that ox shoes were never 'fullered' (*i.e.* provided with the groove on the under surface shown in Fig. 1) whereas this was commonly made on horse shoes. It follows that Items A and B in Fig. 1 are wrongly labelled as ox shoes. Are they then horse shoe fragments? We cannot assume that without enquiry for the horse shoe is not the only sort of grooved iron known. The following overwhelming evidence is available (*a*) both A and B are curved like 18th century horse-shoes, (*b*) they are slightly concave as was also usual then, (*c*) they have four holes, in one of which a nail remains, and these holes are such as one finds in horse shoes, and (*d*) the thinned out and broken front edge and even the shape resulting from this thinning

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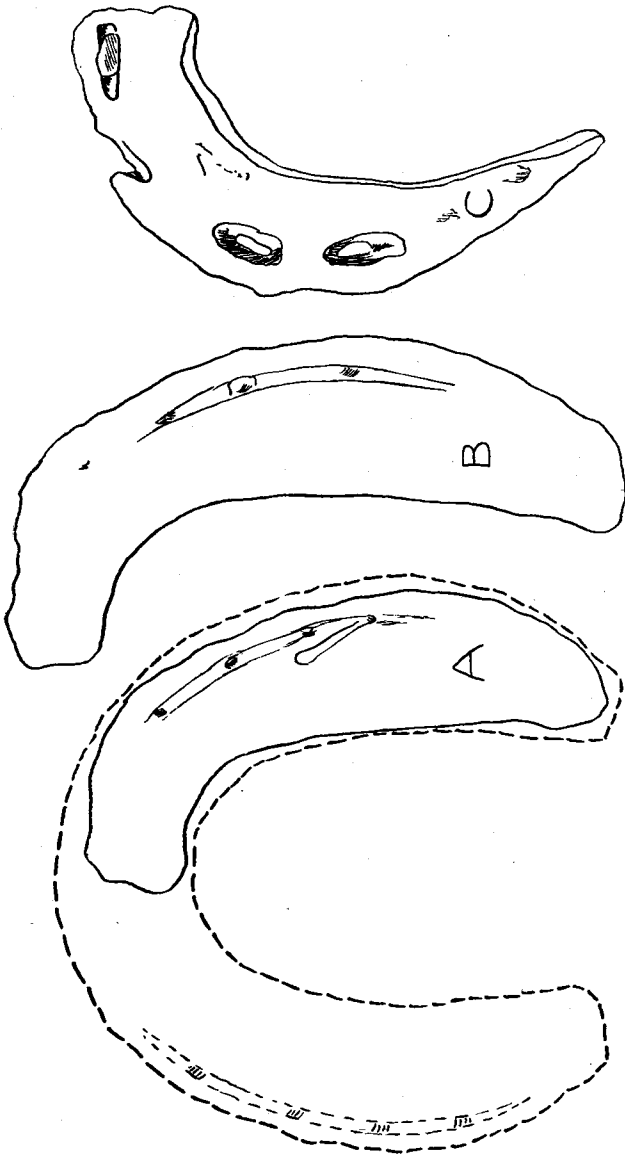


FIG. I

are such as we often find in horse shoes. Item A has been drawn within the frame of an 18th century horse shoe in a Kent museum. We have still not quite decided whether these fragments are necessarily 18th century horse shoes or whether that type might also have existed in Roman times. There are very few horse-shoes known with certainty to be of Roman origin but what there are seem to conform to the type of Item C in Fig. 1. This is quite unlike A and B. Also the nail in A is not a Roman type. So both A and B must come out of the Roman class and they now assume no more importance in connection with Roman Silchester than would a Georgian penny fallen through a sun crack in the earth. It should be noted that Item C is not from Silchester but from the Traprain Law Site in the Scottish Museum of Antiquities at Edinburgh. It is only fair to state that the Traprain Law collection has also various fairly modern horse shoes included as Roman.

Fragment D in Fig. 2 may properly be built up, as there shown, to a horse shoe of a not uncommon type. It will be noticed that there is a suggestion of bulging of the outline opposite nail holes, and caused by the punching of those holes. This type is not unusual after a date which is probably before the Tudors and may be a century or more earlier.

Item E in Fig. 2 is a Silchester fragment imposed on a fragment from Sussex, in short dotted lines, which has itself been built up upon the well known plan of what may be called Prince Rupert's shoes, since their date is known from their occurrence at the Prince's smithy at Gloucester. It may also be called the 'key-hole' type and is widely reputed to be 'Roman' amongst farmers and other countryfolk.

Item F in Fig. 3 would seem to be of the same class as E and to have equally little claim to be Roman or to be an ox shoe. But the true features of long buried and rusted shoes can only be revealed by handing them over to a blacksmith for careful firing and this has not been done to the Silchester specimens nor do I suppose that so revolutionary a method would be acceptable to any but the private collector anxious to get the maximum of information out of his material.

