

A Note on the Romano-British and Other Finds from Carr House Sands, Seaton Carew, Cleveland

Hedley Swain

The last one hundred and sixty years has seen the energies of sea, wind and man combine to reveal a large group of Roman finds dating to the second and third centuries AD from the sand dunes and beach at Carr House Sands, on a stretch of coast 1.5 km (0.8 miles) from the centres of Hartlepool and Seaton Carew, on the north Cleveland coast (NZ 5215 3100, *Figures 1 and 2*). The Seaton promenade has for thirty years covered the site of the only known archaeological excavations connected with the site. However, with the majority of surviving finds now on temporary display in the Gray Museum and Art Gallery Hartlepool, this is a suitable time to review the history of discoveries at Seaton, and to suggest some origins for the finds including the most enigmatic of these discoveries, the 'Danish Neolithic pottery'.

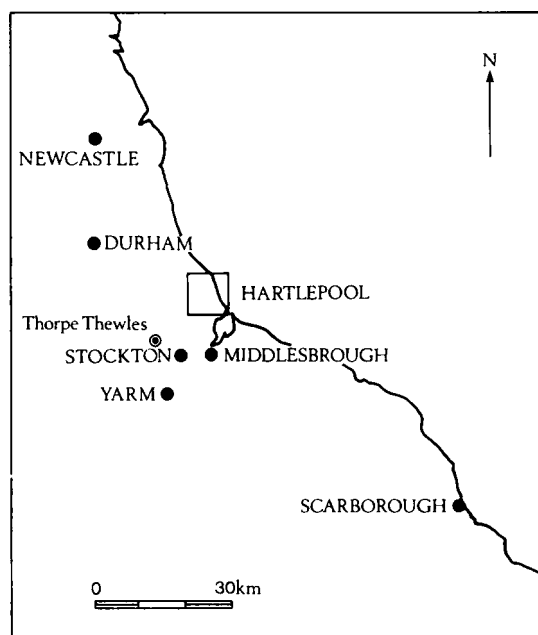


Figure 1 North-East England showing Area of Figure 2 and location of Thorpe Thewles Iron Age settlement

The first finds were recorded in 1816, when sherds of Samian and other pottery, fragments of red tile and animal bones were recovered. In 1822, during engineering work, E. Pearce found 'a large fragment of red earthenware' on the same spot. Pearce, intrigued

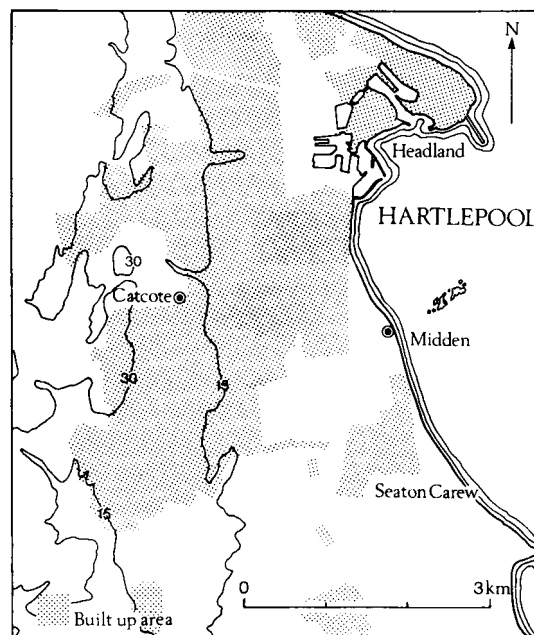


Figure 2 The site of the Carr House midden in relation to modern development and Catcote Romano-British site

by these finds, searched in more detail and uncovered an iron spearhead, a brass coin of Domitian and a small 'brass' fibula (Middleton, 1885, 104). These artefacts remained in private hands and their present location is unknown. Further finds were made in 1881, when R.O. Backhouse found a selection of shellfish and animal bones; some of these bones had been worked: a 'picker' in horse bone and the worked vertebrae of a whale. In the same year H. Casebourne discovered a bronze trumpet fibula which is still in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries, Newcastle upon Tyne (*Figure 3.1*).

