

II.—THE SMITH GOD IN ROMAN BRITAIN

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In 1958 there were discovered at Corbridge six fragments of a coarse vessel bearing in relief the appliqué figure of a Smith God. This find adds an important item to the group of similar figures already known from that site, which were found during the excavations of 1906-14, and published individually in the appropriate reports. In this paper I propose to consider this group as a whole, and to collect and discuss the rest of the evidence, archæological, epigraphic and literary, for the worship of an indigenous Smith God by the Britons under the Roman occupation.

A. THE CORBRIDGE GROUP

All the items are fragments of coarse greyish-black ware bearing their figures in appliqué relief, and are now in the Corstopitum museum.

1. (Plate IV, fig. 1) Found in 1958. The frontal figure, $4\frac{3}{4}$ " high, of a bearded and moustachio'd deity wearing a conical cap of some soft material, beneath which his hair appears in a thick fringe across his forehead. He has prominent round eyes and a furrowed brow which combine with the down-turned lines of his mouth to give him a severe and sombre appearance. He wears a kilted tunic reaching to just above the knees, fastened by a brooch over the right shoulder leaving the left shoulder bare, and girt round the waist by a belt or cord. His right hand grasps a hammer ready to strike an ingot which he holds with a pair of tongs in his left hand over an anvil to his right. He is wearing a pair of open-toed,

calf-length boots. The fragments were found in the destruction debris of the Antonine II period, and thus dated to the closing years of the second century A.D.

2. (Plate IV, fig. 2) Found in 1908 (Report p. 116=AA3 v 420). The head and right half of torso of a similar figure with beard, moustache and conical cap. His kilted tunic is fastened in the same way over his right shoulder by a penannular brooch. In his right hand he brandishes a large hammer, part of the head of which is missing, and two fingers of his left hand can be seen holding across his body a pair of tongs, only the handles of which remain, although the jaws have left their imprint on the sherd. This figure is considerably larger than no. 1, having been approx. 6½" high.

3. (Plate IV, fig. 2) Found in 1908 (1910 report p. 60=AA3 vii 202). A muscular leg, probably belonging to no. 2. It wears a boot similar to those on no. 1. To the right of it are the remains of a scroll ornament incised on the sherd.

4. (Plate VI, fig. 4) Found in 1911 (Report p. 46=AA3 viii 182). The lower portions of two legs clad in boots very similar to those on no. 1. To the left is a large rectangular object which, by comparison with no. 1, is clearly the block of an anvil.

5. (Plate VI, fig. 4) Found in 1910 (Report p. 60=AA3 vii 202). A pair of booted feet standing on a ledge with the butt-end of a spear or staff to the right. To the left is an oblong object with incised lines round top and bottom, surmounted by a square projection, very similar to the anvils on nos. 1 and 4. This bears the inscription ALLETIO scratched on it before firing. Below the feet is incised an inverted double-bordered triangle, enclosing a heart-shaped object, the bottom half of which has been smoothed out while the clay was wet and the word ALLETIO scratched where it should have been.

6. The figure of a pair of tongs in appliqué on a sherd of coarse grey pot. There is no evidence as to when this was found.



FIG. 1. APPLIQUÉ RELIEF OF SMITH GOD FROM
CORBRIDGE (NO. 1).



FIG. 2. NOS. 2 AND 3 FROM CORBRIDGE.



FIG. 3. THE "TARANIS" MOULD AND CAST FROM CORBRIDGE.

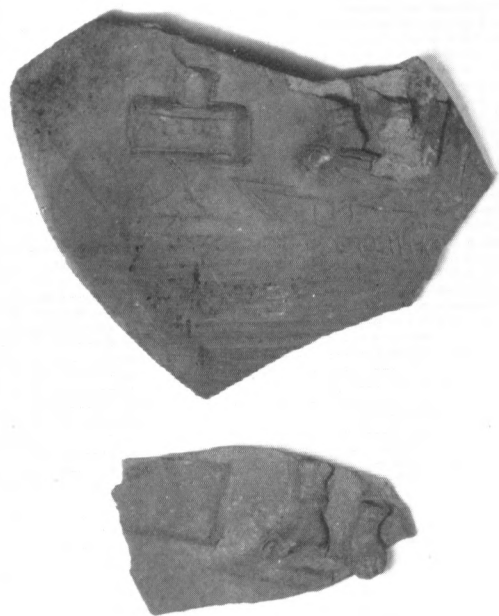


FIG. 4. NOS. 4 AND 5 (ALLETIO SHERD) FROM CORBRIDGE.



