

ART. IV.—*A Roman cemetery site at Beckfoot, Cumberland.* By ROBERT HOGG, B.Sc.

Read at Penrith, April 2nd, 1949.

THE material described below comes from a point on the Cumberland coast, a short distance south of the Roman fort at Beckfoot,¹ and was given to Carlisle Museum by our member Mr A. Hall, who discovered it during an examination of the marine dissected coastal section in April 1948. The writer paid several visits to the site with Mr Hall; they were accompanied on one occasion by the Rev. M. P. Charlesworth, and on a final visit by Dr I. A. Richmond.

THE CEMETERY SITE.

The cemetery site used by the Beckfoot garrison seems to have been noted first by Mr Harold Duff,² but hitherto no material found there has been published, though reference has been made to the discovery of fourth-century Castor ware from the coastal section north of the fort. The extent of the site is not yet known, but osseous debris is common in shore sections to the south of the fort, where extensive coast erosion has probably removed a great part of the cemetery area.³ This conclusion is supported by local reports that there have been numerous discoveries of cinerary urns and the like, which have been washed out of the coastal strip by the action of the sea.

¹ The Normal National Grid reference for the find-spot is 094499; for the Roman fort cf. CW1 v 136 and CW2 xxxvi 76 f.

² CW2 xxi 270 f. and xxiii 244.

³ An extensive talus of Raised Beach gravels is proof of the erosion that is now in progress, although the cemetery site is now protected by the gravel mass of the storm beach and lies above the high water mark of spring tides.

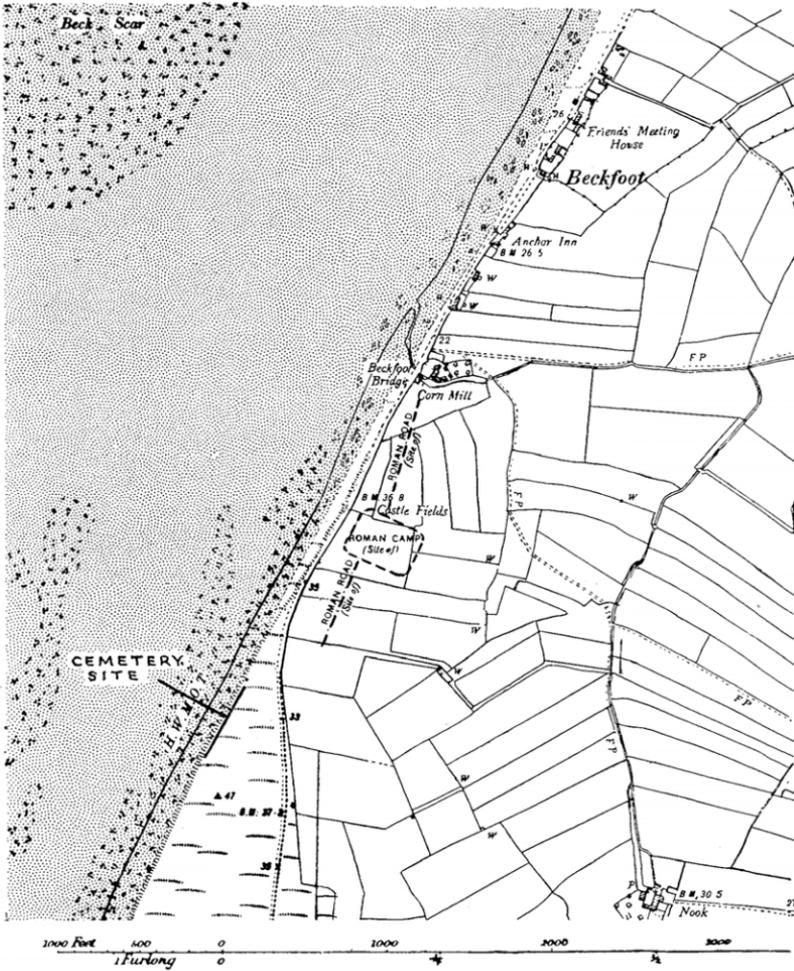


FIG. 1. Beckfoot Roman fort and cemetery. (Reproduced from the 6 inch Ordnance Survey map, with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office, and printed by Titus Wilson & Son, Limited, 28, Highgate, Kendal).

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The coastal section at Beckfoot⁴ shows several feet of bedded sands and gravels of the Raised Beach overlain by a continuous, thin stratum of dark brown, sandy humus, in which Roman remains are found. This humus clearly indicates an old surface level which remained exposed in Roman times; it now lies buried beneath a post-Roman, hummocky accumulation of blown sand, which in section varies in thickness from a minimum of two feet to local patches several feet thick. The remains of a pyre, recorded below, were found in the coastal section to the south of the fort, at a point 400 yards from its south-west angle; all the material was found concentrated at one place within the humus bed.

