

A Fragment of Decorated Metalwork from Newstead, Roxburghshire

by *D. V. Clarke and H. McKerrell*

The fragment, now in the collection of Mr Mason, was a surface-find from the site of the fort at Newstead, Roxburghshire. Its maximum dimensions are 64 mm by 80 mm and it

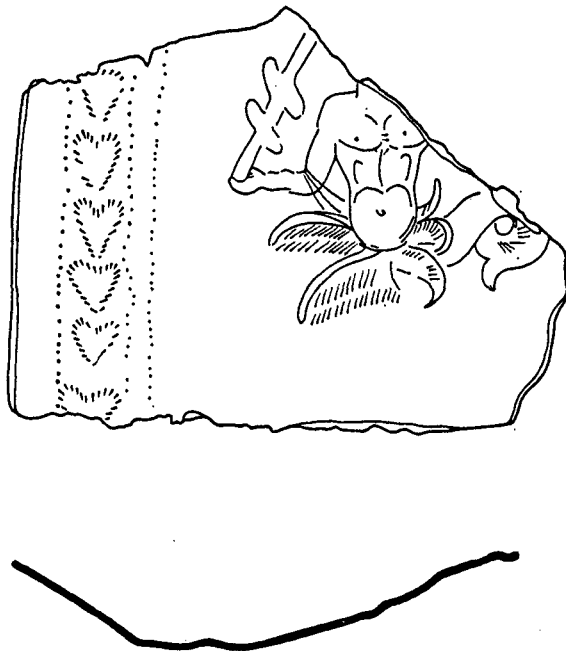


FIG 1 Fragment of decorated metalwork from Newstead (1)

has an average thickness of 0.90 mm (fig 1, pl 24).¹ This piece has been clipped in antiquity from a larger object of which 53 mm of the original edge survives; two edges show clear signs of clipping² and the intervening edge of twisting, which suggests that the object was first clipped but that the final detachment was by twisting and bending. Chemical analysis has shown the metal to be a brass containing 15% of zinc, 1% of tin and less than 0.2% of lead, figures that are quite typical of wrought Roman brass.^{3,4} The low lead content is noteworthy in view of evidence (as revealed by metallurgical microscopy) for deliberate hardening by cold working – a low lead content would be an essential prerequisite for such treatment. The upper surface of the metal has been partially tinned, and a combination of non-tinned areas delineated by punched and incised working has been used to emphasise the decorative motifs. Almost certainly the tin was applied by running a stick or small ingot of metal over that part of the sheet requiring such embellishment, a flux of fat or resin being applied beforehand. Microscopic examination showed that in places the tinning runs over the punched decoration and it would seem therefore that the non-tinned areas were first defined by punching, tinning only then being carried out. The original appearance may have been deliberately imitative of gold and silver. The decoration consists of two elements: a border, presumably running around the whole object, and an incomplete Triton, forming part of the enclosed design. The border has a column of heart-shaped motifs, emphasised by short punched lines, and enclosed by one and two lines respectively of punched dots. The central band has been tinned around the heart-shaped motifs. As a result of the clipping the Triton lacks its head, left arm and part of the tail. It is well executed apart from the right forearm and hand. The object held in the right hand is difficult to interpret but is certainly not the conch-shell normally seen in depictions of Tritons.

Interpretation of such a small fragment is fraught with difficulties, but the straight edge and the thinness of the metal, despite its hardness, suggest that it formed part of a square or rectangular decorative plate fixed to an object made of wood or some other perishable material. In such circumstances the best parallels are provided by the shield-centres from South Shields⁵ and Windisch.⁶ Although neither of these objects provides parallels for either the border or the Triton, both conform closely in design to that suggested by the Newstead fragment. The un-military motifs on the Newstead piece need not detract from such an interpretation, for Toynbee has commented on the presence of similar motifs on fine military metalwork,⁷ and the heart-shaped motifs are comparable to those inlaid in silver onto a piece of early Roman military equipment from South Cadbury.⁸ Particularly important in this respect are the Triton-like figures executed in relief on pieces of military equipment in the Straubing find.⁹ The apparently exclusive use of punched and incised decoration emphasises the links between the Newstead example and the South Shields and Windisch shield-centres, since decoration in relief is common on pieces of military parade-gear, with punching usually only serving to delineate and define areas of relief decoration. A much smaller number of objects, including helmets from Guisborough¹⁰ and Heddernheim,¹¹ and a fragment of armour-plating from Corbridge,¹² have a combination of relief and punched decoration.

