XII

MUSEUM NOTES, 1979*

Lindsay Allason-Jones, John Atkinson and Richard Coleman-Smith

1. TWO UNRECOGNIZED ROMAN SURGICAL INSTRUMENTS (fig. 1)

The excavations at South Shields Roman Fort in 1977 produced a bronze object,[1] 14·8 cm in length, with a domed head supported by a flanged cup with ridging at the neck. The upper shank is faceted and divided by two bands of ridging whilst the lower shank is decagonal in section and tapers to a well formed hook (fig. 1). This bears a striking resemblance to a "pin" from Housesteads on display in the Museum of Antiquities (Accession no. 1956.151.9.A; fig. 1). The Housesteads example is 13·8 cm long and has a disc head but with the same flanged cup and ridging at the neck. The upper shank is circular in section with only one band of ridging and without faceting. The lower shank is of decagonal section as in the South Shields example, but the tip is broken. On close examination, however, the Housesteads "pin" also appears to have been hooked. This makes its identification as a dress or veil pin doubtful, as does the heavy ridging on the shank which would surely tear holes in fine material.

Several hooked "pins" of a similar type have been found on Roman sites in a medical context. There are three with faceted shanks from Bingen in Germany,[2] and Milne shows a smooth-shanked parallel from Naples Museum in *Surgical Instruments in Greek and Roman Times* (1907, pl. LI).[3] The British Museum has two faceted hooks of unknown provenance.[4]

Blunt and sharp hooks are frequently mentioned in Latin medical texts. The blunt hook (*hamus retusus*) was used for dissection and for raising blood vessels in the manner of the modern aneurism needle, whilst many of the operations performed by modern surgeons with the dissecting forceps were carried out by Roman surgeons with sharp hooks (*hamulus acutus*). Celsus (VII, xxviii) and Paulus Aegineta (VI, xxx) particularly recommend the use of sharp hooks in removing tonsils. They were also used as traction hooks to extract the foetus in a difficult labour (Celsus VII, xxix). The Housesteads hook appears to be a sharp hook whilst the heavier, thicker South Shields example is probably a blunt hook. The "decoration" of faceting and heavy ridging may have a functional use in helping to prevent the hand from slipping whilst performing delicate manipulations.

Unfortunately there is no record of the discovery of the Housesteads hook. The hospital, when excavated by Miss D. Charlesworth in 1969–73,[5] yielded no medical instruments. Excavations at South Shields, on the other hand, have produced a number

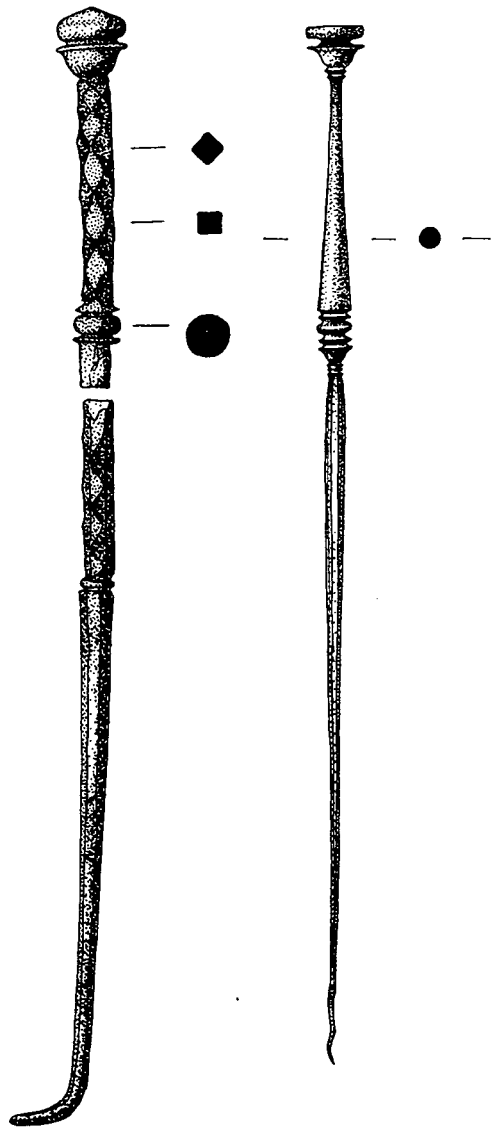

Fig. 1. Roman surgical instruments from South Shields (left) and Housesteads (1:2). See Note 1.

