

NOTE ON AN ARAB WATER-BOTTLE.

BY FRANCIS W. READER.

IN the last issue of the Transactions (N.S., III, iv, 334), in the paper on "Old Camberwell," Mr. Philip Johnston gives us a drawing of a comparatively modern Arab water-bottle, the lower part of which was dug up in Grove Lane, not far from the site of a pond fed by springs, and which he labels as Roman. After telling us "the vessel is of a type found all over England," and describing it in detail so as to leave no doubt of its identity, he goes on to draw certain conclusions: "(1) That the Roman legions must often have marched up Grove Lane . . . when they would naturally halt at this wayside spring to fill their water-bottles; (2) that this vessel found throughout England, of identical size, shape, material, colour, and ornamentation, is, in fact, the regulation water-vessel of the Roman soldier." Having settled these points, he enters into more minute details of how a particular legionary broke this identical pot, the lower portion of which survived to be discovered and interpreted in the light of modern knowledge.

Now, so far as the story is concerned of the Roman legions refreshing themselves in the district now known as Camberwell, it is certainly no wild improbability, but does it seem at all necessary to produce a pot to prove so harmless a supposition? In any case, the water-vessel as represented by Mr. Johnston does not advance the matter in the slightest, as its advent in this country was at least 1,300 years after the last Roman legion had left Britain.

It is quite true that this type of vessel is found commonly in many parts of the country, and it has just as commonly been mistaken for Roman. It frequently turns

up at Society meetings with this preposterous claim, as do also Oil Jars, Acoustic Pots, and Flemish Bricks.

These water-bottles, one of which is represented (Fig. 1), are of porous, unglazed earthenware, of slightly varying size, but about 10 inches in height and $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide. They have a full swelling body, with two handles, a narrow neck, except at the top where it is enlarged above the top of the handles, looking like an egg-cup placed on the mouth of an Amphora. In most cases the curve of the body is flattened at the widest part, which is a particularly Arab or Moresque feature.

The point which fixes these objects with certainty is a perforated diaphragm or strainer fastened in the neck at the bottom of the enlarged portion. Mr. Reginald Smith tells me that this is not always present, but all that I have seen have it, or the traces of it when it has been broken away. The object of this strainer is said to be for the purpose of keeping out flies.

They are made of porous clay and left unglazed in order that some of the water may ooze through, and in a hot, dry atmosphere evaporation rapidly takes place, causing the bulk of the contents to be icy cold. They differ slightly in detail, while their colour is variously red, buff, or grey.

This type of vessel has never been found in true association with Roman remains, although some have been found on sites like London, where the soil has been disturbed and a hopeless mixture of objects of all ages consequently results, or in superficial finds.

Some of them have at times been exhibited in our smaller local museums as Roman. A few years ago some were so shown at Chelmsford, but, as I then pointed out the error to the Curator, doubtless these have since been properly classified.

Mr. Johnston does not seem to have been misled by this

means, however, as he only refers to the Hull Museum. Although he does not state how they are there classified, he claims them as examples of his supposed Roman Army regulation water-bottle. His choice could hardly have been more unfortunate. In order to clear up the point, I wrote to Mr. T. Sheppard, who has charge of the Hull Museum, although I had no doubt whatever that he was far too able a curator to have perpetrated this blunder. His reply was prompt and forcible. I found he had forestalled me by writing to the Editor, correcting the error. Mr. Sheppard feels particularly aggrieved, as he has for years been combating this fallacy—some of his correspondence on the subject he has been good enough to send me. Moreover, he has figured and described one of these objects in No. 17 of the Hull Museum Publications, 1903, where he says it is of Eastern origin, probably Egyptian.

Although I have long known, in a general way, that these vessels hailed from the north coast of Africa, and were of recent date, I have never troubled to try and fix their precise locality, or the limits of their period, until the occasion of this note seemed to make it necessary.

