Four Roman Bells from Scotland[1]

by D. V. Clarke

Although little attention has been given to Roman bells it is perhaps fair to claim that the most distinctive type is that illustrated here by the four known Scottish examples from Newstead, Birkwood, Linlithgow and Perth (fig 3). The defining characteristics are a quadrangular body with four small feet, one at each corner, and a diamond or pentagonal suspension loop.[2] The bells were cast in one piece, although both the Newstead and Linlithgow examples show some indications that the feet were attached in a separate operation. The bells are from four to seven centimetres in height. No clappers survive but corrosion products inside the bells suggest that they were of iron.[3] Ward, in his brief discussion of Roman bells, considered this type to be more common than hemispherical or conical examples,[4] but the latter, if not from known Roman sites, are more likely to be masquerading in museums as sacring or sheep bells.[5] Furthermore the typology of hemispherical and conical bells offers little hope of distinguishing Roman bells from later examples in the case of isolated finds. The type here discussed does not, however, appear to have parallels in Migration-period, Medieval, or later contexts, and it is therefore reasonable to consider all examples as being of Roman date.

Examples of this type of bell have a wide distribution, both in Britain and the German Provinces of the Empire.[6] Although predominantly from military sites in both areas (e.g. Richborough,[7] Brecon Gaer,[8] Neuss[9] and Vindonissa[10]), they are not uncommon on civilian sites (e.g. Fishbourne,[11] Jewry Wall, Leicester,[12] and the villa site at Voerendaal[13]). The latter finds have some significance in a consideration of the Scottish examples. Only the Newstead bell comes from an assuredly Roman context; although some Roman material has been found near Linlithgow Palace,[14] there are, as yet, no clear indications of what the find signifies. It is therefore likely that three of the four Scottish finds represent further examples of the Roman 'drift', recently discussed by Dr Robertson.[15] In considering the possible means by which the natives of Scotland acquired Roman objects, she argued that it was most likely that the majority of these objects were obtained through peaceful trading, and not through looting. It is within this framework of trade in high quality, portable goods between Roman and native that the bells from non-Roman sites are best viewed. The finding in Gotland of a bell of this type associated with a coin of Marcus Aurelius[16] *could be similarly explained. Since this is not the only example of a Roman bell from Gotland,*[17] it is reasonable to suppose that bells had some sort of fascination for the peoples outside the Empire, and that they were interested in acquiring them.

None of the Scottish examples comes from a closely dated context, but two recent finds in the south have supplemented the otherwise meagre dating evidence: these are the examples from Fishbourne and Usk,[18] both of which come from levels dating to before AD 75.[19] Although these dates do not, of course, mean that all other examples are of first-century manufacture, it is interesting to note that there is good evidence for occupation in that period on all the Roman sites in the south which produce examples of this type of bell; the third- or fourth-century date assigned to the Richborough find is wholly unsatisfactory, based as it is on an inappropriate parallel.[20] The association of the Gotland bell with a coin of Marcus Aurelius does suggest that, at least in areas outside the Empire, these bells were in use into the second half of the second century or later.

Forrer, Ward and Gansser-Burckhardt[21] considered that these bells were for attachment to horse-harness and/or waggons, and this view was supported by a leather fragment from Vindonissa.[22] This leather find does not, however, prove that all types of bell were so used, especially
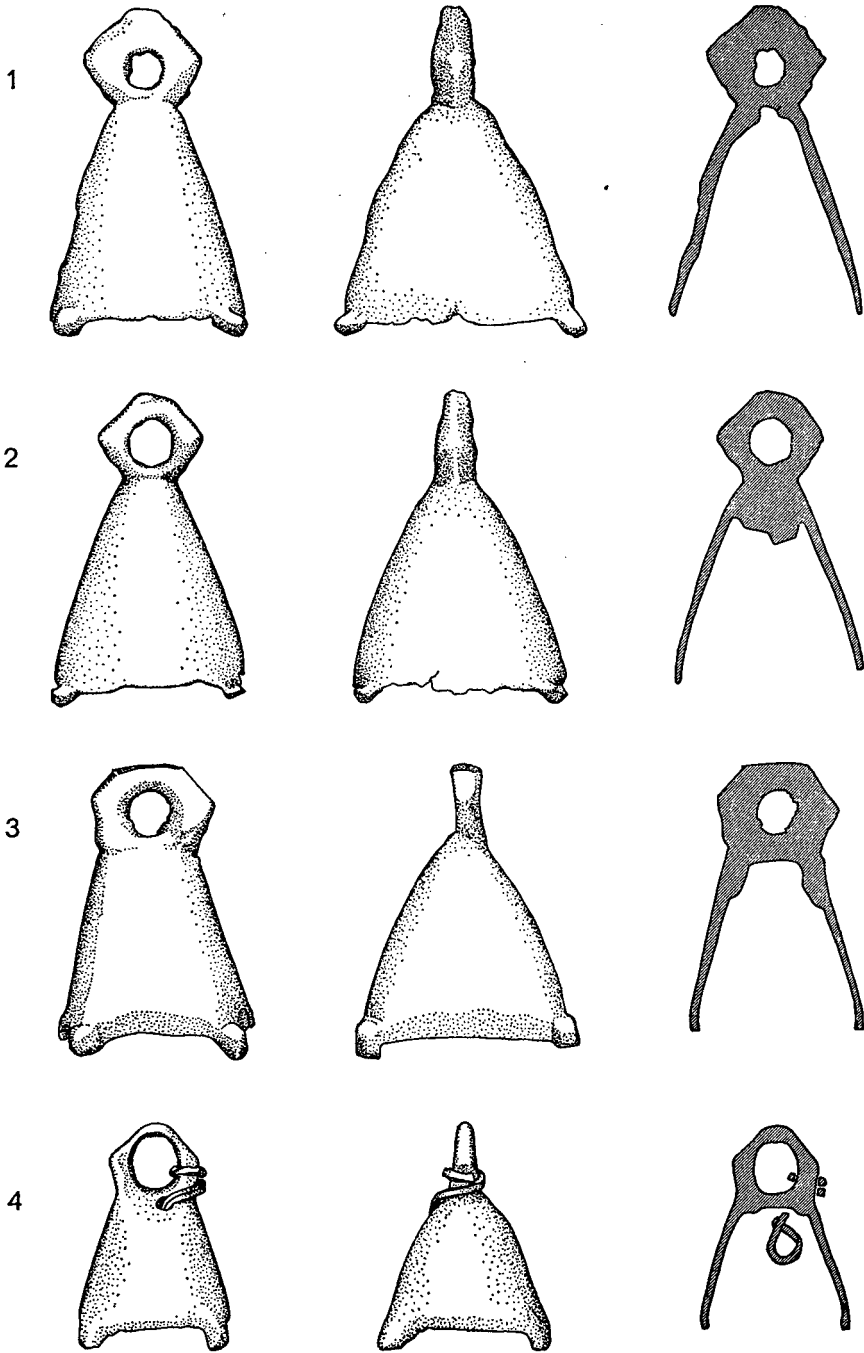
FIG 3   Roman bells from 1, Newstead; 2, near Linlithgow Palace; 3, Perth; 4, Birkwood (⅔)

