VII.—A HOARD OF IRON AND OTHER MATERIALS FROM CORBRIDGE

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The object of this paper is to record the discovery, and to give a preliminary account of the composition of, the so-called Corbridge Hoard excavated in 1964. For reasons which will become apparent later it is clear that some time and not a little work have to be expended before the material can be finally published; this report is offered in the interim.

DISCOVERY AND CONDITION

The discovery was made in 1964 during the Joint Training-Excavation of the Universities of Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne at Corbridge.[1] On the 17th July one of a series of trenches laid out to investigate the stratification of the Flavian *principia*, the building immediately to the east of it (on the site of the 2nd-century *praetoria*[2]) and the road between the two, clipped the south-eastern corner of an iron-bound wooden box in its final stage of disintegration (see fig. 1). Closer investigation showed that the find was in fact a wooden chest tightly packed with metal and other objects—

[1] Jointly directed that year by Professor Eric Birley and the author. Other members of the directing staff who took a special interest include Dr. N. McCord, who was supervisor of the trench in question, Dr. J. C. Mann and Mr. J. Tait, who supervised the task of excavating and lifting the chest after the author had left the site.

[2] The building in question has many of the characteristics of the later hospital which lay between the *principia* and the granaries in Antonine times, but the presence of the Hoard in one of its rooms must raise the question of whether it was a *fabrica* instead. It does not appear to have been the early *praetorium*.

mostly of iron. Later a larger area was opened under the direction of Mr. John Tait and Dr. John Mann to recover the whole of the find. This enlarged excavation revealed that a portion of the wooden floor-boards of a room in the building to the east of the *principia* had been sawn through and raised, the chest buried and the floor-boards replaced. The fire which had subsequently destroyed the earliest fort at Corbridge had charred and shrunk the replaced boards so that when cleaned by the excavators the history of the burial was clearly visible.

The find was then removed to the newly-established conservation laboratory of the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle, where work was continued on it. Shortage of staff and funds, however, meant that between August 1964 and May 1967 only limited treatment could be carried out. More recently as a result of a most encouraging grant by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, progress has been improved, although very much still must be done before the worst cases of corrosion and collapse are out of danger.

COMPOSITION

The Hoard had been buried in an iron-bound wooden chest some 38/39 ins. × 20 ins. in size and at least 12 ins. in depth, although subsequent pressure had rendered the depth difficult to ascertain. The wood of the chest had almost completely perished and could not be saved although the four angle-iron uprights had survived. "Unpacking" revealed the true wealth of the Hoard which for convenience is here described and listed in groups according to composition.

Organic material (1) WOOD. By and large the wooden items of the Hoard have suffered badly. Except for a few fragments they had only survived where they had become so impregnated with water-borne rust particles that their cellular

