

#### IV.—AN EXCAVATION AT HOUSESTEADS, 1962

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From surface appearances the sector of the south curtain wall of the fort at Housesteads, between the south gateway and the modern breakthrough to the west, is the only one in the whole circuit of the defences where the material immediately behind the wall is in an undisturbed condition.

The Ministry of Public Building and Works, in whose guardianship the fort lies, intends in the near future to consolidate the south wall of the fort, and before doing so arranged an examination of the area. This was undertaken by the writer in March 1962 with the help of workmen from the Ministry of Works and one volunteer helper, Mrs. M. Trail, to whom I acknowledge my indebtedness.

Two trenches, each five feet wide, were cut at right angles to the fort wall at distances of twenty-five feet and ninety-two feet respectively, west of the west wall of the west guard-chamber of the south gateway. As stratification was so very similar in both sections, only the more westerly, which was cut between the fort wall and the south wall of the Commandant's house, is here described.

Excavation revealed that the defences at this point were indeed in a fairly good state of preservation and that the rampart backing, in which three separate periods were represented, was more or less intact. In neither trench was there evidence of buildings overriding or replacing the bank, though such buildings do appear, abutting on the fort wall, north of the west gate and west of the north gate.

The only modern disturbance encountered was an old excavation trench three feet wide and four feet deep which showed in both cuttings and ran immediately inside the fort

wall. This trench had unfortunately cut through the second and third periods of rampart backing, destroying the junction of backing material and fort wall.

When the fort wall was built, the topsoil had been cleared down to bedrock under and immediately north of the wall, to give a level footing for the clay and cobble foundation; the upcast was thrown back inside the fort area. The trench left behind the wall had then filled with an accumulation of masons' chippings covering the footings and first three courses of the wall.

The rampart bank, the bottom two feet five inches of the present height being wholly of turf, had been laid down on the old land surface and the upcast. This bank extended from the fort wall for a distance of fifteen feet six inches and terminated in a small retaining wall, three courses high, of laid but undressed stonework. A band of coarse sand varying in thickness from two to seven inches overlay the turfwork and extended over the retaining wall. The sand was overlaid in turn by about one foot of brown soil and clay which reached as far as the top of the retaining wall of the turfwork and was itself retained by stones set over the layer of sand. Above this was a greasy black layer one inch in thickness containing occupation material. This black band extended right over the retaining wall and continued over the *intervallum* road.

To counteract the natural upward slope of the land the space immediately north of the retaining wall had been filled with large whinstone boulders to act as a levelling for the earliest *intervallum* road, which at this period had extended between the retaining wall and the south wall of the Commandant's house, a distance of twenty-one feet six inches. Like the turf rampart backing and its retaining wall, these boulders had been thrown on top of the old land surface.

The second period bank was seventeen feet wide and retained at the north end by large stones. The material was a mixture of earth, clay and large stones, most of which lay directly on top of the black layer and were covered by the

earth and clay to a depth of between twelve and eighteen inches. At a distance of twelve feet from the fort wall and on top of the material of the bank, large flags were encountered on the east side of the trench with small stones similar to the roadway surface on the west side (fig. 1 bottom plan). There was no evidence of any kerb associated with the flags, but they had been cracked in position as if heavy traffic had passed over them. A line of stones forming a kerb did overlie the flags at a point seventeen feet from the fort wall but this kerb is most likely to be associated with the latest *intervallum* road.

The latest period of the bank (fig. 1 plan) differed from the earlier ones; it was composed of stones and clay with a roughly built kerb or retaining wall six feet from the fort wall. This kerb was three courses high of undressed stone set in clay; it probably acted as a kerb to the rampart walk. The retaining wall of the mound, built in re-used dressed stone and faced only on the north side, roughly overlay the position of the earliest retaining wall. The stone kerb of the *intervallum* road, mentioned in the preceding paragraph, is also of this period and would give a width of just over twenty feet for the latest *intervallum* road.

Immediately north of the rampart backing, but at a slightly higher level and extending for eight feet, was a paved area one foot six inches below the present surface and separated from the *intervallum* road by several inches of black soil. This paving, if it is not post-Roman, probably represents the final period in the history of the fort.

The distance between the inside face of the fort wall and the south wall of the Commandant's house was thirty-nine feet, not forty-two feet as shown on the published fort plan. The fort wall was in a good state of preservation at this point; it stands nearly seven feet high and shows twelve courses, excluding the clay and cobble foundation. If the stone kerb found six feet from the fort wall was the kerb of the rampart walk this came at a height of at least seven feet six inches; if a further two feet six inches is allowed to the parapet walk,

and six feet for the breastworks and crenellations, the curtain wall of the fort would stand to a height of at least sixteen feet.