FIG. 5. POT FROM ELSWELL.



FIG. 6. FRAGMENTS OF APPLIQUÉ WARE FROM MALTON AND NORTON.
NOS. 9 AND 10 (CENTRE TOP).

It is by no means certain that no. 5 ought to be included in this group. Professor Richmond (AA4 xxi 192) has called the feet those of a spear-bearing god set upon a pedestal and clad in military boots. There seem to me to be two strong objections to this explanation. In the first place one would expect a warrior god to hold his spear in his right hand, whereas the object of which the butt-end remains on the fragment is held in the figure's left hand. Of possible long-handled and left-handed attributes there come to mind the mallet of the Celtic "Dieu au maillet", and the sceptre or trident sometimes wielded by the Gallo-Roman Vulcan. The former, generally known as Sucellus, is closely connected with Taranis, the Celtic Jupiter, and in the ancient religions there is a close relation between the mallet, the hammer and the double-axe as the emblems of both a sky and a nether-world deity, and as apotropaic symbols (cf. M. P. Lambrechts, *Contributions à l'étude des divinités celtiques*, ch. 6).¹

Again, the combination of smith's tools and sceptre as attributes of a single deity (cf. Espérandieu nos. 433 (Nîmes), 6407 (Cologne) and Germ. 62 (Gross Krotzenberg), suggests a connection between Vulcan and Jupiter or their equivalents in Celtic religious thought. However, any reconstruction on the present evidence would be no more than a guess.²

The object to the left of the figure, however, is more easily recognisable. Its obvious affinities with the objects on nos. 1 and 4 make it unlikely that it is anything other than an anvil, and it is difficult to explain an anvil as the attribute of a warrior god. The inscription is unfortunately of little help. According to Dr. Anne Ross a full interpretation of the name "Alletio" is not possible, though it appears to contain the element "allo" meaning "other", "on the other

¹ In this connection may be noted two axe brooches from South Shields. One (AA4 xi 197 and pl. xxix d no. 2) is in the form of a double-headed axe joined by the handle to a single-headed axe, the other (unpublished) is a single-headed axe.

² We may have a relief of this or a similar deity in stone. In the museum at Corbridge there is the lower half of the carved relief of a nude male figure bearing in his left hand a long staff-like object. No certain interpretation, however, is possible.

side". It may be that it is the name of the potter, but more likely, I think, that it is the name of the deity whose feet alone remain, and whose character and identity must continue in obscurity.

The Corbridge group is completed by two further items showing representations of a different deity, generally identified as the Celtic thunder god Taranis with his attribute the wheel. One is the well-known baked red clay mould, found in 1909 (Report p. 22 = AA3 vi 224), for the production of the figure, 4½" high, of a helmeted, bearded and moustachio'd personage carrying a shield on his left arm and leaning with his right hand on a curious, crooked, clublike object, possibly a barbaric representation of a thunderbolt. To the right is an eight-spoked wheel (Plate V, fig. 3). The other item is a fragment of a pot, found in 1913 (Report p. 33 = AA3 xi 309) but never illustrated and now lost, showing the head and body of the god on the mould, but not struck from it. The folds of the tunic were less skilfully indicated, the shirt was apparently shorter and the shield somewhat differently ornamented. The mould has been fully described in the report and by J. Curle in *A Roman frontier post and its people* p. 334, and discussed by M. P. Lambrechts (*op. cit.* p. 77) and M. Rostovtseff (JRS 1923 pp. 91ff.).³

It would not, I think, be wholly accurate to talk of the Corbridge group as a group of local deities. Taranis, if such he be, was not merely a local deity, and, as we shall see later, a Smith God was worshipped elsewhere in Britain, at least twice in association with the god of the wheel. This of course is not to say that at Corbridge these two gods were not worshipped under local names in much the same way as a warrior god was worshipped under the names of Cocidius and Belatucadrus in different parts of the Wall region.

