



BIRDOSWALD 1831.



BIRDOSWALD 1949.

## II.—ROMAN BRONZE ARM-PURSES

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In 1935 I contributed to our Proceedings (PSAN4 vii 84 and pl. III) a brief note on arm-purses, six of which were then known to me to have been found in Britain. The total has now risen to eleven, the additions including one each from Durham, Northumberland, Cumberland and Dumfriesshire, while further study shows that the origins of the two specimens in the Chesters Museum were transposed by Wallis Budge. It seems appropriate that I should offer to this Society a study of the whole series, long on the stocks but only completed recently. Thanks are due, for facilities to study their specimens, to the authorities of the eight museums in which the purses are now to be seen, and to Mr. Wilfred Dodds for the drawings reproduced in this paper.

German archæologists describe these objects as *Börsen-armringe*, which may be translated as "armlet-purses"; but the term "arm-purse" has been in use in this country for more than a century, and I propose to retain it. The term first appeared in print, as far as I can trace, in the precis of Collingwood Bruce's report to the Archæological Institute, on 5 November 1858, on the first specimen from Birdoswald (AJ xvi (1859) 84):

They have sometimes been designated arm-purses, from the supposition that they may have been worn on the arm as receptacles for small objects of value, the dimensions being well suited for such a purpose, whilst it is obvious that perfect security would be obtained by the pressure of the arm upon the curved plate forming the lid.

It is already implied, however, in the discussion of the Farndale purse eight years earlier (AJ viii (1851) 89):

All the inside edges of the handle are smoothly rounded off, and apparently worn by use; it seems possible that it might have been worn passed over the arm.

This passage was not printed in inverted commas, like the note ascribed to Dr. Thurnam<sup>1</sup> (the exhibitor of the Farndale purse), so that it is presumably due to a member of the editorial committee, which at that period assumed responsibility for the *Archæological Journal*. Before long, this interpretation became generally accepted, and it will be sufficient to quote Bruce's mature judgement:<sup>2</sup> "its whole structure was such as to adapt it for being worn upon the arm."

By contrast, the term "wrist-purse" is of more recent origin. The first hint of it comes in Wallis Budge's *Chesters Museum Catalogue* (1903) 72: "purses of this kind were carried on the wrist" (though at p. 389 he enters the two specimens in that museum as "purses, which were worn on the arm"). In the 1922 edition of the *British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain*, Reginald A. Smith at p. 67 describes the type as "the wrist-purse, with a large boat-shaped receptacle for coins", and in the title to fig. 87, p. 68, calls it a "bracelet purse" (which means the same thing, though putting it more gracefully). R. G. Collingwood (*Archæology of Roman Britain* (1930) 268, fig. 67) and Professor Richmond (CW2 1 (1951) 69 and fig. 6) adopted the same term, but without discussion. Yet it may be doubted whether any of these distinguished scholars ever tried wearing one of the purses as a bracelet; the experiment, once made, should be sufficient to show the unsuitability of them for that position. As M. A. Evelein has pointed out, in his basic discussion of the subject in *Germania* 20 (1936) 104-111, their dimensions are appropriate for wear on the normal upper arm, where they would fit snugly; on the wrist they would be loose, chafing the skin or needing to be held steady by the fingers. Naturally, the owner would have to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *D.N.B.* for John Thurnam, M.D., F.S.A. (1810-1873).

<sup>2</sup> *The Story . . . of the Thorngraston "Find"* (1871) 2.

take his purse off when making a purchase, but at other times its contents would be doubly safe from casual loss or from theft, and his hands would both be free for carrying parcels or anything else. Only if he had to engage in heavy manual labour would the purse on his upper arm prove an encumbrance; in that case, he would need to take it off and lay it on one side—it has been shown by Professor Richmond<sup>3</sup> that the second Birdoswald purse had been laid aside in that way, and lost below clay tipped on to the rampart mound of the fort during its construction, and the accounts of the Thorn-grafton find make it reasonably likely that that purse and its contents had been lost because a load of quarry chippings had been tipped over it: in both cases, the owner was unable to find what another workman's carelessness (or spite) had hidden.