The south wall of the Commandant's house stood four feet high with one course more on the north face than on the south. The two bottom courses were of large masonry set on a clay and cobble foundation and both had a two-inch offset. The remains of this wall were well enough preserved to warrant permanent display.

Rampart backing has been observed several times during past excavations at Housesteads, although most of it had been removed on various occasions both during and after the Roman period. Hodgson noted a terrace of earth and clay which ran from tower to tower along the inside of the wall to a height of about five feet above its foundations. During the excavations of 1898<sup>1</sup> a solid body of chippings and clay was found to run along the south wall to the west of the south gate, and rough retaining walls for the rampart backing were also found north of the east gate, and to the west of the north gate.

Although clay or earth seems to have been the most common material used for rampart backing on the fort walls, turfwork has been found at Haltonchesters<sup>2</sup> as well as at Housesteads. One possible reason for the use of turf at Housesteads could be that it was the most accessible material as there was no ditch on the south side of the fort.<sup>3</sup>

A consideration of the stratified and datable finds, which were few in number, enables approximate dates to be assigned to the main structural phases. The turfwork forming the lower part of the first-period rampart backing is primary and therefore Hadrianic. The brown soil forming the upper part of the first-period rampart backing contained a fragment of Antonine samian, no. A1. From the black greasy layer which overlay both the brown soil and the earliest *inter-*

<sup>1</sup> A.A.2, XXV, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> A.A.4, XXXVII, p. 178 and p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> A.A.4, X, p. 83.