From my enquiries at the British Museum, I found the authorities there, while unable to definitely settle these points, regard the vessels as an introduction to this country during the 17th century. Mr. Reginald Smith has, however, kindly drawn my attention to the opinion expressed by the late Sir Augustus Franks, published in 1878.* In this instance the example was found in a cottage on the marsh near the road from the Menai Straits to Newborough, the cottager having found it some two or three years before, in the sands of the coast. "Its form suggested the notion that it might prove to be another evidence of the Roman occupation of Anglesea." Fortunately, however, a photo-

* "Arch. Cambrensis," Fourth Series, Vol. IX, p. 224.

graph of it was submitted to Franks, who reported on it as follows:—

“Before I read your letter I saw from the photograph that the vessel was an Arab water-cooler, and not Roman. This is confirmed by the presence of the perforated portion in the neck. It is probably from Egypt or Morocco, and has, no doubt, come with some wreck. I have shown the photograph to a friend well acquainted with Egypt, who at once recognised it as Arab. The best are made in Egypt at a place called Balas (?), whence they are called by the same name.”

After inserting this report, the writer of the notice remarks that, although the archæological interest of the find was thus destroyed, an account of it was desirable as a warning to others not to arrive at hasty conclusions. The object itself is represented by an excellent full-page wood engraving by the late Worthington G. Smith.

It will be noticed that Franks' opinion leaves the question of locality a rather wide and open one. I referred the matter, therefore, to my friend Miss M. S. Johnston, who has spent much time in Egypt, studying the geology of the Nile, to which she replies:—

“A great many earthen pots are made in Egypt of Nile mud. Hardly any of these, however, have handles, and then only in the case of the larger vessels, which have little round handles at the top, and even this seldom occurs. I certainly do not consider the pot, of which you send me a photograph, to be Egyptian, but should put it down as Moroccan. . . . I have seen many water-bottles in Egypt, but none with handles similar to your specimen.”

Miss Johnston's opinion is borne out by Lane, who says in his “Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians”:*

* Everyman's Library edition, pp. 151-153. (The first edition was published in 1836.)

"The water-bottles are of two kinds, one called *Dorak* and the other *Kulleh*; the former has a narrow and the latter a wide mouth." Various samples of each class of these vessels are figured, none of which has handles. A typical specimen of each class is here shown (Fig. 2).

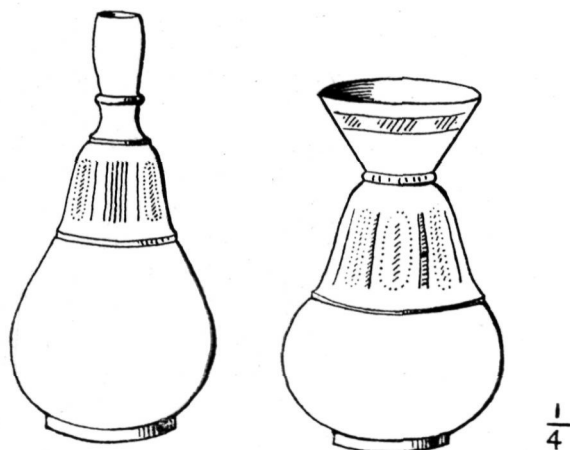


FIG. 2.—MODERN EGYPTIAN WATER BOTTLES.
(After Lane)

Regarding Franks' reference to "Balas," to which he adds a (?), Miss Johnston says: "I have never heard one called a 'Balas,' but always a 'Ghoulah.' There is a place called Ballah, and Lake Ballah, on the Suez Canal, but I should not have thought pots would specially have been made there." *

Mr. Sheppard claims an Egyptian origin for them on the evidence of one of his Museum attendants, who was formerly in the Army, and who, when coaling at Port Said in 1883, saw these vessels in use. Whether a casual observation of this kind can be relied upon, years after-

Deir el Ballas - Middle Egyptian
(modern)
Pottery producing village also famous
for Predynastic culture.

wards, to distinguish between the characteristic Egyptian types and the two-handled type we are considering, seems to me open to doubt. Any way, as Miss Johnston observes, Port Said is very cosmopolitan.

A strong probability of the Moroccan origin of these vessels is afforded by a pot in Miss Johnston's possession which was brought by her aunt from Morocco in 1880. In shape it is almost identical with the object we are dealing with, except for the foot, which is straight (Fig. 3).



FIG. 3.—MODERN MOROCCAN WATER BOTTLE,
GLAZED AND PAINTED.

