

VI.—EXCAVATION AT WHITLEY CASTLE, NORTHUMBERLAND, 1957 AND 1958.

BY NOEL SHAW.

The site of Whitley Castle lies slightly to the west of the modern Alston to Brampton road (B6292) at a distance of two miles north of Alston. It falls within the most south-westerly corner of Northumberland and lies closely adjacent to the west of the Roman road called "Maiden Way", which runs from Kirkby Thore to cross the Stanegate at Cavoran and so on to Bewcastle (fig. 1).

The site has been recognized as a Roman fort since the early seventeenth century. It is referred to by Camden and described by Hodgson (*History of Northumberland*, II, iii, p. 74) and by Bruce (*Roman Wall*, 2nd Edition, p. 325) and also by Sopwith (on the *Mining Districts of Alston Moor*, Chapter IV). Sopwith also made an accurate survey of the site for Bruce which after checking has been made use of for the present excavation.

The bath-house of the fort sited near the N.E. corner outside the fort was partly uncovered in 1810 by Hodgson (*History of Northumberland*, II, iii, p. 432) and descriptions occur of a great store of small finds, shoes, pottery, jet ornaments, etc., in what was described as the "Dunhill" of the fort.

From an altar or base of a statue found near the fort and bearing an inscription commemorating the dedication of a temple to Caracalla in his fourth consulship (A.D. 213) by the third cohort of the Nervii, Bruce conceived the fort to be the Alionis of the *Notitia*, but himself later discounted this and, in the light of present knowledge, this identification is not accepted.

Except for evidence of activity in the third century the

sum total of knowledge of the fort and its place in the military system of the north region of Roman Britain was therefore meagre, and at the April 1957 meeting of the Excavation Committee of Durham University, a dig of limited objective was approved. It was carried out during June of 1957 and June of 1958, and is the subject of this report.

The work was done under the direction of the writer, with the co-operation of Dr. David Smith and Mr. J. P. Gillam.

Thanks are due to Professor Birley for his help and for access to his files on Whitley Castle and to the volunteers who throughout the dig assisted, and particularly to Mr. Thomas Batey of Bardon Mill.

As may be seen from the site plan (fig. 1), the most striking features of the fort are its lozenge shape (the sides subtend opposite angles of 120° and 60°) and the elaborate and extensive system of defensive ditches, thought by Birley to suggest late occupation (cf. Birrens and Ardoch). On the west side are seven ditches; they are generally in such an excellent state of preservation as to make an impressive spectacle.

The site of the fort and defences is closely covered with turf and no exposed stonework is to be seen. So closely overgrown is the site that Hodgson was led to question the use of masonry in the fort, but surface indications and well marked "Robber" trenches disprove this, and as soon as work began normal lime bonded masonry was exposed. It was planned during the first season to explore inwards from a point just outside the mound marking the line of the north rampart for a distance of 50 feet into the interior of the fort with the expectation of straddling the wall, rampart, intervallum road and possibly to make contact with an interior fort building capable of identification. In the second season the purpose was to continue the trench northward over the full extent of the four clearly marked ditches to the north of the fort.

A grid was set out (see plan) to give 10' 0" squares with baulks 2' 6" wide, and the excavation was begun on the west side of the grid to give a trench 50' 0" long and 5' 0" wide, having a 2' 6" baulk every 10' 0".