Thanks to the latest find (no. 1) we can now say with certainty that our potter at Corbridge was making his

³ It has been suggested that this is the figure of a wheelwright and that the crooked object upon which he is leaning is in fact a spokeshave. This, however, leaves the shield on his left arm and the helmet quite unexplained.

wares at the end of the second century A.D. Professor Birley puts him as a contemporary of the mortarium makers Bellicus and Saturninus and reckons his period of production as about A.D. 180-197. It is interesting, however, to notice that as yet no recognisable sherds of his work have been discovered on other sites, so it may be that he was producing only for local use. He had certainly mastered the plastic art to a greater extent than most of his North British contemporaries who tried their hand at carving in stone, and his figures are powerful and vital. He was clearly influenced by Roman and Gallo-Roman representations of Vulcan, but seems to have added to them a very individual style of his own. The conical cap, which Professor Richmond (who thought that no. 2 was a figure of Jupiter Dolichenus) took to be Syrian, is no doubt the felt "pileus" usually worn by Vulcan, and presumably by smiths throughout the Roman Empire.⁴ The smith's instruments are such as are not infrequently found in La Tène and Roman contexts and are well paralleled by finds from Newstead, Great Chesterford, Llyn Cerrig Bach (Anglesey), and Silchester. Tongs were standardised in the early Iron Age and have remained essentially unaltered ever since; the anvils consist of a squared piece of iron, sometimes with a spike or tapered projection on the bottom, which rested upon, or was fixed into, a large wooden block.

B. THE EVIDENCE FROM OTHER SITES

7. Farley Heath Surrey (now in the B.M.) (Ant. J. xviii, 1938, p. 391). A bronze strip, which was used to decorate a priest's sceptre, found in the Romano-Celtic temple. On this is punched a crude representation of a naked male deity wearing a more or less conical cap. Above him is a repre-

⁴ It is possible that a similar headgear was worn by some native Britons as it is found on two sculptured heads of native type discovered at Ashton in Lancashire. (Cf. W. T. Watkin, *Roman Lancashire*, p. 180.)

sensation of a pair of tongs holding a piece of metal over an anvil, seen from above, and below him another pair of tongs: To the right of him is an attribute which could be a hammer with a long handle, and a similar object can be seen lower down. This deity is associated with another god whose head alone is shown and whose attributes are a wheel and a trident-like object.

8. (Ant. J. 1959 p. 93 fig. 2) Now in the Wisbech museum. A painted sherd showing a crude representation of a man facing left, holding with both hands a two-pronged instrument over a rectangular object decorated with crossed diagonal bars. It has been suggested that this is a representation of a smith at work at an anvil. To the left is a further object held over the anvil and it is possible that this is a horse's hind leg (though the position is somewhat awkward) or a further tool held by the smith's assistant.

9. (Plate VII, fig. 6) (R. H. Hayes and Sir Ed. Whitley, *Roman pottery at Norton, East Yorks*, pl. vi b.) Found at Malton, and now in the Malton museum. Eleven fragments of coarse grey pottery bearing appliqué decoration of the following types: five bear representations of a pair or part of a pair of tongs, four representations of hammers, and two figures of half a wheel, one of which originally had eight spokes, the other nine spokes and a large hub.

10. (Plate VII, fig. 6) To this group may now be added another sherd found in 1954 at Norton (also in the Malton museum) bearing in relief a pair of tongs between two parallel pairs of grooves running round the belly of the pot. This fragment came from a pot very similar to the one the top half of which was found at Elmswell (also in the Malton museum, fig. 5) which bears between the grooves a pair of hands and forearms clutching, as it were, the body of the vessel. In the group of sherds mentioned above (no. 9) there was also a fragment bearing such a left hand and forearm. Clearly such vases had a religious significance of some sort and were used in much the same way as vases presumably used in the worship of the Smith God.

11. (May, *Colchester pottery*, p. 147) Found at Colchester. An example of such a vase complete is the well-known Colchester Smith's vase, with frilled rim and decorated with appliqué figures of a hammer, tongs and an anvil.