As far as I can trace, eleven specimens of the type can now be mustered from Britain, and I list them in the appendix to this paper. On the Continent, a couple of dozen are known; 25 of them, and six of the British purses, were listed by the Dutch archæologist, M. A. Evelein, in the paper in *Germania* cited above. It will be sufficient for me to refer generally to that paper for details of the continental purses, and for a discussion of the type, which Evelein was inclined to regard as of native origin, and perhaps produced by a firm of metal-workers in Mainz = *Moguntiacum*, the chief town as well as the military capital of Upper Germany. Robert Forrer, who published a paper on the subject in 1933, had suggested that such purses were used by native women; Evelein, following Karl Schumacher, preferred to regard them as the property of members of the *auxilia*.<sup>4</sup> But a consideration of their distribution suggests that they are just as likely to have been used by legionaries; for of the Continental examples, four have been found at Mainz, one at Bonn, two at Nijmegen, and one each at Strasbourg, Brigetio and Aquincum—all the sites of legionary fortresses (though that

<sup>3</sup> CW2 1 (1951) 69, cf. liv (1955) 56.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Germania* 20, 110.

at Nijmegen was not occupied after *c.* A.D. 105, and it is not by any means certain that the two purses found there were lost as early as that); and, as Professor Richmond has already pointed out, the Thorngraston and Birdoswald purses may well have belonged to legionaries engaged in building the Wall (in one case) or Birdoswald fort (in the other). Indeed, when we bear in mind that it was a fairly common practice for legionary other ranks (enlisted men) to be promoted to the centurionate in the *auxilia*, it might seem best to regard arm-purses as specifically legionary material, if not legionary official equipment (which seems hardly likely); but the possibility cannot be excluded that they were used by civilians as well. We happen to know that veterans retired to live at Colchester and Wroxeter, both of which have yielded arm-purses, and there is no reason why the same should not have been the case at Silchester too; but it would obviously be unwise to assume that these three purses were all the property of ex-legionaries.

Most of the arm-purses so far discovered belong to one or other of two types, which may be described as those with *flexible* and *rigid* handles respectively. In the former type, flat strips of bronze, projecting from either end of the boat-shaped purse, have been formed into a circular handle, the terminal of each being wound round the other, the effect being to allow of expansion of the handle when the purse was being placed on the arm or removed from it; both Birdoswald purses and that from Thorngraston are of this type, as are Evelein's nos. 4, 10-13, 16, 23, 26 and 27.<sup>5</sup> The handle of the other type is in a single piece, sometimes flat and sometimes round in section, neater in appearance but presumably needing to be made in different sizes to fit different wearers. Most examples of both types are undecorated, and Evelein followed Forrer in supposing that they were normally covered in leather, so that they should not chafe the wearer; where decoration does occur, it is usually on the purse or at the

<sup>5</sup> *Germania* 20, 106 f.

junction of purse and handle, but two Continental purses have continuous decoration, of obviously native type, all along the outer surface of the handle, which in those cases was evidently intended to remain visible.

The purse proper is normally shallower in the flexible than in the rigid type, with its maximum width at the top; in the rigid type, the maximum width usually comes just over half-way up, and thereafter the sides turn sharply inwards, leaving a well defined carination. The lid is hinged, and its sides are turned down so as to overlap the edges of the purse; the normal arrangement for fastening it was a circular hole in the underside of the purse, at the opposite end to the hinge and a little below the junction of purse and handle; through this hole a spring tongue was inserted, to catch in a loop rivetted to the underside of the lid, as shown in figs. 1 and 2. The standard description of the purse, first used by Bruce in 1851,<sup>6</sup> is "skiff-shaped", in German "kahnformig"; the primary account of the Thorngraston purse by John Hodgson, in the *Gentleman's Magazine*,<sup>7</sup> for want of that convenient term, called it a vessel "in the form of a basket, about 6 inches long, boat-shaped, narrow at both ends, covered with a copper lid, and having a slender bow or handle, also of copper". The material is in fact bronze, but otherwise Hodgson's account would serve perfectly well.

So far, the question of dating has not been considered. Evelein only knew of one direct indication, namely the coins ending with fresh *denarii* of Hadrian in the Thorngraston purse; but, taking into account the recorded findspots, he concluded that these arm-purses were not in use much before the time of Hadrian or much after A.D. 260.<sup>8</sup> It seems permissible to attempt a little more precision, taking separately

<sup>6</sup> *The Roman Wall*, 1st ed. (1851) 434.

