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1, 3 & 5. ROMAN CLASP KNIVES, (1 *Procolitia*; 3 *So. Shields*; 5 *Cilurnum*.) 2 & 4. MODERN EXAMPLES OF SHEFFIELD MANUFACTURE.

X.—NOTES ON A ROMAN KNIFE FOUND AT CILURNUM.

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READ ON WEDNESDAY, THE 28TH OF NOVEMBER, 1883.

THROUGH the kindness of Mr. Clayton, I am able to submit the following notes on a clasp knife found in the excavations at Cilurnum, along with other indubitable Roman remains,¹ and may preface my remarks with an extract from Juvenal:—

“Ergo superbum
Convivam caveo, qui me sibi comparat, et res
Despicit exiguas, adeo nulla uncia nobis
Est eboris, nec tessellæ, nec calculus ex hac
Materia; quin ipsa manubria cultellorum
Ossea: non tamen his ulla unquam obsonia fiunt
Raucidula; haud ideo pejor gallina secatur.”

Juvenal, Sat. XI., 129.

“Therefore I shun a proud guest, who is always comparing me to himself, and who despises narrow circumstances. And so I don't possess an ounce of ivory, nor little stones for pavements (*tessellæ*)—not a pebble of this sort. Nay, my very knife handles are of bone, but they never make my victuals taste nasty, nor does the fowl cut up any the worse on this account.”

The mediæval knife, or “whittle,” was formed of a blade fixed in a handle of wood or bone, and protected, when out of use, by a sheath of leather, wood, or pasteboard. It was such a whittle, or “thwitel,” that Symekyn, the miller of Trumpington, bore in his hose, according to Chaucer's story. Symekyn carried his knife stuck in between the leg and the stocking, as the Highlander carries his dirk. That the “thwitel” was not an arm defensive or offensive, we may gather from the context which sets forth the miller's equipment:—

“Ay by his belt he bar a long panade [dagger]
And of a swerd ful trenchaunt was the blade,
A joly popper [bodkin or dagger] bar he in his pouche;
Ther was no man for perel durst him touche.
A Scheffeld thwitel bar he in his hose.
Round was his face, and camois [flattened] was his nose.”

¹ See No. 5 of the accompanying Plate.

“Sheathers,” or the makers of sheaths for knives, long carried on their trade in Sheffield, and to them have succeeded the modern case makers. The sheath-knife gave place to the clasp-knife, or jack-knife, said, probably without any good authority, to be so called after one Jacques de Liège; and in the seventeenth century the pocket-knife, with a spring in the back, became an article of general use. I am told that at Lier, near Antwerp, the remnants of an ancient manufacture of knives still linger, both in the form of whittles and jack knives, without springs, made by a few ill-paid cutlers, whose tools and methods of working are those of our forefathers three or four centuries ago. It would be interesting if one of these knives could be compared with Mr. Clayton’s Roman examples.

Chaucer wrote about 1386, but the knife we are now considering was some twelve hundred years old, and lay deep beneath the Northumbrian soil, when the pilgrims were telling their tales at the Tabard, in Southwark. It is no unusual circumstance, however, to find the Romans far ahead of our mediæval ancestors in arts and manufactures. Roman locks have been found, according to Mr. Roach Smith, embodying contrivances that have been made the subject of modern patents. We are not surprised, therefore, to find a Roman clasp-knife, of the kind attributed to the invention of Jacques de Liège, in the midst of a Roman station founded by Agricola.

The knife found by Mr. Clayton measures $3\frac{7}{8}$ inches in length, and is slightly curved like a modern pruning-knife; an example of which lies on the table. The handle is formed from the “tine” of a British buck, and the curve is the natural shape of the horn. The bark, or outer skin of the horn, has been removed, leaving a whitish surface almost resembling ivory; but if the texture is examined it will be seen at once that the material is not ivory, nor on the other hand is it bone. The handle has been prepared to receive the blade by having a groove cut from the convex side, almost, but not quite, dividing the “tine” into two halves. Into this groove the blade closed when the knife was not in use, and in that position we now see it, standing out beyond the handle, very much like some of the larger pocket-knives of modern make. Unfortunately the upper part of the handle has perished, so that we are unable to see the contrivance by which the blade was retained in an open position. A spring running down the back of

the knife is the method adopted now to accomplish this end, but there has been no spring in the example before us. The division down the back of the handle is evidently the result of accident, not of design, and is of a date later than the knife, for two of the ornaments on the handle have been severed by the fracture. The blade may have been fixed when open with a pin, or by a ferrule so arranged as to turn and hold the blade until the ferrule was again moved.