Drawn by R. Herbert (left) and Mary M. Hurrell.

of objects which could have a medical interpretation but so far have not exposed a recognizable hospital building.

LINDSAY ALLASON-JONES

2. THE BRONZE FINGER FROM CARVORAN (fig. 2)

The following observations were made during conservation of the bronze finger, a relic of a Roman statue larger than life, from Carvoran on Hadrian's Wall (Accession no. 1956.163.1.A).

At the base of the finger is a representation of a finger-ring comprising a simple

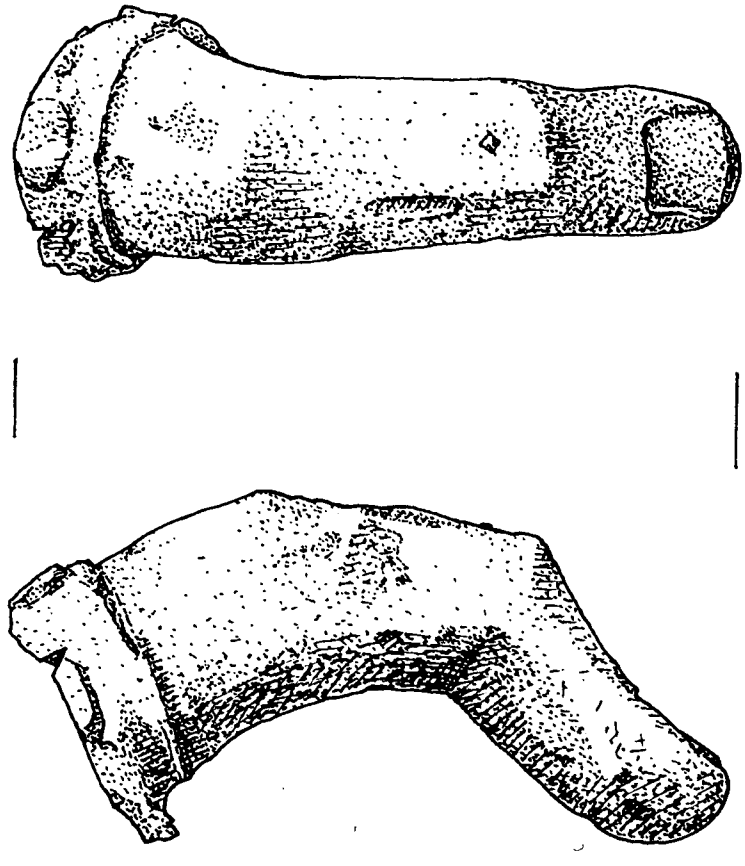

Fig. 2. Bronze finger from Carvoran (1:1). See Note 2.
Drawn by Mary M. Hurrell

band with an oval boss. The finger has broken or been torn from the statue directly below the ring. Compared with the corresponding human finger the proportions of each section of this bronze finger are irregular. It may be suggested that the distortion was deliberate, to counteract optical distortion, and the finger therefore probably came from a statue standing on a plinth with the hand from which the finger came raised in some gesture.

A more interesting feature, however, is that at the base of the finger-nail there is a square-sectioned iron pin, cast into the bronze. It measures 1·8 mm square × 16 mm long (max). In the "cire perdue" or "lost wax" process, which the finger shows to have been that used for casting the statue, the normal modern practice is to employ spacing or holding pins of the same metal as the statue. Maryon states that bronze rods or iron nails were used in Roman bronze castings.[6] But modern bronze-sculptors would dislike the use of iron and, in an admittedly brief search, the present writer has been unable to find any report of the employment of iron in a Roman bronze sculpture. At the same time, it is regrettably true that descriptions of Roman bronze sculptures all too rarely give technical details of this kind, not least perhaps because they are so easily overlooked unless the writer knows the technical processes and problems involved.