<sup>7</sup> December 1837, p. 637.

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Alzinger, publishing an example of the rigid type dug up at Aguntum (Noricum) in 1953 (*Jahreshefte* xlv (1959), Beiblatt 127 with half-tone), misread Evelein as concluding that the latest examples of the type were Hadrianic, and used that as evidence in support of his dating of the town's walls, above the footings of which the purse was found, in a burnt layer.

the evidence for the two types. All three British examples of the flexible type may well be Hadrianic; at least, the Thorngraston purse and that found at Birdoswald in 1949 both contained coins closing with fresh issues of Hadrian when they were lost, and none of the Continental examples of this type come from sites not occupied by the Romans before the Antonine period. By contrast, it seems clear that the Corbridge purse cannot come from a pre-Antonine level, and the specimen from Osterburken on the Outer *Limes* can hardly be earlier than the second half of the second century. It may be, therefore, that the flexible type, which Evelein regarded as probably more expensive to make, gave way to the simpler rigid type in or soon after the time of Hadrian; on present evidence, at least, there is no reason to think that any of the flexible purses are post-Hadrianic.

#### LIST OF SPECIMENS FOUND IN BRITAIN

1. Birdoswald, Cumberland (Chesters Museum).<sup>9</sup> Flexible type; fig. 1. At a meeting of the Archæological Institute on 5 November, 1858,<sup>10</sup> Collingwood Bruce communicated a notice of the discovery "a few years since" of a bronze arm-purse at Birdoswald, adding that "it was discovered in course of excavations by the late Mr. Crawhall"; a woodcut, facing a precis of Bruce's paper (AJ xvi 84), shows the purse itself and details of its fastening, and the subjoined title describes the purse as in Bruce's possession.<sup>11</sup> In the third edition of *The Roman Wall* (1867) 420 (p. 335 of the folio issue), Bruce states that this purse was found "about the year

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also *Chesters Museum Catalogue* (1903) 71—where it is illustrated in half-tone, but wrongly described as "From the hill of Barcombe, near Borcovicus"—and 389; PSAN4 vii, pl. iii facing 84—where it is similarly attributed; *Germania* 20 (1936), no. 20.

<sup>10</sup> By a misprint, AJ xvi (1859) 82 gives the year as 1848, which is also given in the list of contents at the beginning of the volume, p. iv. It is a remarkable coincidence that on the very same day John Clayton at last succeeded in purchasing the Thorngraston purse and its contents (AA2 iii 272).

<sup>11</sup> Bruce himself was certainly not responsible for the wording of the title, or of the precis, both assigning Birdoswald to Northumberland,

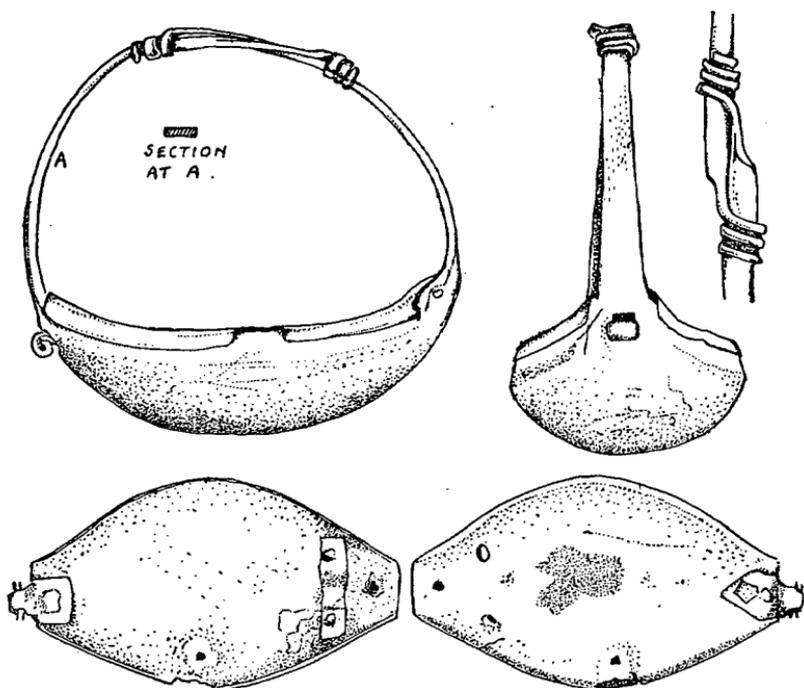


FIG. 1. BIRDOSWALD, BEFORE 1833 (CHESTERS MUSEUM). ( $\frac{1}{2}$ )