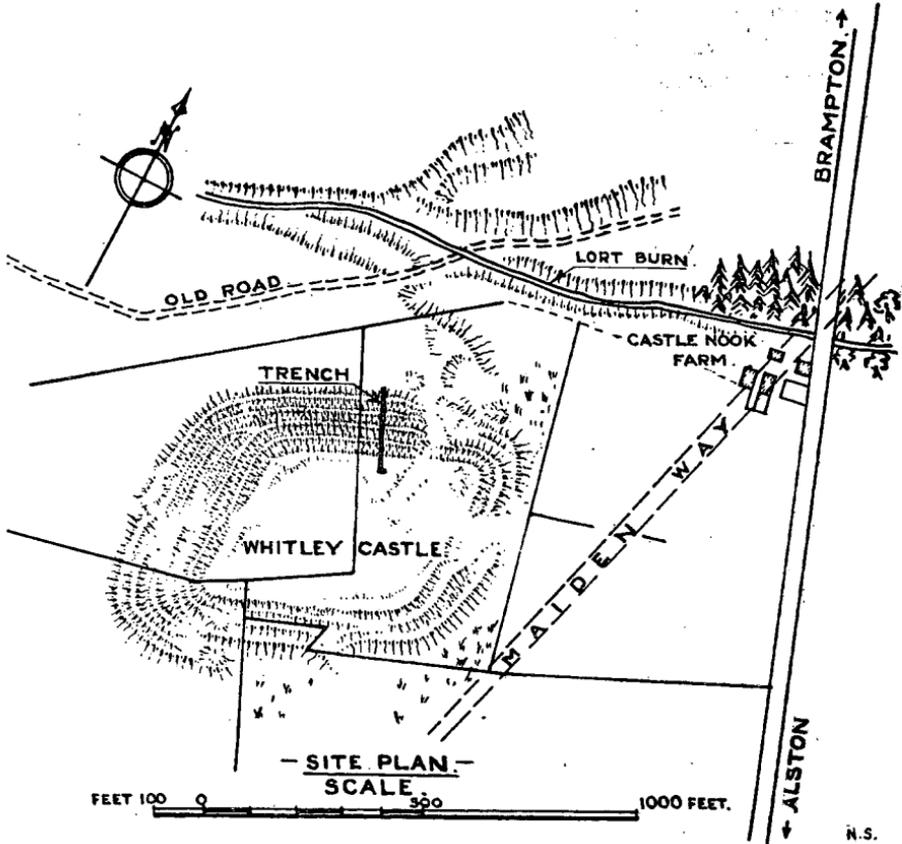


FIG. 1.

During the course of the dig, it was found of each baulk that it exactly coincided in line and width with a wall, so the baulks were removed to give a continuous trench as drawn.

Excavation began at the south end of the layout, and at

N

this end in the first grid square it was extended to the full 10' 0" in width to give maximum exposure of wall No. 1 (see plan, general section 1957-1958).

This wall was tentatively identified as the north wall of a late period granary.

The wall is of a good standard of construction in hammer dressed facing stones with a lime bonded core. The stones in common with those exposed throughout the dig were from thin bedded coal measure sandstone and could have been quarried in the vicinity.

The width of the wall at top level is 2' 0", the north side having a straight vertical face down to a clay puddle foundation. The south and internal face shows an offset of 4" at a level 1' 6" above the top of the clay puddle foundation to give a width at foundation level of 2' 4". On the upper courses of the south face, vertical rebates occur 4" x 4" which finish at the offset. They are at 4' 0" centres and may prove to be a continuous feature when a greater length of the wall is revealed. Their obvious purpose was the housing in the wall of vertical timber struts. Further excavation revealed sleeper walls to the south of the wall and it was possible to associate these with wall No. 1 as the north limits of an internal fort building having characteristic features of a Roman military granary. It was noted that ventilator ducts and buttresses, normally noncommittant features of such a building, were not present in the length of wall examined. Topsoil over this building was unstratified. It yielded random samples of third- and fourth-century coarse pottery.

At a level below the bottom courses of wall No. 1, but above the base level of the sleeper walls, a compact layer of burnt wattle and daub was found. It is 2" thick with a thin black layer beneath it. Below this was found a deposit of silt with carbonized vegetation varying between 6" and 9" in thickness which overlaid undisturbed subsoil of boulder clay.

On the north side of wall No. 1 the burnt wattle and daub

was found to extend up to and abutting wall No. 2. Between these walls and on top of the wattle and daub was a layer of clean dark soil approximately 1' 0" thick which yielded some third-century coarse pottery. Beneath the wattle and daub and sealed by it first- or early second-century coarse pottery was found and some samian fragments.

Wall No. 2 with the wattle and daub can be postulated as the remains of a building of the earliest period which, by parallel with other northern sites, terminated with the destruction of A.D. 197 (Period I, section 'A' 'A', see plan).

