I

SOME NEW THOUGHTS ON OLD HEADS

Anne Ross

THE numbers of heads, worked in stone or fashioned from other materials, which are coming to light in ever-increasing numbers in the British Isles and in Europe, have made it essential to make a new assessment of the phenomenon of the *tête coupée* and to re-examine the very considerable problems connected with the dating of these artefacts. These problems can receive only the most superficial treatment in this brief note, but the whole subject is dealt with more fully in a forthcoming publication.[1] The immediate *raison d'être* for this note is the discovery in the past three or four years of several heads of putative Romano-British interest from the region of Hadrian's Wall, Northumberland. One of these, from West Denton, has already been published in *Archaeologia Aeliana.*[2] Five others remain outstanding, and these present a variety of problems. They are described in brief below; this description is followed by some general remarks on the subject which may be of use in serving as a guide through the maze of difficulties which confronts the person whose task it is to date these objects.

1. A TETRACEPHALOS FROM OVINGHAM. (Fig. 1)

A stone block, having four faces carved on it, is in Ovingham Church; it apparently lay outside, in the churchyard until it was eventually brought into the building sometime earlier in the century. It was kept in the church when it was photographed by a former incumbent, the Rev. Frank Hastings, some forty years ago. Nothing is known of its origin, but it has been suggested locally that it must have come to the churchyard with a load of rubble, perhaps from Spital Farm, brought to the site for repair purposes; at any rate, the stone itself, its proximity to the Wall, and the general style of the features, all support the supposition that it is a local and native piece, dating to the Roman period. I was informed that there was a legend about the head current in the district at one time, but this I was unable to record.[3] The four faces are all different, but bear a marked similarity to each other. Two, three and four-faced heads carved on such blocks of stone are known throughout the Celtic world; the

[1] *Celtic Requiem*, Anne Ross, ?1974 (Routledge and Kegan Paul).

[2] R. M. Harrison, "A Sandstone Head from West Denton", *AA* XLVIII, 347.

[3] Information from the late Mrs. Robert Bell, Ovingham, a member of the Church.

Fig. 1. Tetracephalos from Ovingham

style of the features can be paralleled by several other examples from North Britain (Fig. 2, b, c). I know of no medieval stone which resembles that from Ovingham, either in this country or in Europe. On the other hand, in terms of Celtic belief, of which there are so many traces in this area, it is fully explicable.[4]

2. A TRI- OR TETRACEPHALOS FROM PRUDHOE. (Fig. 3)

A second three or four-faced head, carved in stone, is housed in the chapel over the gateway of Prudhoe Castle. The stone is badly-damaged; one of the

[4] I am indebted to Rev. Frank Hastings for help and for access to his photograph of the head; to Rev. C. Bartlett for permission to publish it here; to Mr. R. S. Edgar, Ovingham, for assistance in my researches; to Mr. George Jobey; and to Mr. Charles Daniels for the photographs of the head on which the drawings are largely based. A note of the existence of the head appears in *N.C.H.* XII, 1926, 127.

Fig. 2a. Tetracephalos from Meistratzheim, Bas-Rhin, France

Fig. 2b. Bremenium (High Rochester) Northumberland

Fig. 2c. Cumberland

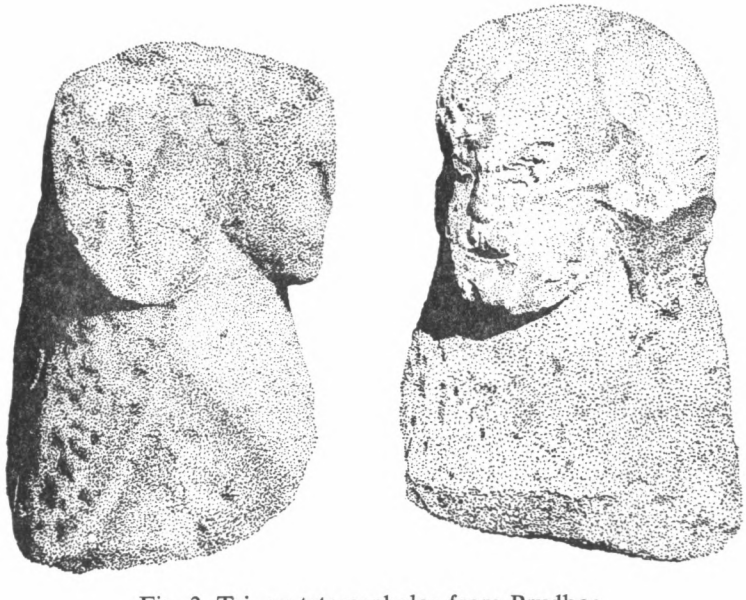

Fig. 3. Tri- or tetracephalos from Prudhoe

faces alone is in a reasonable state of preservation. The two faces flanking this are so badly fractured as to suggest the possibility of the deliberate defacing of a tricephalos, a formula frowned upon by the medieval church. The fourth side has completely lost any traces of a face if, indeed, one was ever present. The angle of the remaining face and the stone beneath it do, in fact, give the impression that this was a three-faced stone, intended to be viewed from the front; on the other hand, this may simply be an optical illusion caused by the total destruction of a fourth face. Both three- and four-faced heads of this nature are again known from Britain and the Continent, (Fig. 2, a), and one would have little hesitation in assigning to this head a date within the Romano-British period.[5]