1820, and is now in the museum at Chesters". It seems clear that he had presented it to Clayton; how he had come to possess it, we learn from the preface to the second edition of *The Roman Wall* (1853) xi f., and from a footnote to p. 251, opposite which it is illustrated at three-quarter scale on an unnumbered plate. Joseph Crawhall (1793-1853) had lent Bruce, "for the purposes of this edition", objects and drawings of them from the excavations at Birdoswald and Benwell by his late brother, Thomas Crawhall (1778-1833), this arm-purse among them. But Joseph Crawhall died on 27 April, 1853, and it is evident that his heirs never recovered the objects from Bruce, out of whose possession the purse passed into that of Clayton at some time between 1859 (when Bruce lent it for exhibition in the Archæological Institute's temporary museum at Carlisle) and 1867. It is uncertain whether Bruce had any evidence to support his statement that it was found about the year 1820; John Hodgson, visiting Birdoswald on 2 September, 1833,<sup>12</sup> noted that

<sup>12</sup> *History of Northumberland* II iii (1840) 207.

Thomas Crawhall had been making "considerable and interesting researches" there "lately", specifying some discoveries made in 1831; it was perhaps really in that period that the arm-purse was found.

2. Thorngrifton, Northumberland (Chesters Museum).<sup>13</sup> Flexible type, one of its two terminal windings broken off and lost; fig. 2.

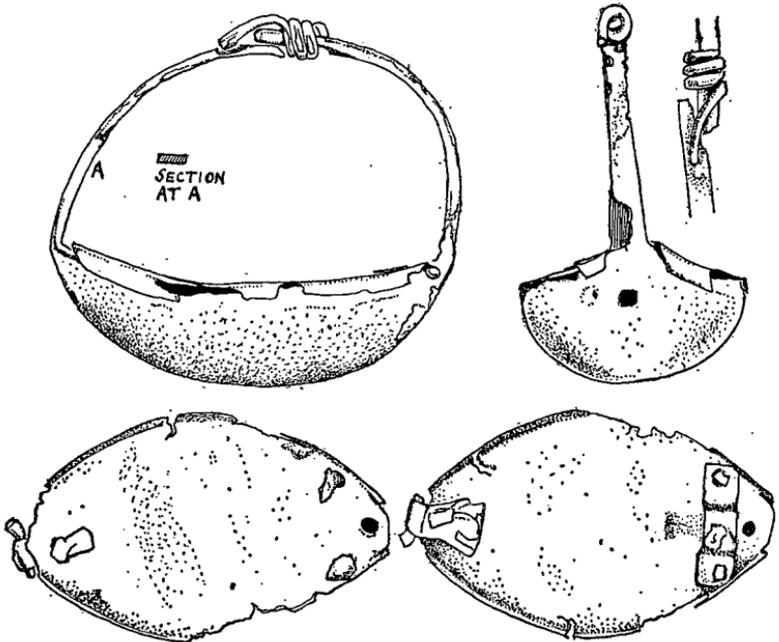


FIG. 2. THORNGRAFTON, 1837 (CHESTERS MUSEUM). (½)

Found in an ancient quarry on the top of Barcombe (due south of Housesteads and east of Chesterholm), on 8 August, 1837, containing three *aurei* and 60 *denarii*—ranging from worn Republican issues to four mint-fresh coins of Hadrian. Joseph Fairless's sketch, giving his impression of what it might have looked like before fracture, was published in the *Numismatic Journal* for January, 1838, and has often been reproduced (e.g. in most editions of Bruce's *Handbook*, including that of 1957), but it shows the handle wrongly as a single

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Germania* 20 (1936), no. 19, and PSAN4 vii 84 (with bibliographical references in a footnote). A fuller discussion of the evidence for its discovery and for the precise contents of the purse is to appear in the *Numismatic Chronicle*.

piece. I must add, as a caution, that the *British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* (1922), fig. 87, illustrates a purse with the title "Bracelet purse of bronze, Housesteads, Northumberland", but reference to p. 67 shows that the Thorngrafton purse is intended: "The Museum specimens are imperfect, but the illustration shows one with the cover and catch complete, found near Hexham containing gold and silver coins from Nero to Hadrian"—yet the illustration is actually copied from the woodcut of Crawhall's Birdoswald purse in *AJ* xvi, facing p. 84. The 1951 edition of the *British Museum Guide* does not illustrate or discuss any example of the type.