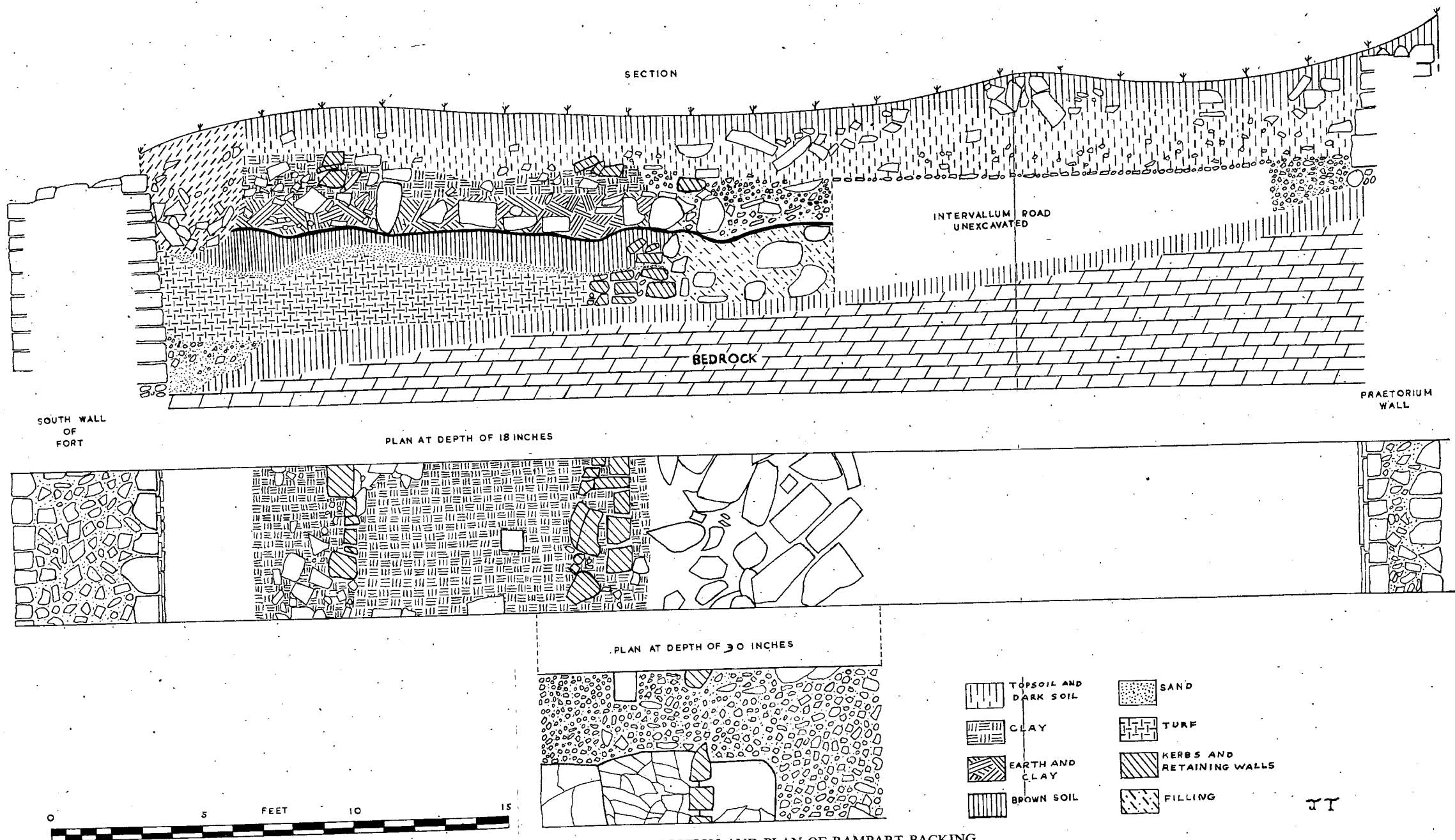


FIG. 1. HOUSESTEADS, 1962: SECTION AND PLAN OF RAMPART BACKING.



*vallum* road came a late second-century bowl no. 1, and two surviving earlier vessels, nos. 2 and 3, indicating an early third-century date for the second-period rampart backing of large stones, earth and clay. The late third-century dish, no. 4, came from the top of the backing, indicating an early fourth-century date for the third-period rampart backing of clay, with its rampart walk and retaining wall. The mortarium, no. 5, of a type which emerged before the end of the third century, was found in the make-up of the latest *intervallum* road, indicating an early fourth-century date for that road. The cooking-pot no. 6, and the contemporary mortarium no. 7, came from the surface of the road, below the high-level paved area. While both vessels are of types which first emerged before the close of the third century they are specially characteristic of the first two-thirds of the fourth century, and tend to confirm the early fourth-century date indicated for the latest road surface by the pottery in its make-up, and by its relationship to the third-period rampart. The paving is self-evidently later, but would seem to have been laid before the closing years of the Roman period because late fourth-century pottery was conspicuously absent from below its level, though a quantity was found in the topsoil in the same section.

On this evidence it appears that the structural phases in rampart backing and associated works at Housesteads fall in with the established periods in the history of the Roman Wall as a whole.

- Period I. Hadrianic. Turf backing and earliest road.  
Antonine. Superimposed layers up to the  
black greasy layer.
- Period II. Severan. Large-stone, earth and clay backing.
- Period III. Constantian. Clay backing with rampart walk;  
latest road.
- Period IV. Theodosian. High level paving.

## THE FINDS

*A. Samian*

Professor Eric Birley kindly examined and commented on the finds of samian pottery; it is described but not illustrated.

1. From the top layer of the period I rampart backing: fragment of central Gaulish samian, too small to distinguish the pattern or identify the potter; probably late rather than early in the second century.
2. In the material of the period II rampart backing: fragment with winding scroll and vine leaves; as there is no ovolo this cannot be assigned to a particular potter, but it is certainly of Antonine date.

*B. Coarse Pottery, fig. 2*

I am indebted to Mr. J. P. Gillam for his help and comments on the coarse pottery. References to *Gillam type* refer to his paper, *Types of Roman Coarse Pottery Vessels in Northern Britain* (AA4 XXXV, p. 180).

1. From the black layer on and near the south edge of the earliest *intervallum* road; bowl with footring and everted rim, in light brown fabric with a brown slip; no exact parallel is known, but a vessel with a similar profile comes from a kiln at *South Carlton*,<sup>4</sup> near Lincoln, dated A.D. 140-180 by the excavator, but possibly of somewhat later date.
2. Findspot as no. 1; Dish in greyish fawn fabric with dark grey surface; cf. Birdoswald 1932,<sup>5</sup> no. 6, Hadrianic-Antonine.
3. Findspot as no. 1: lid in dark grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 339, A.D. 80-140.
4. From the top of period II rampart backing: flanged bowl or dish in light grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 314, A.D. 220-360.
5. In the *intervallum* road at the north end of the trench: mortarium in cream fabric with white and grey grit; cf. *Gillam type* 283, A.D. 290-370.
6. From the surface of the latest *intervallum* road, below high level paving; cooking-pot in reddish brown sandy fabric, black burnished; cf. *Gillam type* 146, A.D. 280-350.

<sup>4</sup> Ant. J., vol. 24, 1944, p. 140, fig. 13.

<sup>5</sup> C.W.A.S., vol. L, p. 56, no. 6.