THE FUNERAL PYRE.

The objects found were as follows:—

Soldier's equipment. Iron spear-head, 8" long; there appears to be a second iron object, of indeterminate character, fused to the socket. Iron sword, of which only part of the blade remains; this is 17" long and tapers slightly to the point: the blade has been bent right over upon itself, presumably to render the sword useless, as in so many burials: there is a circular mass of iron, 2½" in diameter, fused to the blade—its purpose is unknown, but it may perhaps be part of an ornamental fitting from the "funeral bed." Iron arrow-head, with four barbs.

Nails and fittings. There are the remains of some 25 nails, which vary in length from 1½ to 2"; another six nails, about 2½" long, have enlarged circular heads, one of which is 1½" in diameter, and on the head of one of them were detected specks of gold, suggesting that they were originally gilded with gold leaf. There are in

⁴ *The Geology of the Carlisle, Longtown and Sillitho District* (Geological Survey Memoir), p. 78.

addition two iron fittings of unknown use; these are similar to the ornamental nails in size and shape of head, but have semi-circular side projections.

Wood. There are a number of fragments of a blackened and charred wooden structure. Their survival at all is surprising; they presumably escaped destruction at the sides of the conflagration, after the collapse of the central structure of the pyre, and were subsequently preserved by a covering of blown sand.

Bronze. Several pieces of an extremely fragmentary bronze object of unknown purpose occur; it appears that it was originally dish-shape, about 6" in diameter, with lip flange $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide and pierced with square nail-holes. The shape, size and situation suggest that this piece was a shield-boss.

Bone. Only four small fragments of calcined bone were found associated with the above objects. Dr J. S. Faulds, pathologist at the Cumberland Infirmary, states that from their thinness and curvature, three of the fragments could be from a human cranium, and the fourth may be part of a human digital bone.

The material is debris from a funeral pyre, and its occurrence at a level which has produced exclusively Romano-British potsherds allows us to assign it with certainty to the period of the Roman occupation; the pieces of equipment indicate that it represents the cremation of a common soldier, no doubt a member of the nearby cohort. The fragments of wood, nails and fittings indicate the use of an ornate "funeral bed"; the absence of the main mass of human remains is in keeping with the known procedure of removing the bones (a duty of the next-of-kin, a near relative or the heir), washing them in wine and interring them separately.

Such ceremonial details, which an examination of the Beckfoot material permits us to reconstruct, were no doubt regularly performed in Roman times in our

district; but records of Roman pyre cremations are extremely rare, and we must attribute the survival of the debris in this case to the fortuitous sealing of the site by a rapid accumulation of blown sand.⁵ There is a close parallel, however, to the Beckfoot example from the coast of Galloway: at Sandhead, Glenluce, almost identical remains were found under similar littoral conditions, associated with two or three pieces of samian ware.⁶ In that case there was one interesting divergence: the bones had not been removed from the pyre (possibly, owing to the absence of a relative to perform that last rite), but what appears to have been a cairn had been erected over the spot.

In placing on record the details of this rare discovery I must express our indebtedness to Mr Hall; but for his zeal and enterprise, the whole of this treasure might now lie irretrievably scattered on the storm rack of the beach, where in the past much similar material has no doubt been lost. I have also to thank Dr Richmond for pointing out the Glenluce parallel, and for other help.