Wall No. 2 is clay bonded and seemed to be entangled with a culvert covered with thin irregularly shaped flags. Removal of these showed that during a later period rebuild of the fort, the lower courses of wall No. 2 had been made use of structurally as the south side wall of a culvert. This re-use of the wall as part of the structure of a culvert is to be placed with the same period as the supposed granary. Four courses remain of wall No. 2, the width is approximately 1' 10", and it was built of hammer dressed stones with clay bonded core.

Adjacent to wall No. 2 and the late period culvert, and to the north of it, there exists another culvert belonging to the earliest period. It also has a cover of thin irregular slabs at a level 1' 6" below that of the late culvert. Its line intersects that of the late culvert at an angle of 35° and passes underneath it and the foundations of wall No. 2.

The top cover of the early culvert coincides in level with a roughly paved area which extends north for a distance of approximately 14' 0", bounded on its north limits with an open drain. This paved area we regard as the intervallum roadway of Periods I and II. The stones over this area are bedded in clay and below it is yellow clay overlaying boulder clay subsoil. Over the area the topsoil consists of light loam with random sandstone spallings and some large robber rejects to a depth of approximately 2' 6" below turf level. It yielded late coarse pottery. At the depth of 2' 6" it changed to clean dark soil and down to road level this produced a

group of third-century coarse pottery. There seemed no indication of a late period roadway. The paved level was not of good construction and but for its siting with the verge drains it would not be easy firmly to accept it as road construction.

Wall No. 3 was built later than and on top of the road. It is of very poor unbonded construction approximately 2' 3" wide and is assigned to Period II.

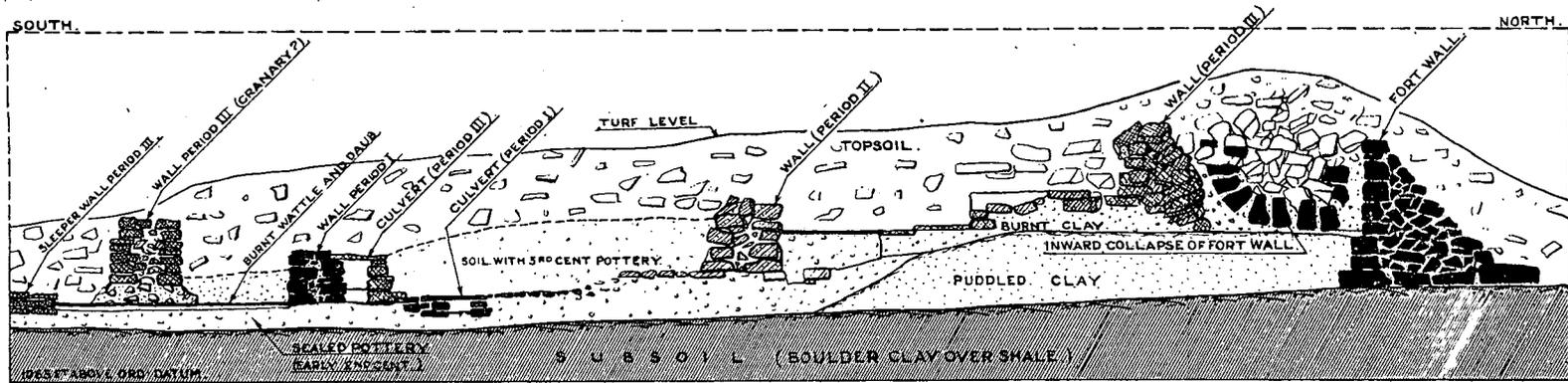
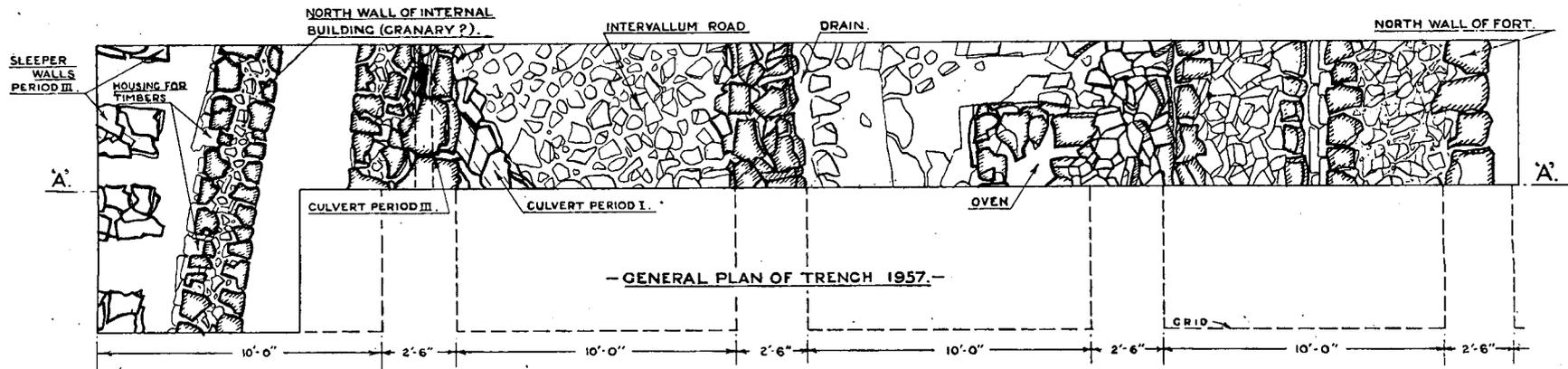
The open drain limiting the road on the north is of rough and ready construction. The sides are made of a single course of hammer dressed stones bedded in clay and this clay continues on towards the north. Its surface rises at an angle of 10°-15° for a distance of 3' 6" from the north face of wall No. 3. Above this to a level roughly coinciding with the top of wall No. 3 is a layer of dark compacted filling containing some charcoal, some clay and third-century coarse pottery. This is covered with a thin layer of burnt charcoal with flecks of burnt clay at the same level as, but of distinct appearance from, the surface of the platform described below.