12. (PSAN3 x 18-22, *Ant. J.* 1929 p. 156) Chester-le-Street, Co. Durham. A fragment of pot, probably the shoulder of some large-bodied vessel, bearing representations of three implements moulded in relief. These are, an axe, two legs joined by an arc, possibly a frame for a plumb line, and a pair of tongs with one leg longer than the other. The material is grey sandy clay containing pieces of grit with a rough buff slip. Below the figures is a band of rouletting.

13. (CIL VII 80, *VCH Roman Bucks*, p. 11) Stony Stratford, Bucks. (Now in the British Museum.) A silver plaque, possibly part of a ritual headdress, from the so-called shrine of Jupiter and Vulcan. It is dedicated to those deities by one Vassinus in gratitude for being allowed to keep something which he had dedicated to them. The names of the deities are preceded by the word "Deo", a formula which is generally taken to indicate that the identity of a native god is hidden behind the Roman name. If this is so then we have here more evidence for the close connection between the gods who became Jupiter and Vulcan by the process of "interpretatio Romana".

14. (CIL VII 86, *VCH Roman Herts*, pl. x, p. 149) Barkway, Herts. (Now in the British Museum.) Two silver plaques, probably from a shrine by the side of Ermine St., presumably from some ritual furniture or vestment. On one of them is a repoussée representation of a Smith God wearing calf-length boots, a tunic fastened over his left shoulder, and a conical cap. In his right hand he brandishes a pair of tongs, and holds a long-handled hammer or mallet in the crook of his left arm, over which there hangs a fold of drapery. To the left of him there can be seen a small lighted altar. He stands in an *aedicula* formed by two columns decorated with spiral fluting surmounted by slab capitals and a triangular head. The other is a larger plaque bearing the

same representation of the god (c. $6\frac{3}{4}'' \times 3''$) in an aedicula beneath which is the inscription "NV VLCO" perhaps standing for "numini Vulcano". Four other plaques from the hoard in which these two were found bear representations of a warrior god with helmet and spear, one of which bears the inscription "D(eo) MARTI ALATORI DUM(?nonius) CENSORINUS GEMELLI FIL V S L M" (CIL VII 85). Another, larger plaque bears the inscription "MARTI TOUTATI TI CLAUDIUS PRIMUS ATILI LIBER V S L M" (CIL VII 84). Here we have a clear case of Celtic deities worshipped in Roman guise. Toutates, otherwise the Teutates mentioned by Lucan (*Pharsalia* 1 444-5) as one of the three great Gallic deities, Taranis, Esus and Teutates, appears also at Castor, nr. Peterborough (EE III 56), Old Carlisle (EE VII p. 128), and at York (*ibid.* p. 313), and is generally equated with Mars. Mars Alator also appears at South Shields (EE VII 999), and the name is taken by Holder to mean "the huntsman". It is unfortunate that we have no evidence for the British name of the Smith God. If the correct expansion of his inscription is "numini Vulcano", then it is well paralleled by the inscription on the altar from Maryport (CIL VII 398) dedicated by the prefect Helstrius Novellus "NUMINI VOLCAN . . ." Presumably the formula "numini" in a dedication has much the same force as "deo", and it is clear, I think, that here we are dealing with a native Smith God. It is interesting to note the similarity between the large hammer wielded by him on these plaques and the mallet of Sucellus, evidence for whose worship has also been found at York along with that of Toutates (EE VII p. 313).

It is obviously impossible to prove whether the significance of no. 8 is sacred or profane, but I think that it is clear that with nos. 9, 10, and 11 we are dealing with objects of religious use. The wheel (no. 9) is undoubtedly a Celtic religious emblem. One would imagine that the vessels contained votive offerings dedicated to the deity whose emblem or effigy was attached to them. No. 12 differs from the rest of the ceramic evidence in bearing representations of instru-

ments other than those of the smithy, but it seems quite natural that members of other crafts should wish to make offerings to one who was after all a craftsman god.

Two further dedications to Vulcan from this country may be noted before we turn to consider the literary evidence. One is an altar set up to Jupiter and Vulcan for the safety of the Emperor Gordian by the magistrates of the *vicani* of Old Carlisle (CIL VII 346 = CW2 xxviii p. 116 no. 13); the other is a dedication to Vulcan alone by the *vicani* of Vindolanda (AA3 xii 201). Presumably the *vicani* who lived outside the forts of the frontier system would contain a large number of craftsmen and smiths whose interests would be considered on official inscriptions such as these two.