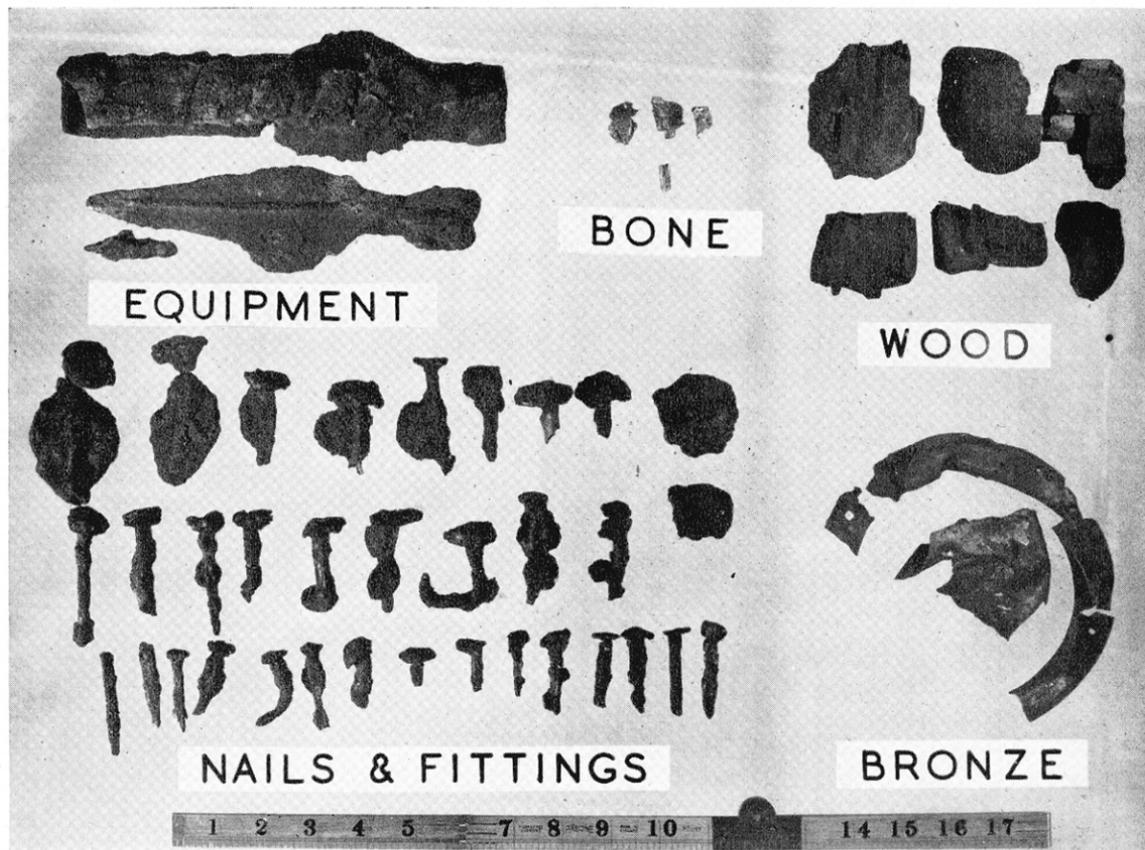
APPENDIX: ROMAN FUNERAL BEDS.

By ERIC BIRLEY.

It was a common practice for a corpse to be carried to the place of cremation on a bier (*lectus* was the normal term, sometimes defined as *lectus funebris*), which was placed on top of the pyre and burnt with the body. At a state funeral, such as that accorded to Pertinax by Severus in A.D. 193, the bier might well have been specially commissioned, made of choice woods and decorated with gold; but in most cases it seems probable that, in place of a special bier, the dead man's bed

⁵ For the cemetery of the fort at Maryport, a few miles to the south, see R. G. Collingwood's discussion of Joseph Robinson's excavations in 1880 (CW1 v 237 f.), CW2 xxxvi 90 f. and especially 93, where reference is made to a funeral pyre close to a circular tomb.

⁶ Cf. James Curle's description, PSAScot. lxvi 284-5 and 375-6; the objects are now preserved with the Ludovic M'L. Mann collection in the Glasgow Corporation Galleries.



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Objects from the Beckfoot pyre.

Photo by R. Hogg.

was used. The corpse was laid out (*collocatio* was the technical term, which the Germans render as *Leichenausstellung*) on the bed which he had slept on when alive, as though still sleeping; and on that bed it was carried to the place of cremation, where the due performance of the last rites was to ensure that the man's last sleep should be unbroken. "Funeral bed," then, though a convenient term, is not perhaps an ideal one, for it suggests something specially made for the purpose. Examples of Roman beds are rare enough in any case, and I have only come across one other instance of one which had undergone cremation on a funeral pyre, without all traces of it being consumed: in the cemetery outside the legionary fortress of Vindonissa, in Switzerland, excavation has produced a number of remarkable bone carvings, the fittings from an unusually elaborate and ornate bed (the most convenient publication is now Christoph Simonett, "Führer durch das Vindonissa-Museum" (1947) 126-7 and pl. 40b); the carvings are the work of a really able artist, such as can hardly have been available in the legionary fortress, and it seems most likely that the bed had been brought to Vindonissa from Italy by its owner, and used as a bier to carry him to his funeral pyre. Felix Stähelin notes (*Die Schweiz in römischer Zeit*, 3rd edition (1948) 422) that the cremation was found at almost the same spot as the tombstone of a centurion of the thirteenth legion, C. Allius Oriens from Dertona; if (as is possible but not certain) it was his bed, it can be assigned to the early years of Claudius at latest, since that legion was replaced at Vindonissa by XXI Rapax in A.D. 45 or 46.