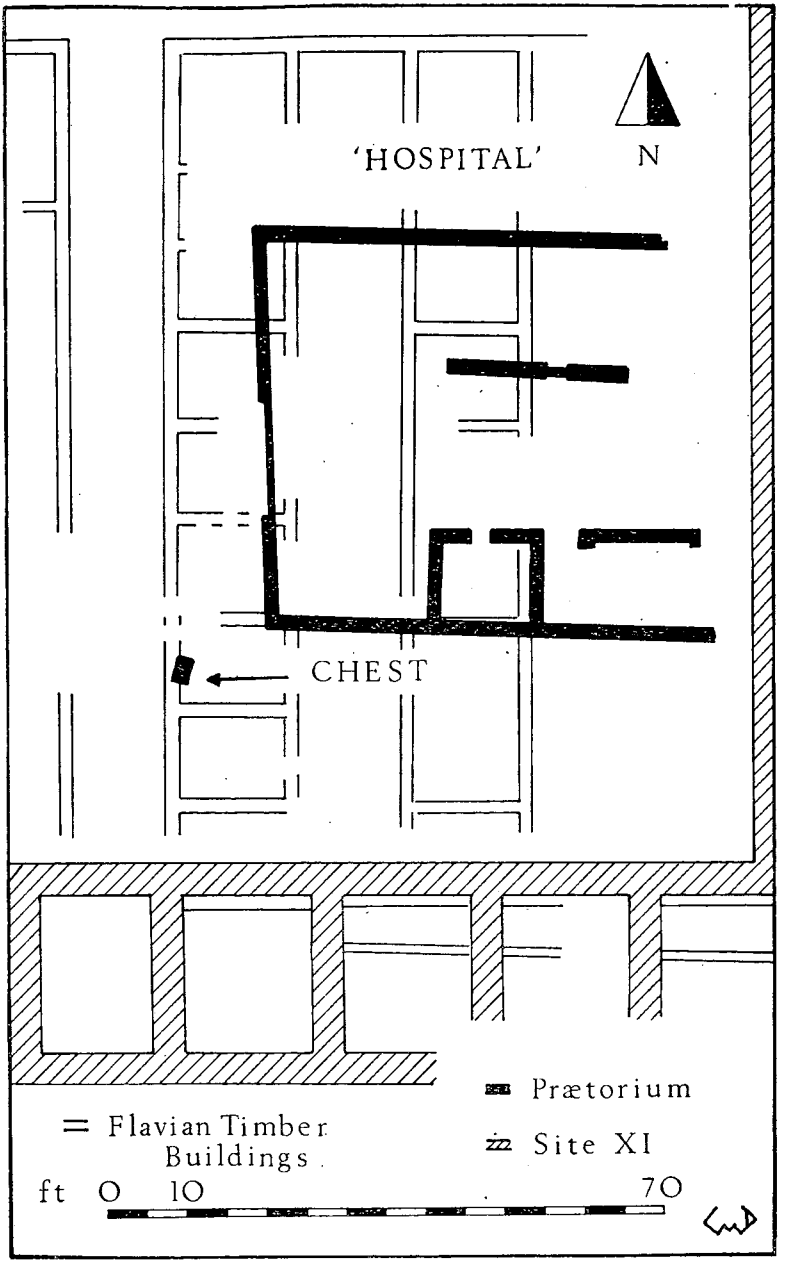

FIG. 1. PROVENANCE OF THE HOARD

structure had been greatly reinforced. The wooden items comprised:

(a) a wooden mug or tankard approximately 7 ins. in diameter × 8 ins. in height. The tankard was bound with iron and bronze bands and originally had possessed a handle of thin bronze plate. The whole was in a very badly collapsed state owing to pressure from much of the iron work of the Hoard and only small portions of the wood had survived. More of the bronze and iron remained, but these were also in a damaged condition.

(b) at least eight fragments of writing tablets mostly small, together with a mass of isolated flakes. It is now impossible to say how many tablets originally existed for they have suffered badly—probably as a result of being manufactured from soft-wood in the main.[3] As nearly all the surviving pieces are inscribed the loss is correspondingly greater.

(c) the remains of an unknown number of pieces of cut wood, often sheathed in iron on one or more sides. Mostly only the iron had survived and the original purpose of the pieces is now quite obscure.

(2) LEATHER AND SKINS. The few completely isolated fragments of leather which were recovered probably came from the armour backing described below (paragraph 9.g). Short and stiff-haired skins of some such animal as deer occurred in several places and it is possible that these had been used to wrap items of iron in the same way as the fabric described next.

(3) FABRIC. Considerable amounts of fabric survived and have been studied by Dr. J. P. Wild of Manchester University. While not wishing to anticipate the final publication he can be quoted in brief: "none is so coarse that it could only have been sacking, none so fine that it is certainly

[3] See those described in the B.M. Quarterly xxxi number 3-4, p. 101ff.

clothing. None of it seems to have been the shirt worn beneath the armour plates. Most of it seems to have been used as wrapping, or just thrown into the chest because it was lying around." In three cases the remains of hair and/or feathers adhering to the fabric suggest cushions to Dr. Wild.

