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ROMAN LEADEN SEALS
FOUND AT
SOUTH SHIELDS



ROMAN LEADEN SEALS.

 BY ROBERT BLAIR.

As it is highly desirable that a record should be kept in the proceedings of this Society of the occurrence, more especially in the northern counties, of any objects of antiquarian interest, I hope this will be a sufficient reason for bringing under the notice of the Society the discovery on the site of the Roman Castrum at South Shields of several *signacula* in lead, or perhaps, more correctly speaking, in pewter, all of which, with one exception (No. 1), are now in my collection of objects from the station in question.

They may be thus described:—

No. 1.—Obverse, LVI (Legio Sexta); reverse, OVA or VAO. This is of an irregular shape, but the letters on both obverse and reverse are well-formed and very legible. This is in the possession of Mr. Vint, of South Shields.

No. 2.—Obverse, cV̄G; reverse, the only letter legible is M. This seal is of special interest in connection with the Castrum at South Shields. The Fifth Cohort of Gauls, which it records, appears, from the number of tiles inscribed with its name which have been exhumed, to have been stationed there. The only other record of it in Britain is an inscription on an altar discovered some years ago at Cramond, near Edinburgh.

No. 3 is of an oval shape, and has on the obverse three portraits in profile, which, judging from the effigies on the coins, are, in my opinion, those of Septimius Severus and his two sons (Caracalla and Geta). The letters AVGG appear above the heads. The reverse is quite plain. Of this type three specimens have been exhumed; only one of them, however, showing the hole through which passed the string for suspension or attachment.

No. 4.—This is very small, having on each side a rude profile, similar in appearance to those on coins of the period of Constantine.

There are traces of letters round one side, but so rude as not to be decipherable.

No. 5 is of an irregular shape, and has on the obverse, ASA; reverse, YBA or VBX. With respect to the obverse of this *bullæ*, Mr. Roach Smith writes me:—"Following my suggested mode of interpreting these inscriptions, I should read A (LA) SA (BINIANA)." Dr. Hübner* agrees with this reading of the obverse; and while considering the reverse obscure, and the name accordingly uncertain, suggests Valerii Ba . . . as a probable reading.

The Ala Sabiniana (so named, I presume, after Sabina, the wife of the Emperor Hadrian) is a regiment recorded in the *Notitia* as having been stationed at Hunnum, one of the stations "per Lineam Valli."†

No. 6.—Obverse, CV; reverse, FL_V. The letters on the obverse are similar to No. 2, but more indistinct.

The two preceding *bullæ*, and also Nos. 1 and 2, appear to be confirmatory of the military nature of these objects. With the exception of No. 4, all appear to be of the Higher Empire. They are of very rare occurrence, so rare as almost to have escaped the notice of antiquaries. With the exception of a large number found at Brough under Stainmoor (*Vertera* of the *Notitia* and *Itinerary*), a few at Felixstowe, in Suffolk, and two at Richboro', in Kent, "not a single specimen has been detected among the numerous remains found in this country, not even at London, Colchester, Exeter, Wroxeter, &c."‡ Dr. Hübner has in vain sought for them on the continent.|| It is difficult to determine for what purpose these *bullæ* were intended. That learned antiquary, Mr. C. Roach Smith, remarks: "The leaden seals are a new contribution to our English archæological materials. Interesting examples still attached to the strings are in the British Museum. They are apparently of the time of the Antonines, judging from the portraits upon them. It would be interesting to know why such objects should have been found only at two Roman stations (Brough and Felixstowe), and those so wide apart. These seals were fastened to merchandise by strings

* *Corpus Insc. Lat.*, Vol. VII., *Addimenta Altera*, p. 318.

† *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, page 49.

‡ *Col. Antiq.*, Vol. VI., p. 117.

|| *Addit. Corp. Insc. Lat.*, Vol. VII., p. 145.

which passed through the centre" (parallel with the face) "in the same manner as the leaden seals or *bullæ* were affixed to papal deeds." * There is this difference, however: the papal *bullæ* were, as I am informed, made by submitting two flat pieces of lead to great pressure, the string being first placed between them, while the Roman seals appear to have been very rudely cast.

In a subsequent part of the same valuable work Mr. Roach Smith informs us "that, as the inscriptions appear to indicate, these seals were appended to some kind of property belonging to military bodies." † Illustrations are given of some of the Brough examples, and ascribed to the Cohors II. Nerviorum (C. II. NER.), Cohors II. Aelia (C. II. AE.), Cohors VII. Thracum or Trevirorum (C. VII. TR.), etc., etc.

Another writer on the same subject, Mr. H. C. Coote, F.S.A., in the Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society, considers these *bullæ* to be military and not commercial in their general character and application, and gives in support of his opinion an extract from "The Acts of the Passion of Maximilian" (a martyr of the third century), which had previously escaped the notice of archæologists, where it is stated that under the Empire recruits on embracing the profession of arms received a *signaculum* which was of lead, which every soldier wore round his neck, and which was the emblem of his military initiation.

This Dr. Hübner thinks is the best interpretation of them.

After thus stating what the most experienced and best writers have been able to advance, I think that it would seem presumptuous in the writer of the present paper to add any remarks of his own beyond expressing a hope that ere long something will be discovered to throw full light on this at present difficult subject, and thus remove it from the domain of doubtful and unsettled questions.

* Collect. Antiq., Vol. III., p. 197.

† Collect. Antiq., Vol. VI., pp. 119-120.