This platform begins with a clean vertical face of puddled brown clay streaked with carbon flecks and red oxidized burnt clay at a distance of 3' 6" from the north face of wall No. 3. Its surface is 1' 3" above the top of the open drain and it is edged with thin flags to give a sharp step.

The platform continues level up to and under wall No. 4, which is of unbonded construction and appears to have been disrupted when the inward collapse of the upper courses of the fort wall happened.

To the east side of the platform a further structure was partly uncovered, faced with rough stones reddened with burning, and filled with a bright red oxidized burnt clay. Surface indications suggest that this structure extends eastwards and further excavation will be required fully to define its function though we accept it tentatively as an oven.

At this stage, the time available for work in 1957 had almost expired. Topsoil over the fort wall had been removed and the structures revealed were obviously com-

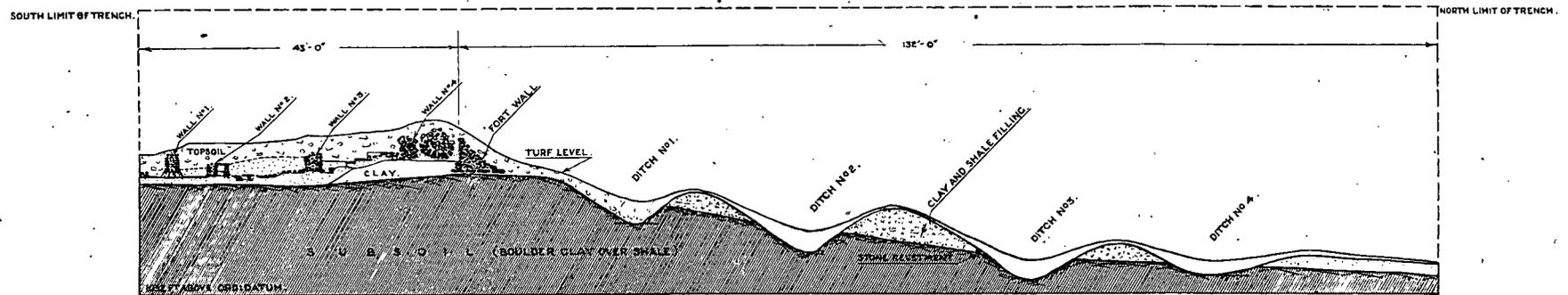


— SECTION 'A-A' —

INCHES 0 5 SCALE 10 15 FEET.