It will be observed that the handle is ornamented with a spot and ring marking. The circles are perfect and have evidently been made with a two-legged tool, similar to a centre-bit. The marks are ten in number. Many examples of a similar ornament may be seen both on knives, combs, buttons, spinning-whorls, and other objects of Roman, Danish, and early English manufacture. Nor has the pattern yet died out. About seventy years ago the "spotted heft" was a common Sheffield product, otherwise called the "bird's eye" ornament, and in the example of a pruning-knife on the table, taken a few weeks ago from the stock of the well known Sheffield house of Harrison Brothers and Howson, the same "bird's eye" marking will be observed on the heads of the rivets.¹ From the same firm was also obtained the buck's "tine," ready cut with the circular saw to form the two hafts of a pruning-knife. One half has had the outer skin removed for the purpose of illustrating this paper, while the other half remains in its natural state.² The members of this Society will thus see exactly the change that has been wrought in the fabrication of the Roman handle. The Roman example was at once pronounced by a Sheffield manager "polished buck." If the cross sections of the modern "tine" be examined, it will be seen how closely the "pith" resembles that in the Roman handle, save that, as one of the practical men remarked, the old "tine" had been cut up more wastefully than we can afford in these days of keen competition. In other words, the handle has been made from the horn more towards the thick part than would now be the case, and a considerable portion of the taper end must have been wasted.

The Sheffield workmen and manufacturers to whom the knife has been submitted were incredulous about its age. "We are making such knives every day," said one, "save that ours have springs and

¹ See No. 4 of the accompanying Plate.

² See No. 2 of same Plate.

this has none." They fancied it might be a product some two hundred years old; and yet there can be no question that it is a genuine relic of the Roman occupation of Britain. "It has a Roman look about it," says Canon Raine; and, more than that, it comes before this Society vouched for by Mr. Clayton and Dr. Bruce. In respect to its curved shape the knife is unusual, but Mr. Blair has pointed out a smaller knife of the same curved kind, on which are also circles, which was exhumed at Procolitia. In this example, which is also in Mr. Clayton's possession,¹ the blade has, however, opened from the incurved side of the handle. Pocket-knives with straight backs have been noticed by many of the authorities on Roman remains. Thomas Wright, in his "Celt, Roman, and Saxon," page 409, third edition, says:—"Roman clasp-knives are by no means uncommon; and one shape of handle, representing a dog in close pursuit of a hare, seems to have been a great favourite, from the numerous examples which have been found in this country. The one given in the annexed cut was found at Hadstock, in Essex, and is now in the museum of Lord Braybrooke, at Audley End; it has the remains of the steel blade shut into the handle. It is here represented half the size of the original ($2\frac{1}{2}$ inches). Two exactly similar were found at Reculver, in Kent; and another at Kinchester, in Herefordshire."

In Volume V. of the "Collectanea Antiqua," page 39, Mr. Roach Smith describes a visit to Arles, where, in the hands of a curiosity dealer, he saw "Two curious knives in bone handles, which were cut into representations of a hare and hounds and of a human figure." Of the latter he gives an engraving, from which we gather that the original was $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, and the blade is represented as standing out beyond the handle, very much after the manner of Mr. Clayton's specimen. A band of the "bird's eye" ornament runs round the middle of the handle, and forms a girdle round the waist of the female figure. On this Mr. Roach Smith remarks, "The circular ornament is indented, and very characteristic of early bone decoration, of which numerous instances might be cited."

In Rich's "Dictionary of Roman and Greek Antiquities," *sub voce* "scalprum" is figured a penknife used by transcribers and copyists in the employ of private individuals or booksellers for tempering the reed pen with which the ancient manuscript was written. The example

¹ See No. 1 of the accompanying Plate.

(engraved) is from an original excavated at Rome; the handle is of bone, into which the blade is made to shut, precisely in the same manner as now practised.

In Wellbeloved's "Eburacum," Plate XVII., Fig. 14, is represented the handle of a knife on which the author remarks:—"Fig. 14 is the handle of a knife which in its perfect state must have possessed some elegance. It appears to be the figure of a dog; the hinder part of the animal is formed into a socket and groove for the blade of the knife. The material is bronze, studded with silver."



In the York museum there are five examples of clasp-knives. The handles of two of them are carved in the resemblance of figures, the other three are plain. At South Shields also has been found, and is in the editor's (Mr. Blair's) possession, a fine specimen of the handle of a Roman clasp knife. It is made of ivory, and represents a gladiator with a shield on his left arm and a short sword in his right; the latter is resting on the top of the shield. The right leg is greaved. The iron blade, of which a fragment remains in a corroded state, is placed along the back of the figure, and where it joins the handle a bronze ring has been fixed round the latter. This is shown in No. 3 of the Plate illustrating this paper, and the woodcut in the margin gives another view of it.

Many examples of the "bird's eye" ornament might be cited. It is seen on a knife handle figured in Mr. Roach Smith's "Roman London," Plate XXXVII., Fig. 2; on an example in the Sheffield public museum; on bone combs,¹ both Roman and Danish, preserved in the York museum; on a mediæval book-clasp in the same collection; and lastly, it is seen on the Sheffield knife already referred to—an ordinary article of every day commerce. Whether there has been any connection of idea in the origin of this ornament, and the so-called

¹ Also on a comb and other objects from South Shields, in the editor's possession.

cup and ring markings, found on rocks and stones in various parts of the world, may perhaps be an interesting and curious speculation, but is one upon which I do not feel myself competent to enter; but beg, in conclusion, to thank Mr. Clayton for the generous confidence with which he has committed this interesting and valuable relic to the temporary care of the cutlers of Sheffield. It has been, to all who have seen it, an object of the greatest curiosity, and has given to those who make knives a new sense of the antiquity of their craft.