It was the discovery of this fibula which prompted R.M. Middleton to undertake an excavation of the area in 1883. An area 80 yards \times 5 yards (73 \times 4.5 m) was uncovered to a depth of between 1 and 4 feet (0.3–1.2 m). The site proved to be a refuse tip 'like the kitchen middens of the Danish coast', but 'ample confirmatory evidence of the Romans was disclosed' (Middleton, *op. cit.*). The site dug by Middleton was at the time considered to have been the full extent of the midden. However, in the winter of 1883 a storm

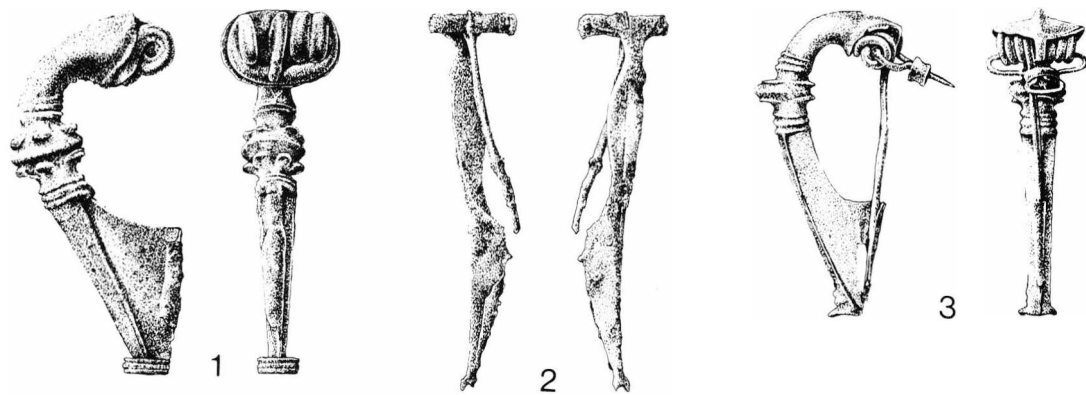


Figure 3 1. Trumpet Brooch found in 1881. 2. Brooch excavated by Middleton, 1883. 3. Trumpet Brooch found on beach 1978. Scale all 2/3

shifted some of the dunes, revealing a further area extending up to 150 yards (137 m) to the north of the excavated area. No structural evidence was recorded, indeed the only allusion to architectural evidence in connection with the site comes from J.A. Petch (1925, 25–6) who records ‘two flat stones in an upright position and a third lying near them’, discovered in 1816. There is no accompanying description of the exact site or context of these finds.

Despite a poverty of structural remains, Middleton’s excavation proved rich in finds. These are reviewed briefly in the 1883 report and are recorded as being given to the Society of Antiquaries, Newcastle upon Tyne (Middleton, *op. cit.*). However, the list of finds which have survived to the present is clearly incomplete (detailed in the appendices below). These finds, along with those found before 1883, suggest that the Carr House Sands midden represents elements of a Romano-British civil settlement dating to the second and third centuries AD.

Finds reported by Middleton include two stamped Samian bases, one of which was recognisable, reading IVLIVS F(ECIT) and which can be firmly dated to the second century AD (Middleton, *op. cit.*), the stamp being of German origin. Twelve other fragments of Samian were recovered. Other pottery included two fragments of amphorae and large numbers of sherds of so-called ‘Romano-Salopian’ ware and ‘Upchurch’ ware. Only two sherds of this apparent Upchurch type pottery survive.

Two sherds of coarse hand-made pottery survive, almost certainly part of the collection described by Middleton as being ‘Celtic’ or ‘Saxon’. The sherds are of Iron Age type, similar to that found at nearby Catcote and Thorpe Thewles (Swain and Heslop, 1984, 65–74). Other finds included a single piece of crucible with green metallic fragments on the interior. Several pieces of mortaria were found, described as having quartz or ironstone inclusions, the latter recorded as being broken up for chemical analysis. Two spindle whorls were also found, one of Kimmeridge shale, the other made from a sherd of Samian.