Its chief point of difference is that it is glazed and painted with characteristic Arab ornament. It has the strainer in the neck, and its affinity is so strong as to amount almost to proof. It is possible also that they have a wide range over the north coast of Africa. The question of their age

is also very indefinite. From their resemblance to the Amphora it is supposed that they are a survival from the Roman period. They might, however, be a Renaissance, or have evolved independently. Such a problem could, perhaps, only be solved by special study in the home of their origin.

It is thought that some of them were introduced to this country as early as the 17th century, but what proof there is of this I have been unable to discover. Most that I have met with have been found in cupboards and cellars of old houses, and quite without any proper record. Some have been dug up in London and elsewhere.

The only example with any particulars that may perhaps indicate its presence here as early as the 17th century is that shown in Fig. 1. Mr. Arthur Wrigley, when on a geological expedition about five years ago, obtained it from workmen who were excavating in alluvial earth near the site of "Ruckholts," a 17th century house formerly standing near Temple Mills, Leyton. Mr. Wrigley thought it might be Roman, but his scientific training having taught him caution in such matters, he came to me for my opinion. It was subsequently exhibited at the Essex Field Club correctly described.* The fact of one specimen found in these circumstances is, of course, *no proof of its age*; it might easily have been buried by some fortuitous accident at any time subsequent to the building of the house. It appears to have been some time in the ground, as it was considerably encrusted with iron-oxide, but, as this is commonly the case with pots that have been in the soil, I did not regard it as anything unusual, not then having heard of Mr. Johnston's "Roman army regulation water-bottle" on which he has detected remains of an iron ring by means of which it was slung by straps to the soldier's

* "Essex Naturalist," Vol. XVII, p. 26.

body. The only example I have heard of with any such attachment is in the Maidstone Museum, which Mr. Allchin says "has a cord arrangement of recent make, which is continued as a double loop to several inches above the mouth, and is fitted at the top extremity in a grooved iron ring, so that it served as a handle for carrying the bottle. It is entered as Egyptian in our donation book under the date of its reception in 1876."

It is difficult to suppose, owing to the porosity of these vessels and the presence of the strainer, that in earlier times anything was imported in them, as was the case with oil and olive jars.

The South Kensington Museum authorities do not consider them older than the 18th century, but they seem to have no positive data for their opinion.

Mr. Sheppard does not think they have any claim to so great an antiquity as the 18th century, but considers them quite modern, and still being made, owing to their frequent and continuous appearance in the shops of Hull, where they may easily be picked up for two or three shillings. He points out that they occur more commonly in seaport districts, which appears to be the case.

Mr. A. G. Wright, of the Colchester Museum, sends me the following:—

"Yes, I know these water-bottles. When I was at the Guildhall, a man brought one in and asked me the date, and I told him modern Spanish. He pooh-poohed the idea, as he said he bought a pair of a navvy, who told him he had dug them up with Roman remains in the City. I sent him to Franks, and stipulated for a postcard with his opinion. It came next day: 'You are quite right!'"

Mr. Wright tells me also that they have a specimen of these vessels at Colchester, which is entered in their books as "Eastern."

One of precisely the same pattern as that figured by

Mr. Johnston was recently shown me that was dug up a few years ago at Crown Hill, Croydon. It was found close to some old walls, and, of course, the whole find was considered Roman. From what I could learn, the walls were ordinary brick of the 17th or 18th centuries.

Other examples may be seen in Hackney Library, and Mr. Reginald Smith tells me of one at Chichester, and he has a note of one found in Beds., and another near Rayleigh, Essex. There are numerous others scattered up and down the country.

I regret not being able to give more exact particulars of this vessel at this stage, but perhaps these imperfect notes may be the means of eliciting more definite information. The evidence so far produced is sufficient to show that they are not Roman, and it is most desirable that the erroneous statement published in the last number of these Transactions should be corrected with the least possible delay. As these objects are so well known, probably the worst result of this unfortunate error will be that the patience of the custodians of our museums will be further taxed by more frequent visits from owners of these "Roman Pots."

Not only is it necessary to distinguish the proper classification of relics, but it is most essential that those attempting their interpretation should have some sense of their significance. On this account I should like to pursue a little further the use Mr. Johnston has made of this pot, and for this purpose it is quite immaterial whether it is Roman or modern, as the object in no way affects the author's arguments.