(4) ROPE. At least two bundles of spearheads had been tied together with lengths of rope. Dr. Wild reports that the rope used show both plying and plaiting of their strands.

Like the wood, the skins, fabric and rope had survived only as a result of heavy impregnation by water-borne iron particles.

(5) BONE. Several fragments of bone have been recognised, mostly in a very fragile condition. They include:

(a) a 10 ins. length of horn, neatly sawn at the end.

(b) a scapula (sheep?) which had been adapted for some useful function by the drilling of a hole through it.

(c) a small knife-handle $2\frac{1}{2}$ ins. in length and 1 in. in width.

(d) a small carved toggle $1\frac{1}{4}$ ins. long.

Inorganic Material (6) GLASS.

(a) so far 47 small gaming counters have been recovered in size from $\frac{7}{12}$ of an inch to $\frac{5}{6}$ of an inch in diameter. 21 are black, 25 are white and 1 is of uncertain colour.

(b) 2 large melon-beads $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch in diameter, one of dark blue glass, the other of turquoise faience.

(c) pieces of broken window glass occurred at various points in the chest. At least 5 small and 1 larger fragment ($3\frac{1}{5}$ ins. $\times$ $2\frac{3}{10}$ ins.) have been recovered.

Metals (7) BRONZE. The condition of bronze objects varies according to their position and the amount of pressure put on them by other items in the Hoard.

(a) an empty scabbard 2 ft. 5 ins. in length and ranging in width from 1 in. to $1\frac{3}{4}$ ins. The roughly torn appearance of the top end of the scabbard and the absence of any belt fastening suggests that it was awaiting repair at the moment of burial. The object is fashioned from a single thin sheet of bronze bent over at the edges and joined together down the centre of the back face by a narrow riveted strip of bronze. The riveting, in particular, is delicately and competently done. What type of sword the scabbard was intended to carry is not clear, for it is the shape of neither a *gladius* nor a *spatha* blade.

(b) 3 bronze "roundels" or flanged fitments, one now in two pieces (fig. 2). These most probably had formed part of a (folding?) stool[4] and are not greatly dissimilar from the fragments found at Newstead and now in Edinburgh,[5] except that the Newstead pieces are much longer and made of iron. The Corbridge pieces are on an average 2 ins. in diameter across the flange and $2\frac{3}{10}$ ins. long.

(c) several pieces of bronze binding and sheeting, a scabbard mount (?) and various stud-heads both flat and dome-shaped make up the rest, together with several left-over odds and ends.

(8) LEAD. Four pieces of lead have been identified, all are typical left-over pieces rather than actual objects. Two are small strips, one a solid lump and the last a largish hemispherically shaped sheet 7 ins. in diameter.

(9) IRON. By far the largest portion of the Hoard consists of iron tools, armour and scrap metal. The condition of this varies considerably: while the bundles of spearheads

[4] See: J. Liversidge: *Furniture in Roman Britain* (1955) p. 28ff. plus plates 17, 39-41.

[5] J. Curle: *Newstead* (1911) pl. lxiv.