3. Colchester, Essex (National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh).<sup>14</sup> Rigid type, lacking the lid; fig. 3. This purse was known to Bruce—or to the editorial committee of the *Archæological Journal*—in 1858, and is mentioned in *AJ* xvi 84 as "found, as it is believed, in Scotland"; but in the *Catalogue of the National Museum of*

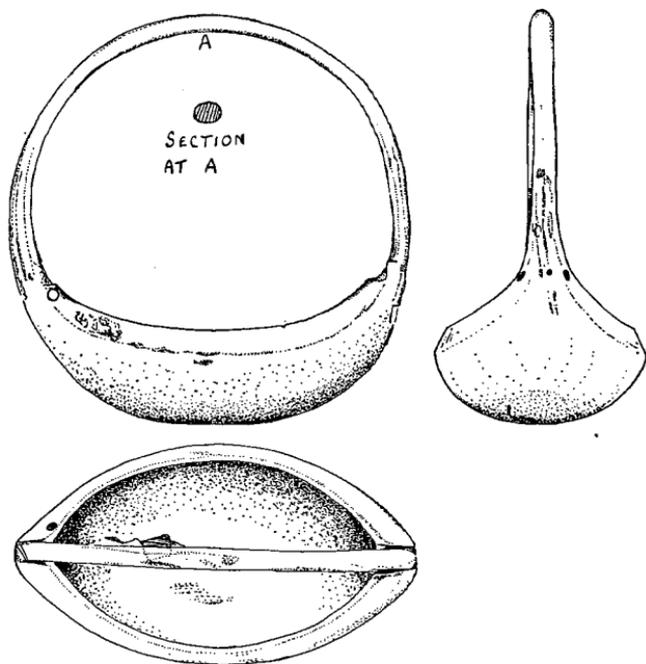


FIG. 3. COLCHESTER (NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES, EDINBURGH). ( $\frac{1}{2}$ )

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Germania* 20 (1936), no. 20a.

*Antiquities of Scotland*, 2nd ed. (1892), 224, it is assigned categorically to Colchester. It was acquired by the museum in 1846, but the date and circumstances of its discovery are not recorded.

4. Farnedale, Yorkshire North Riding (British Museum).<sup>15</sup> Rigid type. This purse was exhibited to the Archæological Institute on 3 January, 1851, by Dr. Thurnam (AJ viii (1851) 88 f. and woodcut facing); it had been found in 1849 by a labourer "whilst engaged in removing the stones from a cairn on the high moorland to the west of that dale". According to the finder, the purse was "near the bottom of the cairn, concealed in the cavity of a hollow stone, which again was covered by a flat stone", and it was said to have contained "nothing but a sort of ashes like decayed paper". Dr. Thurnam concluded, no doubt correctly, that it had been hidden in a pre-existing cairn.

5. "Hoddam, Dumfriesshire" (British Museum).<sup>16</sup> Rigid type. This purse was acquired by purchase at the sale in 1851 of the Kirkpatrick Sharpe Collection, and it is customarily assigned to Hoddam (so AJ xvi 84). That was where Sharpe lived, but there is no reason to suppose that any of the items in his collection were found there; other Roman objects, acquired by the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh at the same sale, undoubtedly came from the Roman fort at Birrens, a few miles away, and that seems the likeliest provenance for the present piece. Cf. however no. 8, below.

6. Wroxeter, Salop (Shrewsbury Museum).<sup>17</sup> Rigid type. Discovered during the excavations of 1859-1862, "when found it contained coins" (J. Corbet Anderson, *The Roman City of Uriconium* (1867) 19 and 84 f., with a small-scale woodcut of the purse and a detail, to a larger scale, of the fastening). Thomas Wright, the excavator, in his *Uriconium* (1872, 329 f.) says that "when found it is said to have contained some coins", and "I am afraid no note was made of the coins"; it need not be added that no note was made of its precise find-spot either.