3. A COBBLE HEAD FROM CORBRIDGE. (Fig. 4)

A stone head was found in Corbridge in 1972. It is in the possession of its owner, Mr. William Coulson. It consists of a cobble (a water-worn, rounded stone) on which features have been worked, on one side, by a mason's pick. Although it is dangerous to speak of a "typical" Celtic head (see infra), there can be little doubt in this instance that we have an excellent example of a genuine Celtic head of a widely-known type. The material used (a natural pebble, cobble or boulder) is very appropriate, the shape itself being suggestive of a head, (together with the magical properties which such stones were believed to possess in Celtic times—perhaps for this very reason), the features

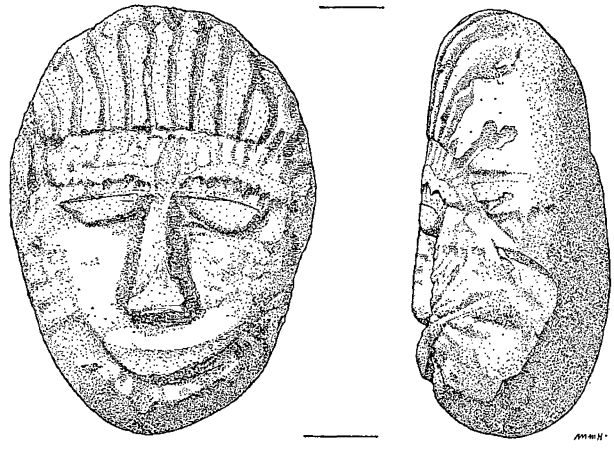

Fig. 4. Cobble head from Corbridge

[5] My grateful thanks are due to Dr. David Smith for drawing my attention to this head in the first instance; to Mr. Charles Daniels for taking the photographs on which the line drawings are based; and to the M.P.B.W. for permission to photograph the stone. A reference is made to it likewise in *N.C.H.* XII, 1926, 127.

too can be paralleled throughout the Celtic world—the hair depicted in straight, stiff lines, the facial hair, the forehead and low-relief nose in one plane, the emphasis on the prominent, lentoid eyes all strongly argue a Celtic origin.[6]

4. and 5. TWO SMALL STONE HEADS FROM HEXHAM. (Fig. 5)

In 1971 two small stone heads were discovered in a garden in Hexham.[7] The heads have different hair-styles; the necks would appear to have acted as tenons. They were petrologically analysed in the University of Southampton

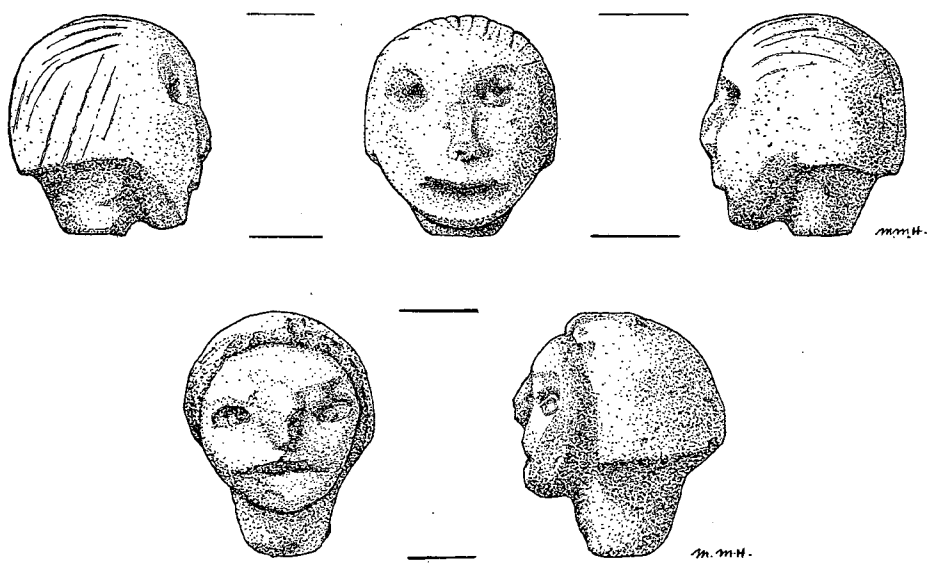

Fig. 5. Stone heads from Hexham

and the results of this examination are contained in the Appendix to this note. Before attempting to date them firmly, fieldwork in the area is essential. They have an archaic appearance, and their find-spot would be in accordance with an early dating. But, whether or not subsequent research proves them to be early or late in date, their very existence and discovery, and the fact that they are of local material, has an inherent value and interest that cannot simply be ignored.