PERIOD I.	BEFORE A.D. 197.	
PERIOD II.	3RD CENTURY.	
PERIOD III.	4TH CENTURY.	

N.S.



— GENERAL SECTION 1957 AND 1958. —

FEET 0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 FEET.

FIG. 2.

N.S.



plex, giving indeed an impression of two distinct fort walls. It was decided to defer examination of these till the 1958 season, and contract work was engaged to fill in the excavation so far completed.

When work began again in 1958, a trench was set out as a continuation northwards of the 1957 excavation, the purpose being completely to straddle the north defences of the fort to obtain a section through the fort wall and the defence ditches.

It was found of the fort wall that the north face had been robbed completely to the foundation stones which were bedded on to the boulder clay subsoil. The south face was found in excellent condition standing seven courses above the foundation stones. From the top of the south face the clay bonded core sloped down at a sharp angle to the north facing foundations. Since the north face was missing a precise measurement of width could not be made, but allowing for an offset from the north face of the footings the width of the wall is derived as 5' 6" at the base, reducing to 5' 0" after two footing courses.

As noted above, the space immediately behind the fort wall appeared to be occupied by an interior wall about 4' 6" in width, having a loose rubble core. When this was removed, however, it was clearly seen that a section of the fort wall having some eight courses had collapsed inwards, and the tenacious clay bonding had held the inward facing stones in their correct relationship with one another to form a plastic curve as indicated on the Section 'A' 'A' (see plan). This top section of the fort wall had fallen into a clear space between wall No. 4 and the fort wall on to clean clay rampart, and had knocked over the wall No. 4 in falling.

Excavation of a trench 5' 0" wide was then continued northward over the ditches. The turf having been removed the topsoil was found to remove—almost indeed to peel—from the Roman level unmistakably. The topsoil in front of the wall and over ditch No. 1 contained distributed core stones and unstratified examples of middle and late period

coarse pottery. The berm in front of the wall and the first ditch had been cut into the boulder clay shale subsoil. Ditches Nos. 2, 3 and 4 had also been cut into the subsoil and the mixture of clay and shale had been used as filling to form the crests of the mounds of the defensive system (see general section 1957 and 1958). Topsoil over these ditches was clean soil over the crests and wet silt in the troughs. On the north facing slope of ditch No. 3 the junction between the top of the boulder clay subsoil and the clay and shale filling had been revetted with re-used stones from the fort, one of which was a chamfered string course stone well weathered in antiquity.

Over all the area exposed there was no evidence of modifications other than the revetment noted above. The conclusions from this seem to be either: (a) that the ditches exposed were those made at the beginning of Period I and that they survived without modification throughout all periods, or (b) that the berm and ditch No. 1 belonged to the first construction and that others were added from later necessity. Since over the whole section at this point the "cut" exactly balances the "fill", an impression is received of one planned system. The application of weathered re-used stones in ditch No. 3 could be a late repair.



VIEW OF NORTH RAMPART AND FORT WALL PARTLY REVEALING STRUCTURE
ACCEPTED AS AN OVEN.



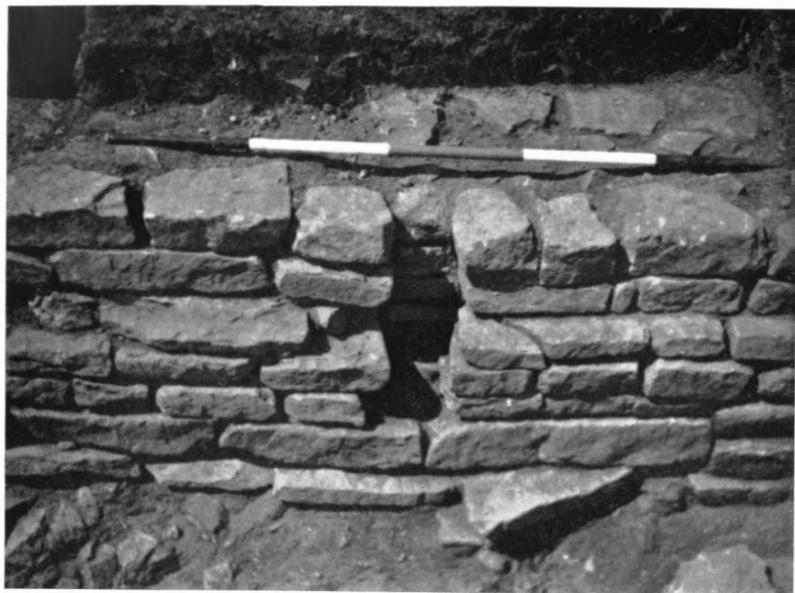
VIEW LOOKING SOUTH OVER DITCHES NOS. 1 AND 2.