7. Silchester, Hants (Reading Museum).<sup>18</sup> Rigid type with flat handle, with no provision for a lid. Found, during the excavations of 1894, "in a pit in *Insula XI*", apparently without any associated finds (*Archæologia* liv (1895) 469 f.); G. E. Fox's careful description of the purse deserves to be quoted in full:

It appears to have been wrought with great skill out of a thin narrow plate or strip of bronze, the two ends of which were brought together and rivetted to form the ring through which

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Germania* 20 (1936), no. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Germania* 20 (1936), no. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Not listed in *Germania* 20 (1936).

<sup>18</sup> Mentioned in *Germania* 20 (1936) 109, footnote 19a.

the arm was passed. The boat-shaped body of the purse is worked into seven flattened lobes, and the opening that fitted against the arm is  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches long and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inch wide. The flat ring that passed round the arm is an oval measuring 4 inches by 3 inches, with a general breadth of  $\frac{7}{8}$  inch. There are no traces of a lid or lining to the purse, but in the bottom of it is a small hole.

This description might well apply to the Annan purse, no. 8, except that its handle is decorated on the upper side whereas that from Silchester is undecorated.

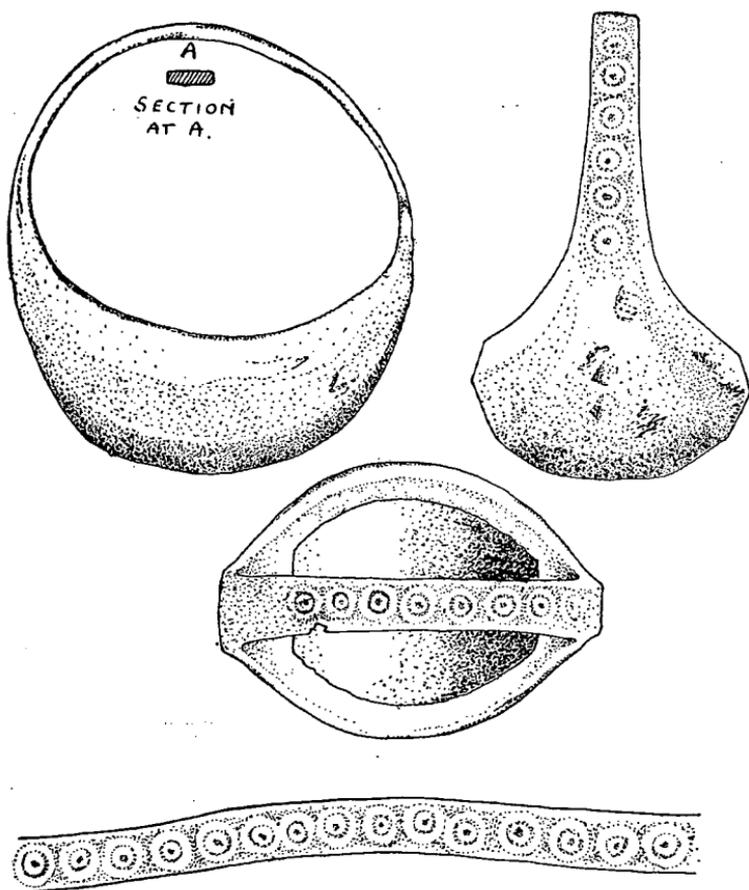


FIG. 4. "ANNA" (CARLISLE MUSEUM). (1)

8. "Annan, Dumfriesshire" (Carlisle Museum). Rigid type with flat handle, with no provision for a lid; fig. 4. Deposited on indefinite loan to the Carlisle Museum, in the period 1939-1945, by the late Mr. J. E. C. Carrick. It is labelled as coming from Annan, but there is no further evidence as to its exact provenance or date of discovery; it seems probable, however, that this is the arm-purse mentioned, on Professor Richmond's authority, in Mary Kitson Clark's *Gazetteer of Roman Remains in East Yorkshire* (1935) 81, as found at "Maleguards, near Dumfries": Professor Richmond points out that Maleguards is a misprint for Hallguards, but he cannot now recollect the source of his information. Hallguards, as Mr. A. E. Truckell informs me, is the site of the original message of Hoddam, on the left bank of the Annan just upstream from the modern bridge and about 500 yards W.N.W. of the site of Hoddam