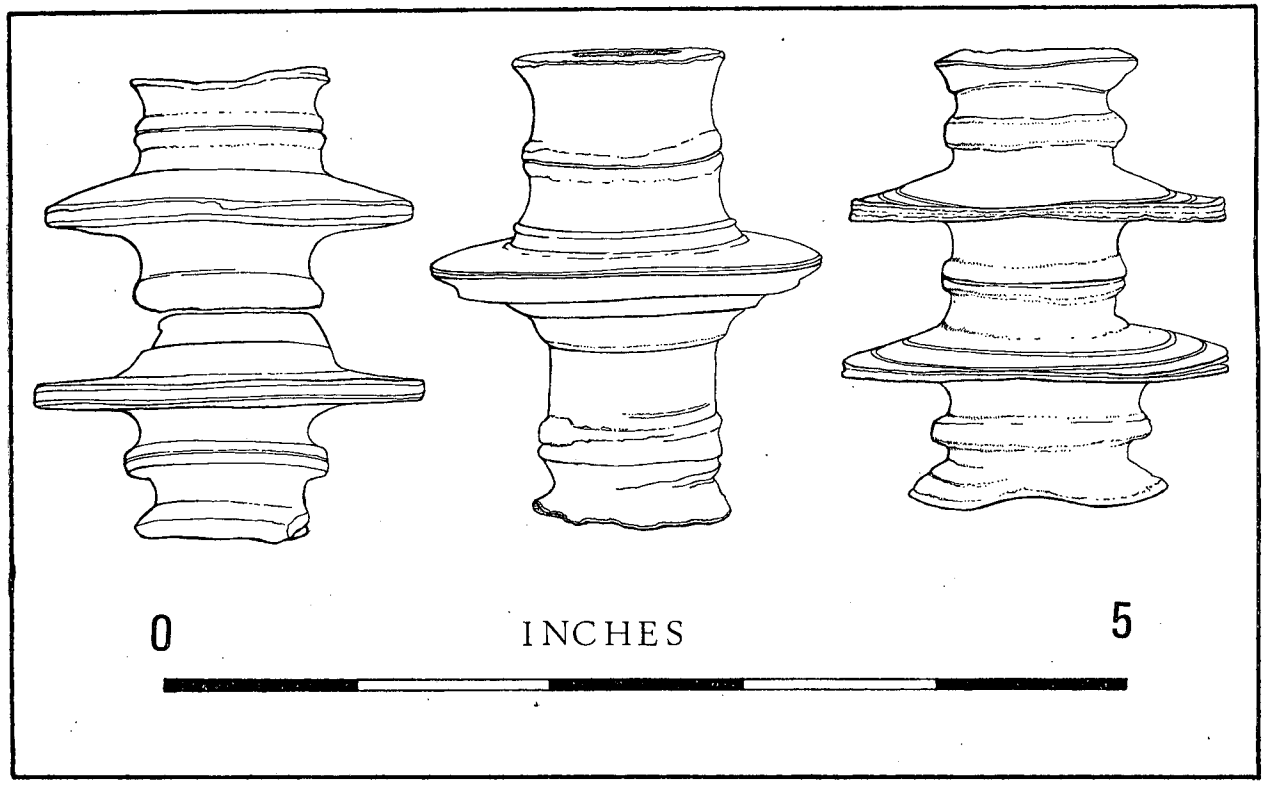

FIG. 2. BRONZE OBJECTS

and bulky objects such as the pick-axe still contain much actual metal and are in many cases continuingly active—adding a considerable problem and urgency to the work of conservation and treatment—by contrast the comparatively thin armour had been mostly, and easily, reduced to corrosion product and is, accordingly, fairly stable and inactive: this means that compared with the rest of the iron work it is both in a much less critical condition and has been much less destroyed or disfigured by the process of corrosion. The iron objects mainly comprise:

(a) several hundred nails, occurring both in large lumps and in single numbers. Many are bent or disfigured and must have already been used. They vary in length from about 2 ins. to 8 ins.

(b) a mass of spearheads of various sizes and shapes, some still with fragments of wood in their sockets (fig. 3). None apparently resembles a legionary *pilum* although the longest is just over 15 ins. in length. In two cases bundles of spearheads have been tied together with rough rope (see paragraph 4 above) and have become fused into a solid mass by the corrosion product: such groups are among the most difficult and serious conservation problems.

(c) a series of tools including: a bow-saw, now in at least four pieces but probably originally over $16\frac{1}{2}$ ins. in length and at least $2\frac{1}{2}$ ins. at its widest point; a pick-axe head 15 ins. long; a small prising implement or jemmy $6\frac{1}{2}$ ins. long; a pair of small shears and at least one gouge.

(d) a block and tackle over 12 ins. in length with the remains of its wooden pulley surviving (fig. 3).

(e) two lock-keys.

(f) a mass of iron bars, braces, supports or brackets, and general scrap material.