VIEW OF TRENCH SHOWING INTERVALLUM ROADWAY.



NORTH WALL OF GRANARY WITH INTERNAL SLEEPER WALLS.



SOUTH FACE OF GRANARY WALL.



LATE PERIOD CULVERT WITH COVER SLABS REMOVED.



LOOKING NORTH OVER DITCHES FROM FORT WALL.

THE POTTERY.

The pottery falls into three groups.

(1) Throughout the disturbed topsoil were found thinly distributed fragments of third- and fourth-century cooking pots, bowls, and dishes. None of the fourth-century fragments would be classified as post-dating the Picts war (A.D. 367).

(2) The stratified area of dark stony soil overlying the intervallum roadway yielded a larger group which consistently belonged to the third century.

(3) Finally, from beneath the wattle and daub and sealed by it a small group of samian fragments and one early coarse pottery fragment were obtained.

One fragment of figured samian from topsoil bore a representation of the baiting of a chained bear (fig. 14).

A small samian fragment also from topsoil bore the potter's stamp (fig. 15).

The pottery has been referred as closely as possible to Gillam, "Types of Roman coarse pottery vessels", AA/IV, Vol. XXXV, pp. 184-251.

1. Rim fragment of rustic ware cooking pot from below burnt wattle and daub and sealed by it. This is the earliest fragment found and being sealed is consistent with the date of Period I before A.D. 197.
2. Fragment of base of samian vessel sealed by wattle and daub.
3. Fragment of samian platter sealed by wattle and daub.
4. Fragment of samian bowl also sealed by wattle and daub.
5. Rim fragment of cooking pot in black fumed ware from dark stony layer overlying the intervallum roadway.
Cf. Gillam 143 dated A.D. 190-280.
6. Rim fragment of cooking pot or wide-mouthed jar in light grey fabric from topsoil.
7. Rim fragment of cooking pot in grey fumed ware from dark stony layer overlying intervallum roadway.
Cf. Gillam 142 dated A.D. 200-297.

8. Rim fragment of jar with ledge for lid in reddish grey fabric from dark stony layer overlying intervallum roadway.
Cf. Gillam 151 dated A.D. 190-260.
9. Rim fragment of cooking pot in grey fumed ware from dark stony layer overlying intervallum roadway.
Cf. Gillam 140 dated A.D. 180-270.
10. Side fragment from rim to base of a dish in dark grey fabric from topsoil.
Cf. Gillam 325 dated A.D. 190-340.
11. Fragment of large dish in black fumed ware with external loop decoration from topsoil.
Cf. Gillam 329 dated A.D. 190-340.
12. Rim fragment of large straight-sided flanged bowl or dish from topsoil. The example is corroded and may have been changed by fire to its present sandy reddish grey fabric. It belongs to the fourth century but not necessarily post-Picts war.
13. Rim fragment of a straight-sided flanged bowl from topsoil in black fumed ware with external loop decoration.
Cf. Gillam 228 dated A.D. 310-370.
14. Fragment of decorated samian from topsoil.
15. Fragment of samian with stamp from topsoil. Stamp: REBVRRRI OFF.
16. Side fragment from rim to base of a straight-sided flanged bowl in white sandy fabric from topsoil dated as No. 12.
17. Rim fragment of dish in black fumed ware from stony layer over intervallum roadway.
Cf. Gillam 313 dated A.D. 190-240.
18. Two conjoined fragments of a *mortarium* rim with spout in white fabric from ditch No. 3 probably dating to third century.