JOHN ATKINSON

3. TWO NEOLITHIC AXEHEADS FROM NORTHUMBERLAND (figs. 3, 4)

These axeheads were not found together. No. (1) was found in Corbridge and No. (2) near Sewingshields. Both were discovered by the writer of this Note and presented by him to the Museum of Antiquities (Accn. no. 1978.21).[7]

(1) This axehead (fig. 3) is of fine-grained stone, consistently light grey in colour throughout. It is now 120 mm long, but both the cutting edge and butt end have been damaged in antiquity. The whole axehead is much abraded, and measures *c.* 65 mm across the cutting edge, which has a large chip missing from one side. The thickness is 42 mm, which is rather more than usual for this type of axe, and its sides are more rounded. The whole workmanship is rather more clumsy.[8] The findspot was at Corbridge North Land, in ditch clearings on the east side of Cow Lane (NY 987652).

The axehead must have been lodged in the bank of the Corbridge Middle School, the findspot being 10 m to the north of the main school gate.

(2) This axehead (fig. 4) is likewise of a fine-grained and light grey stone but displays considerable colour variations. It also bears iron-stained lines, as if it had been scraped by a plough or spade. The length is 77 mm, but there is considerable accidental chipping at the butt end. The cutting edge measures *c.* 50 mm across, and the axehead is 15 mm thick. This axehead is much more typical of the axes found in the area.[9] The findspot was in disturbed ground within 300 mm south of Hadrian's Wall at Sewingshields (NY 809699), and the axehead had been dislodged during the work

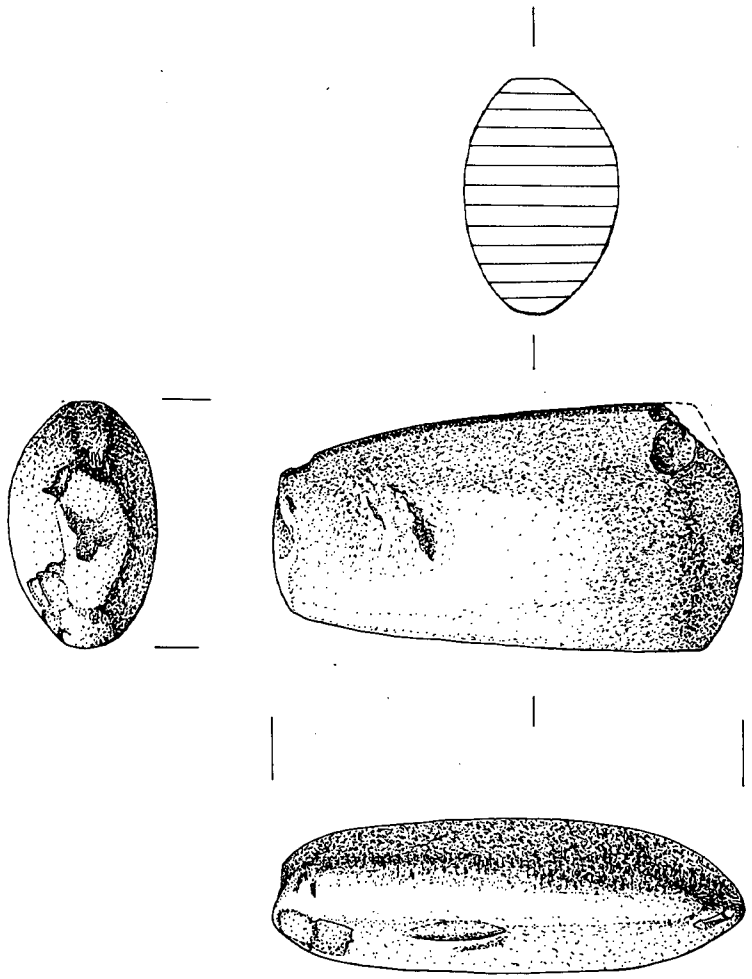

Fig. 3. Stone axehead from Corbridge (1:2). See Note 3.
Drawn by Mary M. Hurrell

of repointing the Wall here. Possibly it was brought here in Roman times in a load of earth for levelling operations.