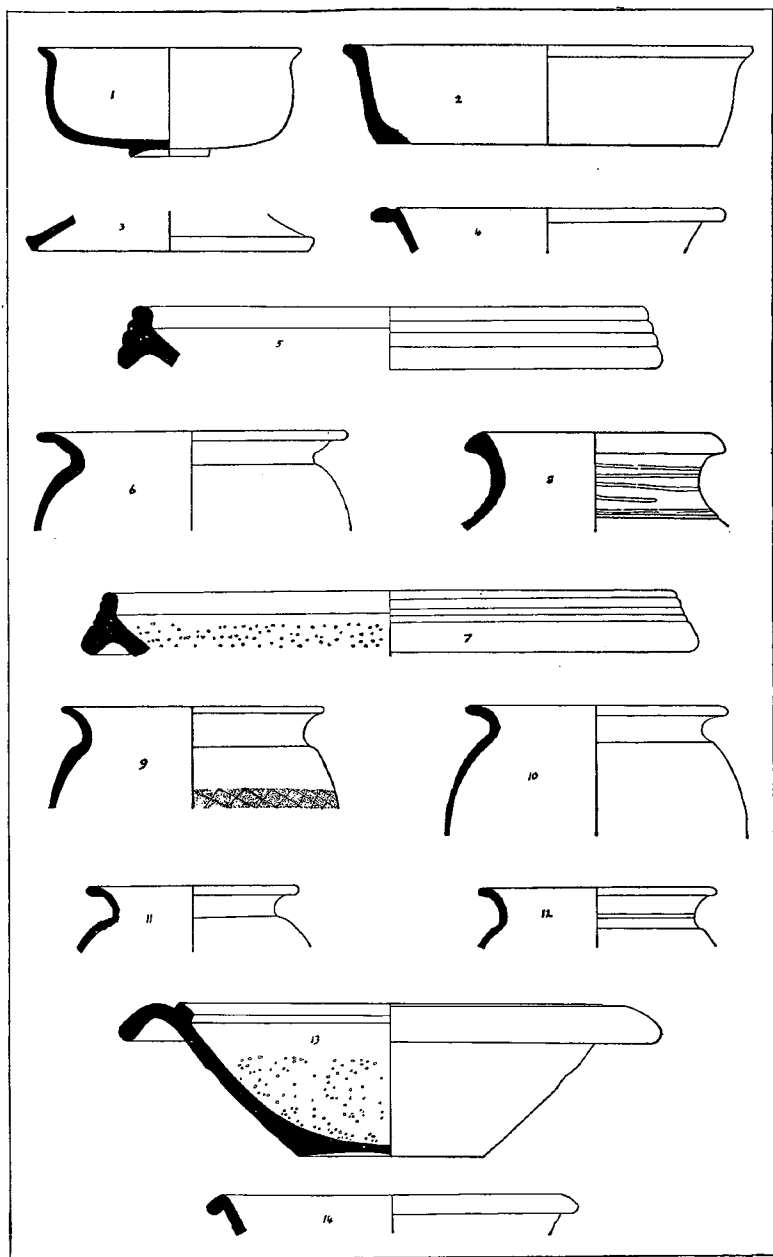


FIG. 2. COARSE POTTERY (1/4).

7. Findspot as no. 6; mortarium in pipe-clay fabric with red grit; cf. *Gillam type* 284, A.D. 290-370.

Nos. 8-14 were found as a group, unstratified on top of the south wall of the Commandant's house, or immediately behind it. The group, which consists largely of third-century pieces, may have been dumped on top of the wall during one of the earlier excavations.

8. Jar in hard bluish grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 31, A.D. 160-230.
9. Cooking-pot in light grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 138, A.D. 180-250.
10. Cooking-pot in light grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 140, A.D. 180-270.
11. Cooking-pot in light grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 142, A.D. 190-280.
12. Cooking-pot in hard grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 142, A.D. 190-280.
13. Mortarium in creamy-white fabric with multicolour grit; cf. *Gillam type* 253, A.D. 140-180.
14. Dish in grey fabric; cf. *Gillam type* 312, A.D. 190-240.

#### *C. Other Finds*

Of the other finds amphora sherds and fragments of leather were found on the old land surface beneath the turf rampart backing. The largest piece of leather was sixteen inches long and five inches wide, with a hem and stitch holes on one side. This leather was very thin and possibly came from a garment rather than tent material.

A piece of metal weighing about three-quarters of an ounce, and of a shape such as would come from molten metal being spilt on the ground, was found in the makeup of the latest period *intervallum* road. On analysis, carried out by Dr. R. F. Tylecote, Department of Metallurgy, King's College, the metal was found to be silver containing a little copper and iron.