C. THE LITERARY EVIDENCE

The worship of a smith god by the Celts and Germans of the Roman period is attested by two passages from the classical authors. Florus (1 xx 5) records how in 222 B.C., during the Gallic war, the Insubres under their king Viridomarus promised to offer Roman arms to Vulcan in the event of victory. Clearly the god to whom the Insubres made their vow was not Vulcan but a Gaulish deity whom the Roman historian, probably Livy or his source, had identified with him because of his similar attributes. It is worth noting that when Florus records an earlier occasion, on which Ariovistus had vowed to dedicate a necklet made from the spoils of the Roman soldiers, he uses the words *suo Marti* to indicate the god to whom the Insubrian chieftain prayed (*loc. cit.* 4). One may be surprised to find the Celtic Vulcan in company with Jupiter and the Celtic Mars as a god to whom *spolia* were dedicated or vowed, but we have seen above that the British Smith God had close associations with both Jupiter Taranis and Mars Teutates.

Caesar (B.G. vi 21 2), describing the habits of the Germans, says that they only count among the number of

the gods those whom they see and by whose aid they are openly helped, the Sun, Vulcan, and the Moon. Obviously one of the important Germanic deities shared some of the characteristics and attributes of the Roman Vulcan. No doubt he was the god of fire by whose aid the smith is openly helped, and also the god of thunder and lightning.

Furthermore, memory of a smith god has survived in Welsh, Irish and Teutonic legend. In the Irish myths he appears as Goibniu, the craftsman god who helped Lug in his battle with Balar by forging for him the lightning weapon, and in a later version of the myth assisted the Tuatha De Danaan in their struggle with the Fomoiré by undertaking to provide spearpoints which would slay all whom they touched. In Welsh folklore, for example in the Mabinogi of Kilhwch and Olwen, he seems to appear as Govannon the son of Don, the mighty smith, or under other names derived from the Welsh root "gof" = "smith". According to Prof. O'Rahilly (*Early Irish History and Mythology*, pp. 308ff. and 525) he is primarily the Celtic Otherworld god in his capacity as artificer, and the Lord of the Otherworld feast (in Irish the "fled Goibnenu") whose partakers became immortal. In Teutonic mythology he is Wayland the Smith.

D. CONCLUSIONS

It is notoriously difficult, and indeed dangerous, to draw hard and fast conclusions in any matters pertaining to Celtic religion. All that can be said with safety in this case, I think, is that there was being worshipped in Britain under the Roman occupation a god, whose characteristics included those of a craftsman, who was identified by the conquerors with their own smith god Vulcan. A glance at the distribution will show that the evidence for his cult so far discovered comes from two distinct areas, the military zone of Hadrian's Wall and its hinterland, and the south-east of England, areas which have also produced evidence for the worship of

Taranis. The two seem to be closely connected, and it may be that the great Celtic god of the wheel had craftsman attributes which did not fit in with the Roman identification of him with their own Jupiter. Such a dual personality is of course very conjectural but is, I think, suggested by several of the items. At any rate the existence of this Vulcanesque deity, though it has been hinted at occasionally in the past, has been largely neglected in recent discussions of Celtic or Romano-British religion, and it has been the object of this paper to draw attention to it.⁵

⁵ Since the MS. of this paper went to the printers we have seen the publication of "Art in Roman Britain" by J. M. C. Toynbee, which is clearly now the standard work on the subject. The catalogue (pp. 191-2) contains entries on the Taranis mould (no. 161, pls. 164-5), and the Smith's vase from Colchester (no. 162, pl. 191). References are also made in these entries to nos. 1 (also pl. 256), 2 (still identified as Jupiter Dolichenus), 3, 4, 5, 9 and 12 above, and the writer adds two further examples of pots in the style of the Smith's vase, one from Canterbury, a pot in sandy grey fabric bearing figures of a hammer, wedge, tongs, anvil and rope, and another fragment from Colchester with tongs, hammer and anvil. A passing reference to the Smith God occurs in the introduction on p. 11.