Petrological analysis of these axeheads may well reveal their origin, which from visual examination would seem to be Great Langdale.[10]

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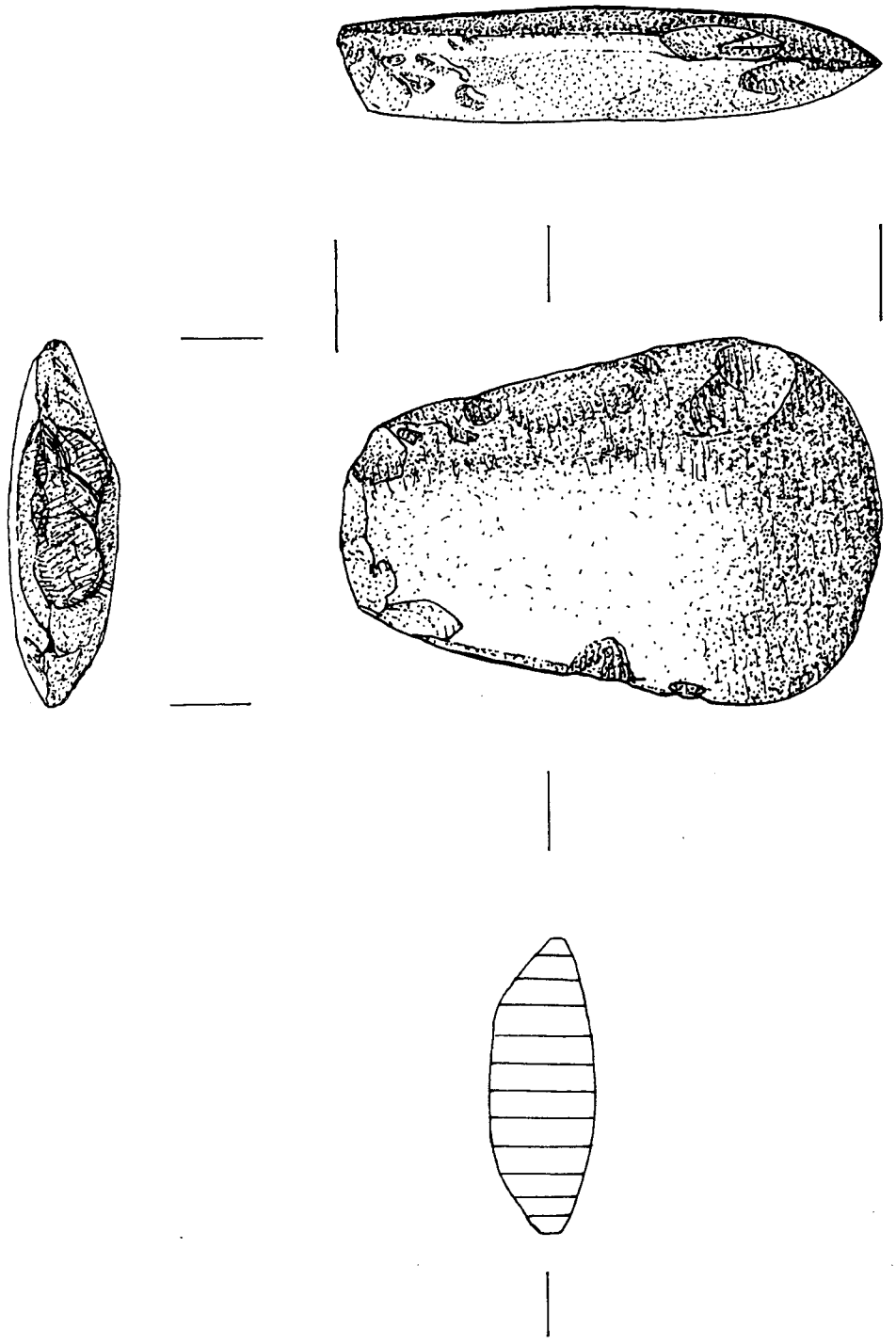

Fig. 4. Stone axehead from Sewingshields (1:1). See Note 3.
Drawn by Mary M. Hurrell

4. A BRONZE AGE SPEARHEAD FROM HOLY ISLAND (fig. 5, Plate XV)

Bronze Age spearhead from Holy Island (1:1). See Note 4.
Photo: Dept. of Photography, University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Although this spearhead (Accn. no. 1978.20) is much damaged and corroded, it is of considerable significance, being the first recorded Bronze Age artefact from Holy Island. Furthermore the specimen of shaped wood preserved by corrosive action in the socket of the spear has been identified as ash, and constitutes valuable evidence of the wood favoured by Bronze Age people for the shafts of their spears.