[6] I am indebted to Dr. David Smith for bringing this head to my notice.

[7] I am indebted to Mr. R. Miket for informing me of these heads, which were found at 3 Rede Avenue, Hexham.

Background to the Study

It is now well-known, but recapitulation has its own value, that the cult of the head was the most potent of all Celtic religious expressions; in conjunction with springs and wells, the head reached the apotheosis of its power, according to popular belief. The Celts were head-hunters as well as head-worshippers. It was this barbaric aspect of their culture, together with the practice of human sacrifice which allegedly caused so much embarrassment to the conquering Romans. As a result, the taking of heads in battle and their veneration in the temples would come under official censure and prohibition. When fresh heads became scarce, it would be inevitable that, just as human sacrifice was modified to mock execution, so the cult of fresh heads would be transferred, to a great extent, to substitute-heads, fashioned from stone, as well as wood, metals, and other materials. In this way, a deeply-rooted native cult could continue, without offence on the one side, or fear of punitive measures on the other. It has been thought that the sudden crop of stone heads in Celtic areas in Roman times was due entirely to the sculptural tradition and the civilising influence of Rome. Where classical influences can be demonstrated in the artefact this is no doubt the case. But here again, we are faced with a fact, and a problem. There is ample evidence for the fashioning of human heads from stone well into the pre-Roman period, by the Celts; and excavations at important cult sites in France, for example, are bringing more of these to light. The problem is that of the whole question of the dating of these heads when found within, or without, a Roman context. When they are found in an incontestably Roman level, and show features which reflect the actual dating of the context, then there can be little doubt as to their period, even if their *significance* is not always clear; we shall return to this point. Any study of the siting of Roman forts and stations, both in this country and in Celtic Europe, soon reveals that it was a deliberate policy of the Romans to construct their forts and temples on native sacred precincts and shrine areas whenever possible. That many of these were already situated in positions most advantageous for communication and tribal gatherings is not in question.[8] Thus, when heads of crude, or non-naturalistic nature are found in excavations of a recognisable Roman period, it is clear that they do not *post*-date this phase, but it is by no means certain that they do not *pre*-date it; they may well belong to an already established native shrine, rather than to the period of the occupation of the fort itself. This *pre*-dating may not amount to a long period of time; but the presence of such native cult heads in Roman contexts need not always be taken as an indication of Roman influence on native religious sculpture. Consequently, a more open mind is

[8] This whole question is discussed in a chapter "Celtic Shrines and Roman Forts" in Ross, *Celtic Requiem*, ?1974.

required even in dating heads found in a well-attested context. Moreover, there seems good reason to envisage native cult activity even in instances where a purely Roman situation would seem to be applicable. Heads which are not entire artefacts in themselves, but have been severed from statues are frequently found, with no trace of the torso, in the forts, or deposited in some pit or river. The head of the splendid gilded bronze cult statue of Minerva, for example, at Bath, (Aquae Sulis) had been ripped from the torso on some occasion.[9] It is not unlikely that hostile native activity from the north would include in its raids on the Roman forts of North Britain the ritual decapitation of classical statues, thus honouring the ancient tradition of beheading the vanquished foe. If it is not even a straightforward matter to date heads found in good archaeological contexts, how greatly is the problem increased when heads are found, as they more and more frequently are, in unstratified ground—ploughed up, or dug out of the earth; discovered in gardening activities; found built into the walls of domestic dwellings or field walls, or the walls of churches to which they bear no architectural or petrological affinity. It is at this point that our problems really begin, and in order to resolve them in any way at all, a variety of disciplines must be brought into play. First of all a thorough study is essential of those heads from Celtic Europe which come from irrefutable Roman contexts, if not from earlier sites. It will be found that the so-called *typical* Celtic head is, in fact, a myth; even a study of the human countenances on the rich metalwork of La Téne Europe will reveal the variety of ways in which the limited repertoire of facial features can be expressed; and in the case of heads fashioned from stone, the varieties upon the basic anatomical theme are infinite. Eyes may be lentoid, or round and staring; they may be uneven in size, without pupils, or having deeply-drilled holes for this feature. The pupil, or the eye itself, may consist of some inlay such as glass or coloured stone. Nostrils may or may not be depicted. The mouth may droop sombrely, or turn upwards in a humourless smile, or be lacking altogether. It may be straight and severe, or toothed and vaguely menacing. The hair may consist of scraped-back, streaked strands, ending, perhaps, in a single pigtail or two pigtails, or continuing the short striation at the nape of the neck. It may also consist of elaborately curled locks, twisting and twining to create an elegant pattern. But, one must say, there must be *some* factor which links and unites all these heads and enables us to speak of certain heads as "Celtic". Perhaps the factor which welds them all together is the common, elusive, but indisputable quality of non-humanness. They cannot, for example, be said to be horrific, but they *are* non-naturalistic. They are *not* portrait heads; they convey an idea, an impression, not a likeness. It is this elusive quality that sets them so strikingly apart from the calm, naturalistic heads of the Roman iconographic tradition and the grimacing grotesques of the Romanesque. Even so, continuity of the tradition, and with it of the style itself, are factors