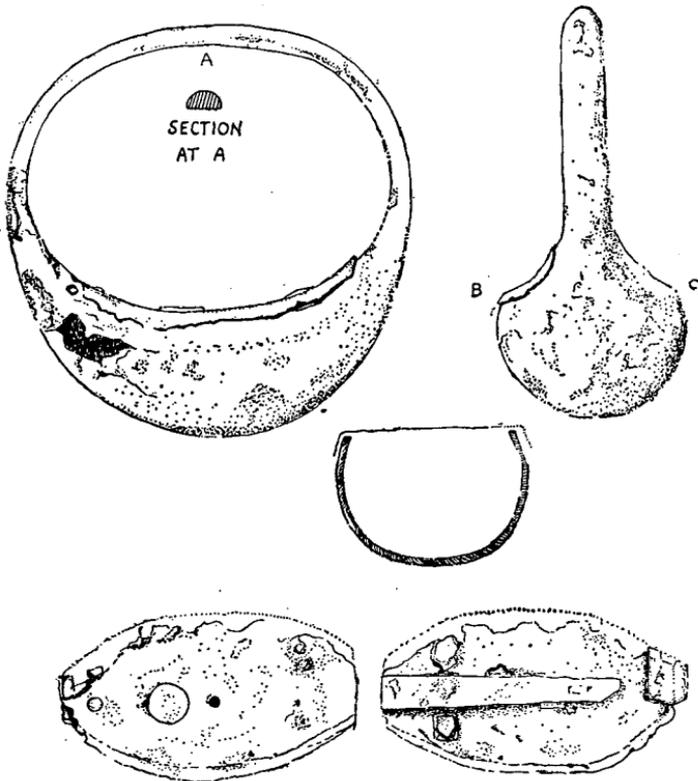


FIG. 5. CORBRIDGE (CORSTOPITUM MUSEUM). ( $\frac{1}{2}$ )

old church (cf. O.S. 6-in. map, Dumfriesshire LVII N.E.); if the findspot is correctly reported, it is curious that this specimen was found so close to Kirkpatrick Sharpe's home (cf. no. 5 above) and on a site which would otherwise be taken to be medieval at earliest. Its closest known analogue is the Silchester purse (no. 7 above), but two Continental specimens, with lids, resemble it in having decoration on the upper surfaces of their flat handles, namely Evelein's plate 24, 1, from Osterburken on the Outer *Limes* of Upper Germany; and plate 25, 7, from Nijmegen in Holland.<sup>19</sup>

9. Birdoswald, Cumberland (Carlisle Museum). Flexible type. Found in 1949, buried by the rampart-mound a little north of the main east gate of the fort (CW2 1 69 and plate facing). It contained 28 *denarii*, ending with one of Hadrian in mint condition (cf. I. A. Richmond, "The Birdoswald hoard and its composition" in CW2 liv 56-60 and, for a suggestion as to its significance, G. R. Watson, "The Birdoswald hoard; the pay and the purse", *ibid.*, 61-65).

10. Corbridge, Northumberland (Corstopitum Museum). Rigid type; fig. 5. Found by the staff of the Ministry of Works, on 17 January, 1952, on Site XLIV at Corstopitum. The stone building within which this purse was found is datable to the first half of the third century, but in part overlies the remains of an earlier, late second-century, structure, that in turn partly covering the east rampart of the Antonine fort. It seems unlikely that the purse can have been lost before the closing years of the second century, and it might even be assignable to the third-century building.

11. South Shields, County Durham (Roman Remains Museum). Lid only surviving, from an arm-purse of the rigid type; fig. 6. There is no record of the circumstances under which this was found; I am indebted to Dr. D. J. Smith, F.S.A., for knowledge of it.



FIG. 6. SOUTH SHIELDS (ROMAN MUSEUM, SOUTH SHIELDS). ( $\frac{1}{2}$ )

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Germania* 20 (1936), nos. 3 and 18.