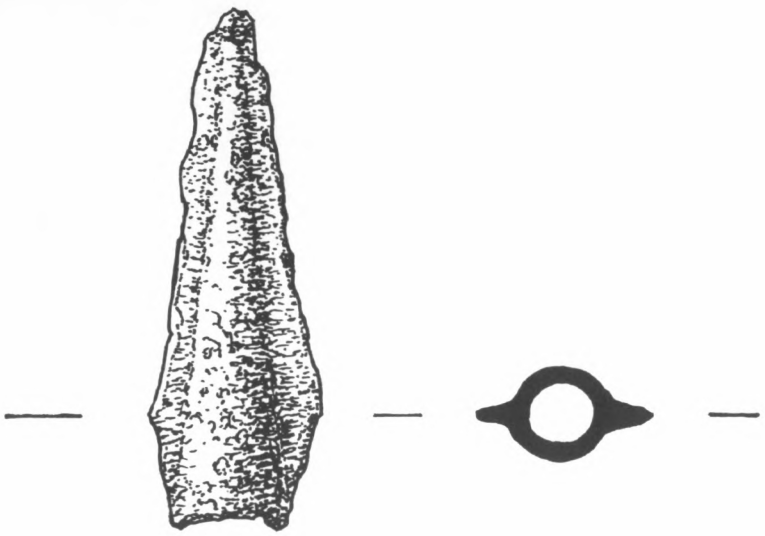

Fig. 5. Bronze spearhead from Holy Island (1:1). See Note 4.
Drawn by Mary M. Hurrell

Unfortunately the spearhead is so damaged that Mr. Colin Burgess informs me that it is impossible to tell whether it dates from the Middle or the Late Bronze Age. It is 70 mm long and 25 mm across. The fragment of wooden shaft is 20 mm long and 5 mm across, and has obviously been tapered to fit tightly into the socket. I am grateful to Mrs. A. Miles of the Building Research Advisory Service, Department of the Environment, Princes Risborough Laboratory, for the following note: "The specimen taken from a Bronze Age spearhead has been identified as Ash (*Fraxinus* species)."

The spearhead was found by Mr. Ashton Coleman-Smith in 1976, on the shore-line just north-west of Lindisfarne Priory, Holy Island (NU 124418). It had presumably been washed out of the cliff underlying the Victorian rubbish dumps in this area.

I am indebted to Mr. Burgess for his comments, and to Mary M. Hurrell for the drawing.

RICHARD COLEMAN-SMITH

NOTES

* Prepared for the press by Dr. D. J. Smith, with cordial thanks to the contributors.

[1] My thanks are due to Mr. R. Miket for allowing me to publish this example.

[2] *Germania* IX (1925), fig. 3, nos. 15–17; *Saalburg Jahrbuch* XXVII (1970), 90, fig. 3, nos. 8–10.

[3] Milne also gives examples which differ in the shape of the head: pls. XXIII, XXIV.

[4] The British Museum Catalogue of Bronzes: nos. 2318 (Blacas Collection) and 2319 (Comarmond Collection).

[5] *AA*[5] IV (1976), 17–30.

[6] Herbert Maryon, *Metalwork and Enamelling* (4th ed., rev. 1971), 214.

[7] The writer is indebted to Mr. T. Gates for help in the preparation of this note and to Mary M. Hurrell for the accompanying drawings.

[8] G. Jobey, "Three polished stone axeheads from Northumberland", *AA*[4] XXXIX (1961), 378–80.

[9] L. Harrison, M. Ovens, and C. Burgess, "New stone axeheads from the Kielder Area", *AA*[4] L (1972), 280–2.

[10] *PPS* XVII (1951).