If the Newstead fragment formed part of a shield-centre, its elaborate nature presumably precluded use in battle. Although Toynbee thought that the South Shields example was too fragile even for use in the *hyppika gymnasia* described by Arrian,¹³ the hardness of the Newstead fragment suggests that it may well have been designed for this purpose. In either case it is tempting to link it with the other parade equipment from Newstead for which a date late in the first century AD seems appropriate.¹⁴ Such a date would not seriously conflict with the accepted date of c AD 120 for the South Shields example,¹⁵ although Klumbach has recently suggested that a Severan date would be equally acceptable for this piece.¹⁶

Much of the above interpretation rests on tenuous evidence, and, although it is tempting to accept such fragments from Newstead as military, they need not be so. Many of the objects are as likely to be civilian as military and some, for example children's leather shoes, must be civilian.¹⁷ The clipping of the original object may imply loot from farther south and this possibility is further emphasised by the popularity of the Triton motif in the civilian areas of the South. It occurs on a wide range of objects including the stone pediment at Bath,¹⁸ a mosaic at Rudston,¹⁹ and a metal strip from Lydney Park.²⁰

NOTES

1. The thickness measurement was made in the Engineering Department of the Royal Scottish Museum.
2. The clipping was done with shears having an effective cutting edge of 15 mm.
3. Caley 1964, 104.
4. Tylecote 1962, 53.
5. British Museum 1958, 67, no. 6, pl 26; Klumbach 1966, 177, Abb 5.
6. Klumbach 1966, 178, Abb 6.
7. Toynbee 1964, 298.
8. Alcock 1970, pl vii, C.
9. Keim and Klumbach 1951, Taf 23, 2, and 31, 1.
10. Toynbee 1964, pl LXVII, c, LXVIII.
11. Woelcke 1930, Taf 2, 1 and 3, 1.
12. This appears to be the only example of armour-plating so decorated. Wright 1968, pl I, fig 1; Klumbach 1962, 193.
13. Toynbee 1964, 299.
14. British Museum 1958.
15. Toynbee 1964, 291.
16. Klumbach 1966, 176-8.
17. Curle 1911, pl xx, 1-3.
18. Toynbee 1964, 131, fig 1.
19. Toynbee 1964, pl LXIV, a.
20. Wheeler and Wheeler 1932, pl xxvii, 123.

REFERENCES

- Alcock, L 1970 'Excavations at South Cadbury Castle, 1969: A Summary Report', *Antiq J*, L (1970), 14-25.
- British Museum 1958 *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain*. 3rd edition.
- Caley, E R 1964 *Orichalcum and Related Ancient Alloys*. New York.
- Curle, J 1911 *A Roman Frontier Post and Its People. The Fort of Newstead in the Parish of Melrose*. Glasgow.
- Keim, J and Klumbach, H 1951 *Der Römische Schatzfund von Straubing*. München. (=Münchner Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Band 3).
- Klumbach, H 1962 'Römische Panzerbeschläge aus Manching, Landkreis Ingolstadt', *Aus Bayerns Frühzeit*, LXII (1962), 187-93.
- Klumbach, H 1966 'Drei römische Schildbuckel aus Mainz', *JRGZ Mainz*, 13 (1966), 165-89.
- Toynbee, J M C 1964 *Art in Britain under the Romans*. Oxford.
- Tylecote, R F 1962 *Metallurgy in Archaeology*. London.
- Wheeler, R E M and Wheeler, T V 1932 *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman, and Post-Roman Site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire*. London.
- Woelcke, K 1930 'Der neue römische Paradehelm aus Heddernheim', *Germania*, XIV (1930), 149-53.
- Wright, R P 1968 'Two Roman Inscriptions on Bronze and Brick', *Arch Ael*, XLVI (1968), 1-4.



Fragment of decorated metalwork from Newstead (scale approx. 5:3)