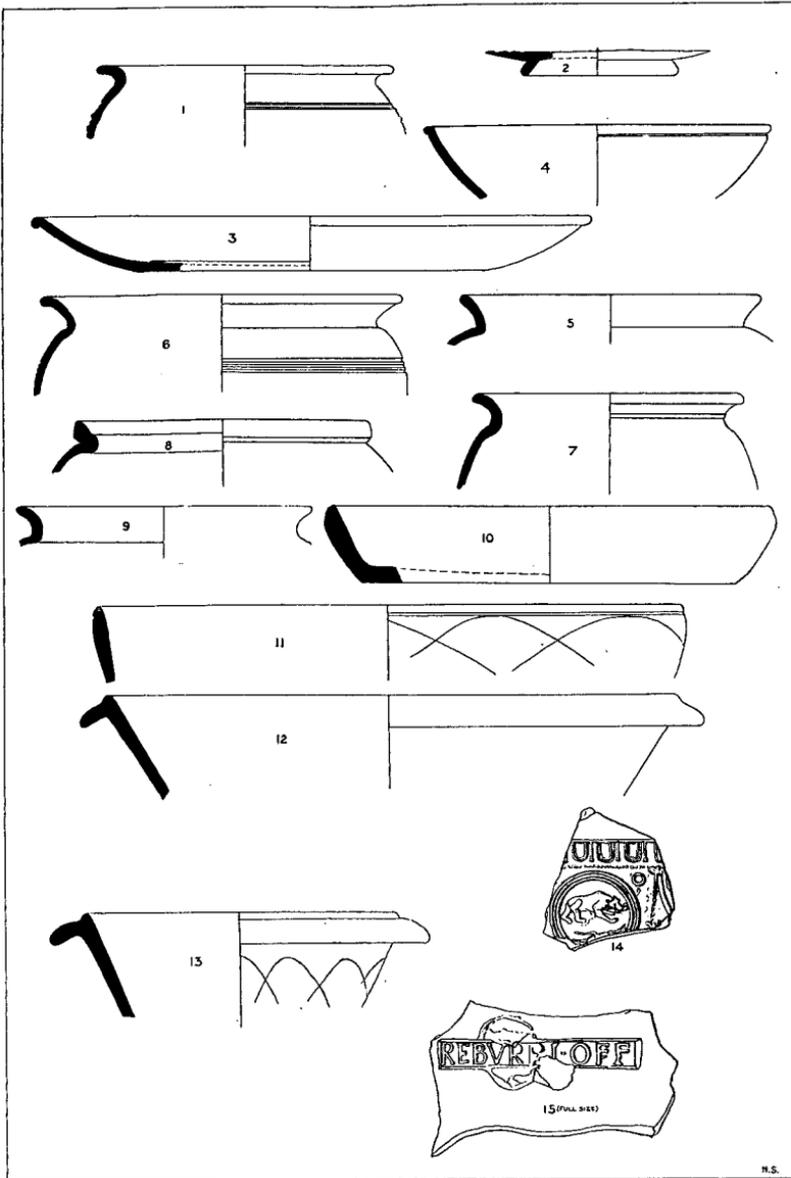


FIG. 3.

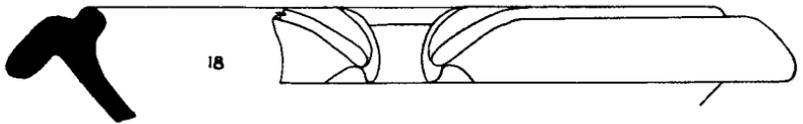
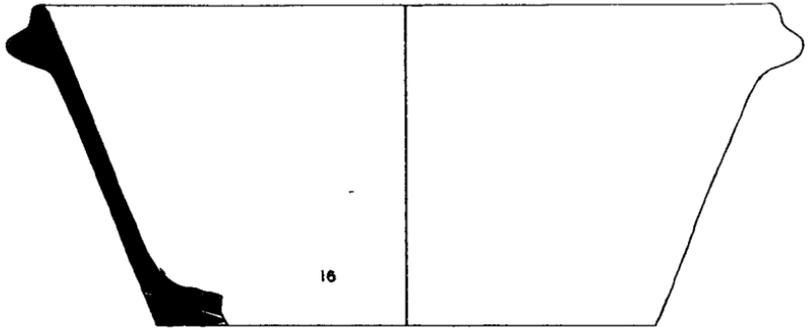


FIG. 4.