A large selection of bone artefacts included several

bone pins of common Roman type, and a small ‘paddle-shaped’ artefact. There is also a shaped toggle and a piece of unfinished worked bone which may be a partly made bead or a phallus amulet. The only other surviving artefact of particular note is a bronze fibula of simple design and undecorated, crushed out of shape but otherwise whole, best dated to the first century AD (Figure 3.2). Middleton makes no mention of unworked bone in his report other than in his initial description, but a number of animal bones survive with the other finds and it might be assumed that many more were found and discarded.

No coins were found by Middleton, however, he records (1885, *op. cit.*) that a local labourer had made a full-time hobby of collecting coins from the dunes; of the 100 examples he had reputedly found, 70–80 were still in his possession in 1883, and 43 of these were definitely Roman, ranging in date from Claudius and Titus to Valens and Gratian.

It seems unlikely that any of the missing finds from Middleton’s excavation will reappear. J.A. Petch, when commenting on the collection in the 1920s (1925, 1–34) mentions only the finds at present accounted for. It therefore seems likely that the vast majority of finds from the 1883 dig were discarded at an early date, either by Middleton himself or at a later date in Newcastle with only artefacts of particular interest being kept.

First reported by Gordon Childe in 1932 (1932, 84) is a group of eight decorated pottery sherds which he stated to be all dated to the late Danish Neolithic. However, Piggott (1954, 321) and more recently Cowen (1966, 212–216) have presented arguments against the association between this pottery and the Cleveland coast. The supposed discovery, in isolation, of such a select group in a context otherwise associated with second century Roman material must have its authenticity questioned; indeed, Piggott rejected it on these grounds.

Cowen has examined in detail the origin and history of this pottery; his findings do not make encouraging reading. He concludes that the pottery was probably first associated with Middleton’s excavation

after the arrival of the Carr House finds in Newcastle, and that this was due to a cataloguing error.

Another long-held but extremely unlikely association with the site is the view originally put forward by Haverfield (1912, 201–214) that the finds might be related to a Roman signal station. Haverfield claimed that the finds included ‘a substantial element of the fourth century and particularly of the late fourth century’ (1912, 206). The reference here is almost certainly to the many coins found along the dunes, as none of the other finds support this statement. Even if finds did belong to the fourth century the placing of a signal station on this particular stretch of coast would seem unlikely. The known stations along the North Yorkshire coast are in commanding positions, and in all likelihood would have been intervisible. A more likely location along the coast north of the Tees estuary would be Hartlepool Headland.

In recent years three new finds of Roman material have been made by people using metal detectors on the beach immediately adjacent to the site of the midden. These help confirm an early date for the site. A Roman coin of Vespasian dated to 75 AD was found within 5 feet (1.5 m) of a bronze trumpet brooch of the second century AD (*Figure 3.3*); both of these finds are now in the Gray Museum and Art Gallery, Hartlepool. The brooch is similar to the example shown to Middleton in 1883. A crossbow brooch of the third–fourth centuries AD was also found on the beach; this has been recorded, but remains in the possession of the finder.

As one element of a second to third century Romano-British settlement the Seaton Carew finds fit well with other sites discovered through excavation and field survey in Cleveland. The introduction of Roman influence to the area in the first and second centuries is readily attestable at Thorpe Thewles (Heslop, forthcoming) and Ingleby Barwick (Heslop, 1984) and is hinted at by a series of sites where field-walking has produced finds of Roman and native pottery (S. Sherlock, pers. comm.).