since feet would seem to be a rather redundant feature on a hanging bell. It is impossible to exclude the interpretation of these feet as a wholly decorative feature, but their requirement, in some cases, of a separate manufacturing operation suggests a more functional role than decorative effect. Acceptance of this interpretation emphasises that there need be no exclusive explanation.

CATALOGUE

1. *Newstead, Roxburghshire* (fig 3, 1)   NMAS: FRA 639
   Height: 6·3 cm (2·5 in)
   Badly corroded. Parts of two adjoining sides, including one foot, now missing. Traces of iron clapper.
   Illustrated as being from Pit VI, but not mentioned in text.
   Curle 1910, pl LIV, 1.
2. *Near Linlithgow Palace, West Lothian* (fig 3, 2)   NMAS: KA 11
   Height: 6·1 cm (2·4 in)
   Lower edge damaged. One foot now missing. Traces of iron clapper.
   Circumstances of discovery unknown.
3. *Perth, Perthshire* (fig 3, 3)   NMAS: KA 23
   Height: 5·6 cm (2·2 in)
   Good condition. Traces of iron clapper.
   Circumstances of discovery unknown.
4. *Birkwood, Lesmahagow, Lanarkshire* (fig 3, 4)   Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum: A 7111C
   Height: 4·4 cm (1·7 in)
   Good condition. Upper edges of suspension loop heavily worn.
   Traces of original iron clapper. Secondary clapper made of bronze wire.
   'Picked up' by some labourers *c* 1815–25.
   Greenshields 1864, 37 and frontispiece, 3; *JBAA*, XXI (1865), pl 3, 2.

NOTES

1. I should like to thank Mr J G Scott for permission to publish the Birkwood bell, and Miss E H Jackson for the drawings.
2. The example from London appears to have a circular suspension loop (Ward 1911, 217, fig 62, k).
3. The clapper attachment of the Birkwood example (fig 1, 4) is unique and gives every indication of being a secondary addition.
4. Ward 1911, 219.
5. For an example of the problems involved in distinguishing function, even with more modern examples, see Smith 1967.
6. Despite the lack of non-Roman parallels many examples of this bell type are still thought of as medieval. Only a thorough search would reveal the true numbers and it has therefore been thought undesirable to attempt a list.
7. Bushe-Fox 1949, 151, pl LVI, 271.
8. Wheeler 1926, 116–17, fig 58, 16.
9. Lehner 1904, 413, Taf. XXXIV, 64.
10. Gansser-Burckhardt 1942, 112, Abb. 86.
11. I am grateful to Professor Cunliffe for information concerning this find in advance of publication: see now Cunliffe 1971, 112, 115, fig 46, 107.
12. Kenyon 1948, 260, 259, fig 87, 7.
13. Braat 1953, 72, 68, Afb. 13, 59.
14. Curle 1932, 353.
15. Robertson 1970.
16. Almgren and Nerman 1923, 81, Taf. 30, 446.
17. Manneke 1966, 145, Abb. 4.
18. I am grateful to Dr W H Manning and Mr C Saunders for information concerning this find in advance of publication.

19. These early dates are supported by a recently published French example (Lerat 1970, 357, fig 21).
20. Bushe-Fox 1949, 151.
21. Forrer 1907, 291; Ward 1911, 219; Gansser-Burckhardt 1942, 112.
22. Gansser-Burckhardt 1942, 112, Abb. 85.

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