

III.—TWO CELTIC HEADS FROM COUNTY DURHAM

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Recent work has resulted in the finding of two further Celtic heads, additions to the list prepared and commented on by Dr. A. Ross in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, XXXIX.

1. *Ebchester:*

During the 1964 excavations at Ebchester what seemed to be a river cobble appeared in the west section and, as it did not obtrude too greatly, was cleaned around and left. When the trench was extended early in 1965 the stone turned out to be larger than was expected and finally resolved itself into the back of the head of a free-standing bust of Celtic workmanship, carried out in grey gritstone of medium texture worked from the solid and showing pecking as the manner of production.

The bust comprises a round moon face, originally a true circle 6 ins. in diameter, the crown of which has been pecked off in antiquity. A triangular or sub-conical neck merging into a base is clearly marked at the front but more indeterminate at the sides. Total height $11\frac{1}{4}$ ins., base 8 ins. by $4\frac{3}{4}$ ins. The face is flat, without any modelling other than a slight thickening to indicate the brow area, from which a parallel-sided pilaster-like nose descends, without any indication of nostrils. The eyes are represented by two oval outlines pointed at the outer end; the eyebrow a single line above them, more marked in the left than in the right. Both eyes are slanted, the right lower than the left. The mouth is represented by a figure-six-like line with the tail to the right and the loop to the left. This with the expression of the eyes

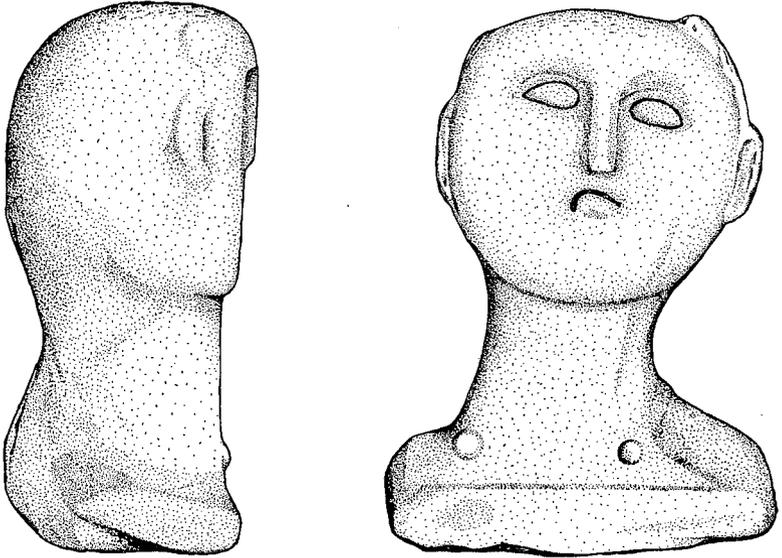


FIG. 1. HEAD FROM EBECHESTER (4)

gives a rather sinister smile. The ears are indicated by two very slightly curved ridges, reminiscent of the ledge handles on a stewjar or terrine. Rising from above the right ear is a slight ridge about 2 ins. long terminating in a small excrescence towards the top of the head. There is evidence of a similar process on the left side; both of them have been damaged by the reworking on the top of the stone.

The neck is set back a good half inch from the level of the face and descends in a somewhat triangular flat plane to the base or border which is plain and $1\frac{3}{8}$ ins. wide. Half an inch above this are two half-inch bosses, one on either side, that represent most probably the terminals of a penannular torc; this possibility is further strengthened by a very slight ridge running upwards and backwards from the right-hand boss.

The back of the head is hemispherical, showing the constructional peck marks but no other working.

That the present sculpture is of Celtic origin though of

Roman date there can be no doubt, owing to the characteristic treatment of the eyes and the general freedom from the sophisticated plasticity of Roman provincial art, and the finished though vernacular appearance places it in the same category as a surprising number of these ritual heads from the Wall area. As a free-standing, finished object, the present specimen ranks high among this Roman-Celtic collection, its nearest parallel being the head (only) from Carvoran: that presents a similar treatment of the nose and eyes and also the same embryo horns and ears. These may have been true horns and ears or a headdress reminiscent of that on the well-known Pfalzfeld Pillar (*The Celts*, T. G. E. Powell, p. 269, fig. 23).

That headhunting was a Celtic cultural trait we have sufficient contemporary evidence from Strabo (IV.4.5) (L.II 247), Diodorus (L.III 173) and Livy (X.26.11) (L.IV 459), all of whom are remarkably consistent in their accounts, or are quoting each other. Physical evidence of Celtic headhunting in Britain rests on excavated evidence from three sites. Stanwick, N. Yorkshire (*Soc. Ant. Rep.*, pp. 53-4), an obvious warrior's head with wounds and part of the severed neck; Bredon Hill (*A.J.* XCV 1938, p. 54 ff.) a number of severed heads; and Glastonbury (Bulleid and Gray) at least two trophy heads: in addition at all three sites is a further feature, not commented on, but which fits in well with recent headhunting practices—this is a number of skull fragments broken in antiquity, signifying that a number of warriors had been responsible for the death of the victim, and in these cases each recognisable fragment counts as a whole.