The site of most direct relevance to the Carr House Sands find is that of Catcote, where large numbers of similarly dated finds were excavated on a site which produced only minimal Roman structural remains (Long, pers. comm.). The two sites are only 3 km apart and give direct evidence for the presence of two Romano-British settlements in the Hartlepool area; a feature of some significance in a region until recently seen very much as a backwater to the effects of romanisation.

Within the context of the sites already mentioned Catcote and Seaton fit well as representing the continued romanisation of the area, the closeness of these sites being a quirk of survival and discovery rather than representing any inherent value in the location.

As to the exact location of the settlement associa-

ted with the Carr House midden, this will probably have lain to its seaward side; Middleton (1885, *op. cit.*) records that within the lifetime of some of the older occupants of the area the sea had eroded the coast quite considerably.

An inland site from which rubbish was deposited on to the seashore and which might still be available for further study is argued by the lack of finds or structural evidence during development of the area.

January 1986

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Mr John Menear and Ms Lindsay Allason-Jones for their help and advice and to the former for allowing me access to the finds at present in the Gray Gallery and Museum, Hartlepool. I am also grateful to Blaise Vynner for reading and commenting on this text, and to Andy Hutchinson for providing the illustrations.

APPENDIX 1: *Finds from Middleton's excavation in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne*

Numbers refer to labels on Middleton's contemporary photograph of finds (*op. cit.*).

Shaped bone toggle (4); shaped bone, either amulet or uncompleted bead (5); group of carved bone pins: two with perforated heads (9, 10), three with carved heads (7, 8), two others.

One bronze trumpet brooch (1).

One other bronze brooch.

Stamped Samian base (2).

Shale spindle whorl (3).

One sherd of native pottery.

Three sherds of Roman pottery: two of Upchurch ware, one of Lyon ware.

Group of teeth and bones: pig and cattle.

Two sherds of thirteenth century pottery.

APPENDIX 2: *Finds from Middleton's excavation now lost*

Piece of semi-carved bone.

Samian spindle whorl.

Samian base with one clear stamp.

Twelve sherds of Samian, one a rim.

Piece of crucible with metallic fragments on inside.

Several pieces of mortaria.

Two fragments of amphorae.

Several pieces of ‘Romano-Salopian’ ware.

Other sherds of ‘Upchurch’ ware,

Fragments of native pottery.

Possibly other sherds of medieval pottery.

APPENDIX 3: *Nineteenth century finds recorded by photograph, but now lost*

Cross-bow brooch, stray find made in 1881.

Paddle-shaped bone pin from Middleton's excavation (6).

APPENDIX 4: *Recent stray finds, now in the Gray Art Gallery and Museum, Hartlepool (with Accession Numbers)*

Roman coin of Vespasian 136, '78.2.

Trumpet brooch 136, '78.1.

APPENDIX 5: *Recent finds in private possession*

Cross-bow brooch.

References

- CHILDE, V.G., 1932. The Danish Neolithic pottery from the coast of Durham, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4 ser, 9, 84–8.
- COWEN, J.D., 1966. Two Scandinavian finds from the Durham coast, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4 ser, 44, 211–7.
- HAVERFIELD, F., 1912. Notes on the Roman coastal defences of Britain, especially in Yorkshire, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 2, 201–214.
- HESLOP, D.H., 1983. The excavation of an Iron Age settlement at Thorpe Thewles, in *Recent Excavations in Cleveland*, 17–27, (Middlesbrough).
- HESLOP, D.H., 1984. Initial excavations at Ingleby Barwick, Cleveland, *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 1, 23–34.
- MIDDLETON, R.M., 1885. On some vestiges of Roman occupation between West Hartlepool and Seaton Carew, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 2 ser, 10, 103–114.
- PETCH, J.A., 1925. Roman Durham, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4 ser, 1, 1–34.
- PIGGOTT, S., 1954. *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles*, (Cambridge), 321.
- SWAIN, H.P., and HESLOP, D.H., 1984. Some aspects of pottery production and use in the North Eastern Iron Age, *Bulletin of the Experimental Firing Group*, no. 2, 65–72.