

A PILGRIM'S FLASK FOUND IN DERBY.

By R. S. M. O'FERRALL.

I N the summer of 1949 a hole was dug for the foundations of a new office at the entrance of the works of S. Hill, Iron Merchants, in Nuns' Street, just south-east of where it crosses the Markeaton Brook. Among a heap of rubble about to be carted away Mr. Radford, the present proprietor of the works, noticed what he thought to be a small piece of metal. It was a perfect specimen of a small earthenware flask, obviously very old.

A photograph was sent to the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, where it was at once recognised to be a pilgrim's flask for holy water from the Shrine of St. Menas in North Africa, not far from El Alamein. On both sides of the flask can be seen St. Menas standing in the attitude of prayer, with his arms raised, and with a camel seated on either side. On the side which is here illustrated the Saint appears to be bare-headed or perhaps with a halo; on the other side his head is surmounted by what appears to be a crown.

Menas was an Egyptian soldier in the Roman army who suffered death in the persecution in the reign of the Emperor Diocletian (A.D. 296). There are several stories of his life and martyrdom. It is said that after he had been tortured and beheaded his body was rescued by some Christian soldiers, who tied it to the back of a camel, which was then driven into the desert. Where the camel stopped the body was buried and later a shrine was built over it. In the fourth century so many pilgrims visited this shrine that a large monastery grew up around it, and thousands of them took away flasks of holy oil, similar in pattern and size to this one. Such flasks have been found in many parts of Europe, but authorities at the British Museum know of no other instance of a Menas flask being found in England.



THE ST. MENAS FLASK

photo by D. H. Buckley

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How did the flask come to Derby? The obvious answer is that a pilgrim from here on a visit to the Holy Land visited the shrine of St. Menas and brought it back. But this seems unlikely. Communications between the fourth and seventh centuries were bad. The Romans had deserted their camp at Little Chester and anyway the flask was not found there. The evangelisation of Mercia did not begin until Bishop Diuma reached Repton in A.D. 653, i.e. not far from the time when the famous Egyptian shrine was destroyed. A possible solution is this. We know that several centuries later there was a Nunnery on or near the place where the flask was found, from which Nuns' Street derives its name. A visiting Mother Superior or a chaplain may have brought this flask here from one of the continental convents, which had more than one brought to it during the time when the Menas cult was at its height.

A ROMANO-BRITISH SITE AT SHIREBROOK.

By S. O. KAY.

IN clearing woodland and scrub for building in Stubbins Wood, Thickey Bank, Shirebrook (O.S. 6-inch. Derby. Sht. XXVI S.E.), Mr. Webb of "The Haven" found traces of wall foundations, numerous pottery fragments and a coin of Caracalla. On examination, the bulk of the pottery proved to be of third-century date.

It was found that these evidences of a Romano-British occupation site extended to the neighbouring land of "The Brambles", and the writer is greatly indebted to the owners, Mr. and Mrs. G. Fowler, for permission to make an investigation.

During preliminary work on the site, carried out with the help of Messrs. Duncan Sinclair of Driffield and Adrian Oswald, M.A., F.S.A., part of a rectangular building has been traced, of Basilican type with internal