2. Lanchester:

In the interim between Christmas and New Year 1965-66, Mr. W. Austin of Upper Houses Farm, Lanchester, took up the cobbled floor of an outhouse preparatory to re-laying it in concrete. Among the cobbles was one showing an amount of secondary working that on investigation proved to be a Celtic head of a now well-known type. There being no

known native site near, the most probable place of origin can then only be the Roman fort. Corroboration of this comes from the recollection of a retired member of the farm staff, now over 90 years old, who remembers some 85 years ago bringing cartloads of stones from two dismantled field walls "near the fort", for use in the floors of the farm buildings.

The stone is a large natural worn boulder of a flattened pear shape 13 ins. by $8\frac{1}{4}$ ins. and 5 ins. thick, of grey fell sandstone, of medium fine grain and showing dark bedding planes and a varied amount of mineral staining on the worked face. The face is a flat oval 6 ins. by 7 ins. with two half circles for ears, 3 ins. by $1\frac{1}{2}$ ins. at a slightly lower level on the medial diameter. Five inches apart on the crown are two protuberances that represent horns starting on the level

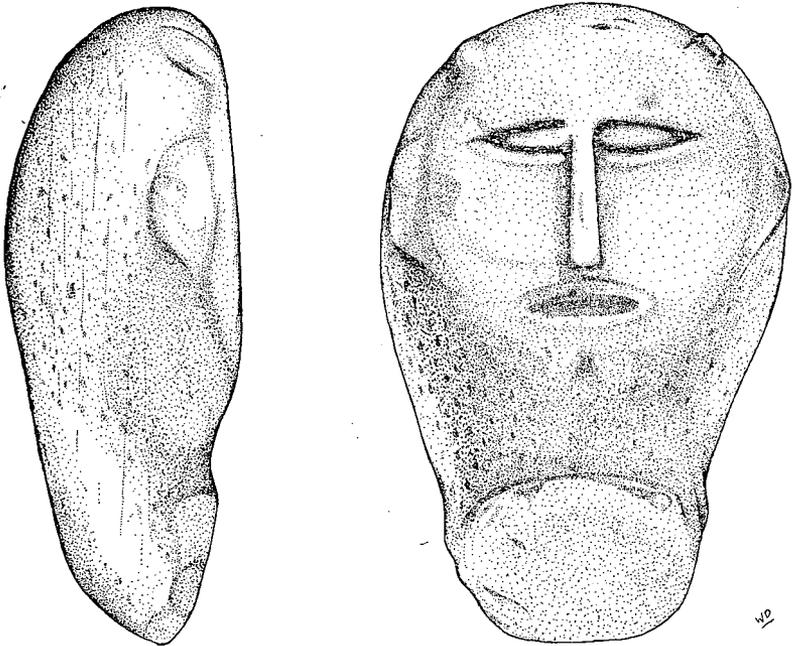


FIG. 2. HEAD FROM LANCHESTER ($\frac{1}{4}$)

of the face and running backwards for an inch or so over the rounded edge of the stone. The lower side of the face has a slight pointed extension with a hollow in the termination representing a short forked beard. The nose is a parallel-sided, square-ended half cylinder carved out of the flat face with two deeply incised almond-shaped eyes slightly slanting downwards and outwards from its upper end, with rather deep lower lids. The mouth is a comparatively deep oval hollow, without any teeth and with a slightly raised border for lips. From the ears a sloping neck descends to the natural rounded end of the boulder which has a somewhat broad oval front formed by pecking away the natural surface of the stone—the general technique employed in the working of the stone, the deeper carving being abraded with a finer point. On either of the two upper angles of this area are the extremely faint remains of what may have been bosses, representing torque ends as in the previous example. As stated the base is rounded and can only have held the head upright if placed in soft ground, otherwise it must have been supported against some backing. The nearest parallel to the present head is one from Corbridge (now mounted on a concrete base), P.S.A.S. XCI, 1957-8, Pl. V, III. That could almost have come from the same hand—eyes with heavy lower lids, column-like nose and “letter-box” mouth; only the ears are missing.

In addition to the remarks on the Ebchester specimen, the subject of the human head, horned or otherwise, has been very thoroughly examined by Dr. A. Ross in her two articles—*P.S.A.S.* XCI, 1957-8, and *AA*⁴, XXXIX, 1961. It only remains to state that the present figure brings the total of Celtic heads from Lanchester Roman fort up to three, the others being Dr. Ross's No. XIV (Collingwood's *Catalogue of Roman Stones* No. 273) and Dr. Ross's No. XLV (*Lap. Sep.* 714 A). Though not a vast number, it does add to our knowledge of the period and also indicate the strength of native tradition under Roman rule. The head is retained by the finder.