(g) several sections of legionary cuirasses or *loricae segmentatae*

As various rumours concerning these have passed into

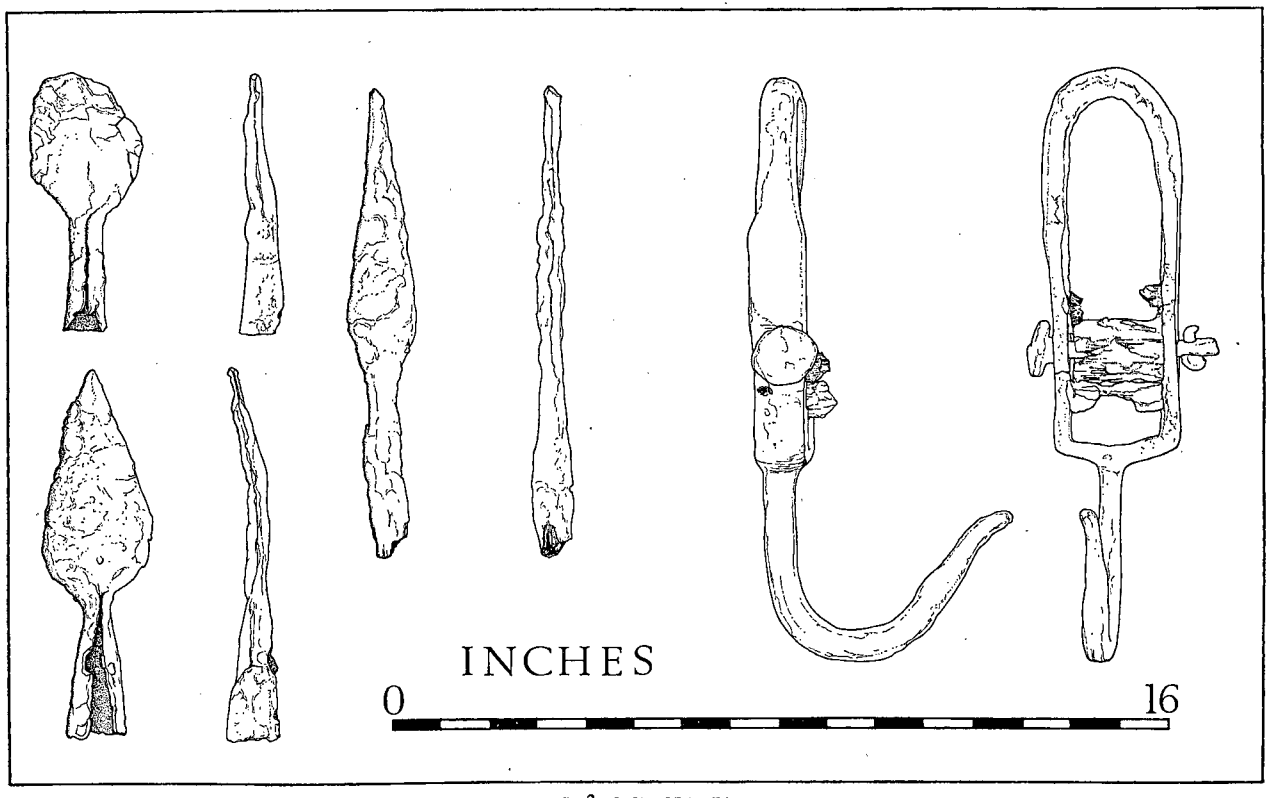

FIG. 3. IRON OBJECTS

circulation a slightly longer comment may be justified here. The sections are not from a single *lorica*, nor are they from an officer's dress uniform. On the contrary they have every appearance of being a collection of unmatched random pieces which have been quickly gathered (and in some cases wrapped in the fabric already described (paragraph 3 above) and hurriedly deposited in the upper layers of the chest. That they were placed on top of the rest of the Hoard is extremely fortunate for although little of the actual iron is now left and in many cases the sections have cracked and broken apart, in very few has the weight of other objects compressed them into densely fused masses or disfigured and bent them beyond identification. Although much of the material can never be restored to a working condition, it will be quite possible to make exact replicas from almost all of it, complete and usable.