[9] Cunliffe, 1969, pl. 11.

which have to be reckoned with and somehow accommodated. Then again, it is vital to make a critical study of medieval architecture, for nearly every early church will be found to have its complement of heads, whether they be contemporaneous with the structure or set in from another and "foreign" context. This total repertoire is daunting enough, but once again one has *some* criterion of dating no matter how tenuous this may be on occasion. It is, however, when one leaves the fields of Roman and Romanesque and launches into the great-unknown of totally unassociated material that one is really in difficulties. It would seem that the greatest degree of error is likely to occur between the modern "primitive" heads and those that are genuinely archaic: and here it is essential to employ every corroborative discipline possible. For example, the evidence of petrology is of major importance; geological analysis can indicate what is natural and what is artificial in the material employed. It can differentiate between natural fracture and marking on the stone, and that made by man; the constituents of paint, inlay and so on can be determined. Again, field questioning when there is doubt about the origins of a head may be rewarding. One has always to bear in mind the fact that heads may turn up inadvertently in a context of archaeological interest, but not necessarily of interest to the finder; as a result, being fairly portable and decorative, heads would tend to be carried away from the find-spot and placed in some prominent place, while any related structure would be ignored and even forgotten. Again, the continuing folklore of the head, the belief in its powers of averting evil and keeping the supernatural at bay is in itself striking and noteworthy and may offer some explanation for the persistence of this iconographic tradition. In conclusion, the very phenomenon of these heads is a most remarkable one, a predilection which seems to lie deep in the sub-conscious of the decendants of the former Celtic inhabitants of Britain and Europe. Little progress can be made in this sphere until a comprehensive corpus, devoid of prejudice and subjective thinking, is compiled, if this enigmatic aspect of our past—and perhaps our present also—is ever to receive the scholarly analysis it deserves.

Appendix

Heads 4 and 5, from Hexham, were examined by Professor Frank Hodson, Professor of Geology and Dean of the Faculty of Science in the University of Southampton. His findings are as follows:

So far as can be determined by surface examination both heads are made from the same material which apparently is a very coarse sandstone with rounded quartz grains up to 2 mm diameter in a calcite cement. The head with the incisions representing hair is weathered to show the surface character of the stone admirably. This material could well have come from the vicinity of Hexham. Officers of the Leeds Office of the Institute of Geological Sciences inform me that such sandstones occur below the Durham "Millstone Grit" and especially in a bed just below the Little Limestone, north of

Hexham. This sandstone is not shown on the Hexham Geological Survey Sheet (No. 19) since it was not then the practice to map the thin sandstones in this part of the geological succession. The head with a groove extending from behind the ears over the high forehead, shows the hair region to be particularly smooth—an effect which I doubt could be achieved by polishing such coarse sandstone. Close examination reveals that a surface coating of fine material has been applied. Most of this surface is now blackened, perhaps by some altered pigment. The immediate underlying material is an ochreous yellow colour. Examination of a minute scraping of this by X-ray diffractometry shows it to be calcium carbonate. It thus seems that the head region was plastered over with lime to give a smooth surface. Possibly this was to provide a surface suitable for colouring. Within this smooth region are small white patches which may more nearly represent the original plastered surface having been protected by "paint" only relatively recently lost. The left eye socket also contains white material which has minute spots of green substance. This is also possibly the same plaster in an undiscoloured condition preserved under a pigment now almost completely lost. Permission to remove a fragment would be necessary to determine the exact nature of this "eye" but, whatever the substance, it has been inserted whilst plastic and is not a specially shaped "jewel" inserted in the socket.

Acknowledgements

Over and above those named in the text, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Hodson for undertaking the above analysis; my thanks are due to Miss Hurrell for figures 4 and 5, and to my husband, R. W. Feachem, for the rest of the line drawings.

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