In the first case, let us consider the most that may reasonably be deduced from such a find. It is merely that an agricultural labourer, during his daily task in the fields, broke his drinking vessel. This very obvious, everyday,

pastoral incident, however, possesses far too little glamour to satisfy the author; besides, it is a blind alley which leads nowhere. Nothing less than the "Mailed Fist" and "Shining Armour" will answer his purpose, therefore the military must be called out.

Mr. Johnston explains the enlarged top of these water-bottles by saying, "A sponge kept in the neck would serve to moisten the lips." Possibly this is based on his researches of the writings of the ancients, but unfortunately he has omitted to give us the reference to his authority for this interesting fact. We may perhaps be allowed to imagine the soldiers of this outpost, after having filled their water-bottles at this Camberwell crystal spring, conversing thus:

"'Tis a wild night, Ventralis, and the blast drives icicles into the blood. Wilt thou moisten thy lips with the sponge from my water-cooler?"

"Nay, gentle Boreas, only yesternight I drew a new sponge from the canteen, yet do I fear to anger the gods, at this momentous hour, by excessive potations."

"'Tis true, Ventralis, that furious Britons lurk in every thicket, yet do I crave the pardon of the gods: I am a terror for drink, so will I even risk it! May the Goddess Fortune smile upon thee!" (Boreas moistens his lips.)

This practice of the Roman soldiery may strike the ordinary public as weird, compared with the idea of a drink as indulged in by the present-day "Tommy," and may seem rather more like a "flapper" opening her vanity-bag to powder her nose.

For the moment the military (and the pot) are left near what "*must* have formed a natural fastness of the Britons when the Romans had gained a footing." Mention is made of a camp, but whether it was the Romano-British fastness referred to, or whether it was Neolithic, Bronze

Age, or Cromwellian, we are not told. Various records of Roman discoveries in the neighbourhood are passed in review. British trackways which may not have been British, and roads which may or may not have been Roman, are detailed. One of these latter, indeed, was personally inspected by the author, who secured "the distinct impression of its Roman origin." Why he secured this, and how a mere inspection of a modern roadway or street can be of value in forming such a conclusion, does not appear.

We are now to be allowed to discover the well-kept secret, up to which all this has been so skilfully and so subtly leading. Let us keep our eye carefully on the sign-posts of the road we have travelled. A piece of a pot, a spring, the Roman army water-bottle, a Roman legion. The main army is shortly to appear, and a little piece of earthenware has now to perform the supreme task that it will be called upon by its exacting master to perform. That is "to focus attention anew on a very interesting theory." This very interesting theory, which does not originate with Mr. Johnston, it must be admitted, but is conjured up by his potent piece of pot, proposes to transfer the scene of Boadicea's defeat from Pentonville and bestow it upon Camberwell.

Poor Pentonville! It once had many evidences of its time-honoured tradition, but it has fallen on evil days. The inscribed stone, supposed to be to the memory of a soldier of the 20th Legion, which was discovered in a cottage garden, has vanished. The Pretorium of Suetonius is now regarded as only the remains of a moated grange. The tooth of the Roman elephant and the stone spear-head of the valiant Briton who slew the monster are explained away. All, all have disappeared as effectually as those gorgeous "beauties" that once haunted Camberwell and honour it by bearing its name. No, not all is lost to

Pentonville; there is still the name of "Battle Bridge," and this seems to cause Mr. Johnston some qualms of conscience, and because of this he cannot altogether find it in his heart to despoil Pentonville without some compensation. Therefore he flings to it the great Alfred's victory over the Danes. He quite overlooks the fact that this victory is already very much appropriated, and now Pentonville must remain poor indeed. Not that Pentonvillians will worry very much. In fact, it seems that there was always a good deal of scepticism about Boadicea's association with the place, among those who troubled themselves about its history. It is true that the mammoth's bones and the stone implement from Black Mary's Hole are said to have given the name to the public-house (the Elephant and Castle) in which they were first exhibited some 200 years ago, when crowds of Londoners journeyed out into the fields to marvel at this great discovery.

One thing is certain—that, if this terrible defeat of Boadicea took place in the meadows of Camberwell and the legions of Suetonius were equipped with Arab water-bottles, not one, but many hundreds of these fragile vessels must have been broken in the fearful struggle of that strenuous day. Many more of these broken pots will have to be found before Thornycroft's Quadriga is taken from the Embankment and escorted in civic state to Camberwell.