From a study of the sections it is clear that the normal *lorica* consisted of something between seven and ten units, depending on whether: (1) some of the sections are continuous pieces hinged at the joints or separated units fastened by buckled straps; (2) The "shoulder straps or bands" are separate and normal sections or not. The pieces so far isolated can be classified as: body-hoops, shoulder straps or bands, front and back plates, and shoulder pieces. Individual sections normally buckle and strap together, although in some cases hooks provide an alternative, and the body-hoops are laced, front and back. Each section consists of anything from three to seven plates or hoops held together by leather straps riveted on to the underside of the pieces, and not a continuous coat or jerkin as von Groller thought.[6] All the fastenings and hinges and almost all the buckles are bronze, as are the large rosette-like studs which decorate various of the upper body-pieces.

In total something like four sections of body-hoops, eight or nine quarter-sections of front and back plates, five of shoulder-straps or bands (unless these last two groups are at

[6] *Der Römische Limes in Osterreich*, II, col. 97.

present misunderstood and fit together in some manner not at the moment apparent) and two very dissimilar sets of shoulder-pieces have been identified. Many of the sections vary more than just a trifle in their size, thickness and fastenings, but none at present appears to be radically different from the other pieces of the same class.

DISCUSSION

Three specific points only have been singled out for discussion at this stage.

Date. The chest was firmly sealed by the replaced floorboards of a building belonging to the 1st-century fort at Corbridge. The occupation of this fort is divided into two periods, as witnessed by two periods in various of its buildings, one following the other without a destruction. The Hoard almost certainly belongs to the second of these periods so that a firm *terminus ante quem* is provided for it by the destruction of the 1st-century fort sometime after the year A.D. 98.[7]

Purpose. It is clear from the list of contents above that the Hoard is not a consistent or logical collection. Ranging from cushions, gaming pieces and a tankard, by way of armour, an empty scabbard and writing tablets to scrap bronze, lead and used iron nails, only two serious possibilities for its collection present themselves: either loot or items purposefully hidden. Enemy looting is ruled out by the Hoard's position and (on a moment's reflection) so can Roman looting for although the armour, tablets and cushions might be worthy of such, the scrap metal can hardly have been. We are left with the second possibility, that the material was purposefully hidden. Seen in these terms a reason at once appears for the inclusion of metal—especially the iron—for Herodian tells us that the Britons "value this metal as other barbarians value gold".[8]

[7] *A.A.*[4], xxxiii (1955) p. 231.

[8] *Histories* iii. 14. 7. *Cf.* the careful burial of 12 tons of nails at Inchtuthal, *J.R.S.* li (1961) p. 160.

Seen in this light the objects fall into place as the contents of an armourer's workshop,[9] hastily collected and thrust into the first available chest: tools, armour and scrap metal together with other items which were of sufficient value in the eyes of the collectors to justify hiding; skins, cushions, writing tablets and a tankard. It is probably not too far-fetched to see the Hoard as the results of the hurried clearing of a workshop at a time when the fort was under attack and in serious danger of falling. That it did fall is shown by the destruction that ended its life: a hint that the destruction was already in progress is given by the broken window glass, while the absence of the sword which belonged to the scabbard speaks for itself in such circumstances.

Parallels. If the dating suggested above is correct it can be observed that the Corbridge Hoard is contemporary with the more famous collection of material from Newstead, now preserved in Edinburgh, the only difference being that the Corbridge material was buried before the sack of its fort, that from Newstead afterwards. In both cases the material contains legionary equipment, implying the presence of legionary troops in otherwise auxiliary forts:[10] a point of importance to anyone studying the question of how the High Command attempted to hold such a large portion of Agricola's conquests with the reduced provincial army of the later part of Domitian's reign.

[9] For *Custos Armorum* see *R.I.B.* 796.
[10] *PSAS* lxxxiv (1949-50) p. 11.