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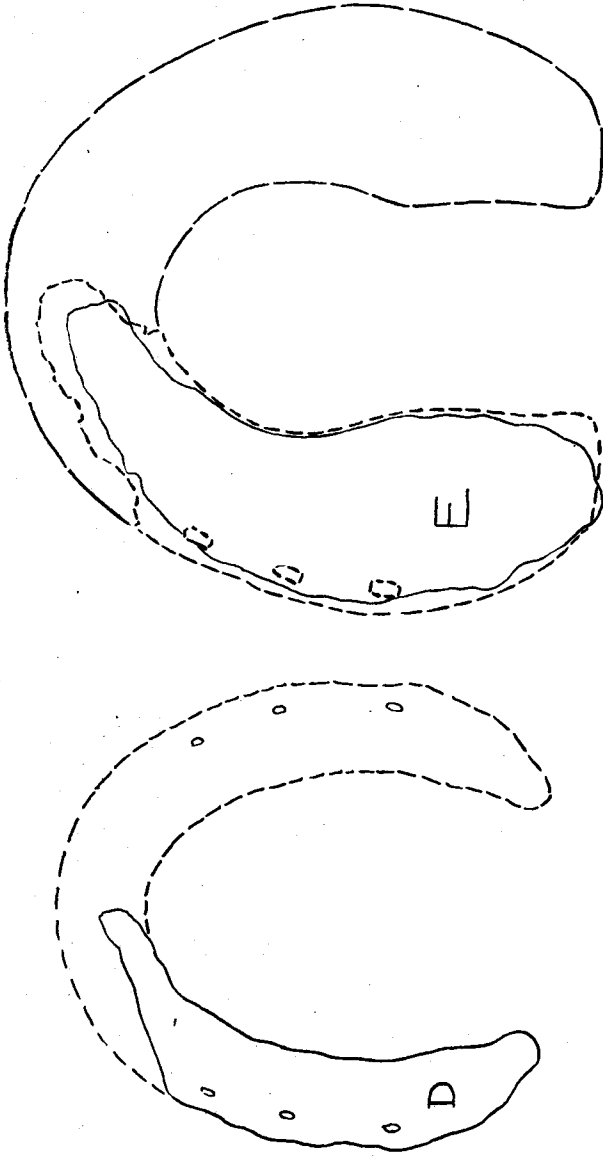


FIG. 2

'ROMAN' HORSE SHOES AND 'OX SHOES' FROM SILCHESTER.

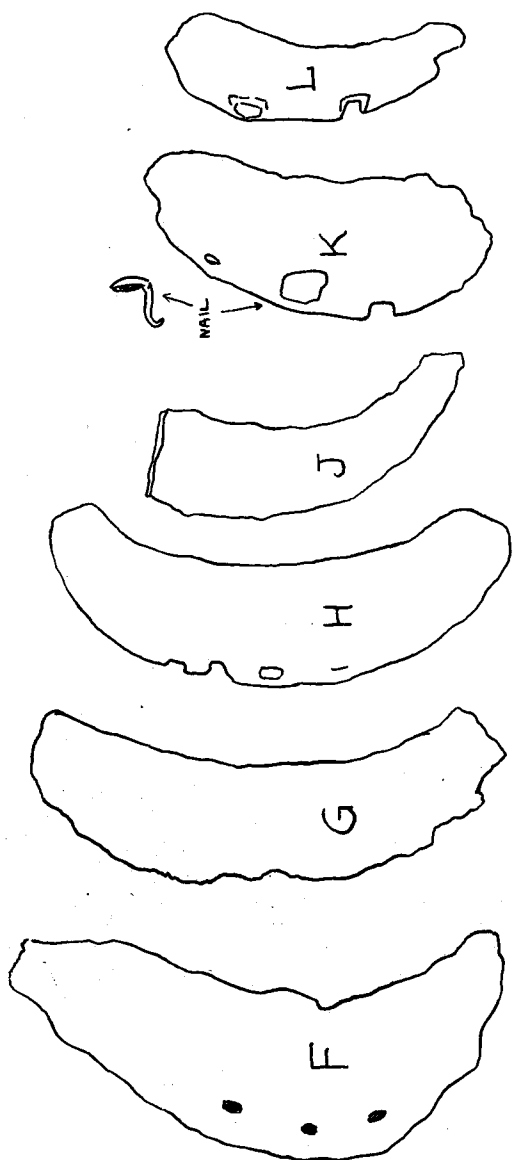


FIG. 3

'ROMAN' HORSE SHOES AND 'OX SHOES' FROM SILCHESTER.



FIG. 4

Items G and H are slightly concave below and are therefore almost certainly horse shoes of much the same type as Item A. They show few definite features but H has the usual thin anterior end due to wear. Item J is a featureless piece of iron with a broken end which was perhaps included as an ox shoe for lack of any other category. I cannot classify it. Item K is, I suppose, part of a horse shoe for it is distinctly concave which would not be the case with an ox shoe. The nail is curious and suggests an early date: it is rather like that in Item C in Fig. 1. Item L might perhaps be some part of an ox shoe but I have compared it with various types and think that the holes are too far apart for an ox shoe. It is probably a horse shoe fragment.

Items M and N in Fig. 4 seem to be undoubted horse shoes but the accumulation of rust and dirt on them and their twisted condition make it hazardous to say any more. N appears to have a nail in the centre which should be an early sign. Both are very much smaller than any shoes usually encountered.

One therefore reaches the unfortunate conclusion that Items A-N, except C which is elsewhere, have an exceedingly dubious status in the Silchester collection and that none of them can prove a claim to be called ox shoes, or to be Roman in origin. All such conclusions are liable to be called in question as knowledge increases. But it is reasonably certain that this question of horse shoes contained in the soil over Roman sites, and not in the sites themselves, must remain one of the minor problems of archæology and should be recognised as such.