

## A Roman iron flask from Newstead

Joanna Close-Brooks\*

James Curle's excavations in the Roman fort at Newstead, Roxburghshire between 1905 and 1910 were published with admirable completeness and promptness (Curle 1911). However, the contents of some pits still under excavation in 1910 were unavoidably given rather perfunctory treatment, though a fuller account appeared later (Curle 1913). A few other metal objects were omitted altogether. These, with some pottery from pit groups, were found in a box in the cellar of the National Museum in 1960. A much larger quantity of pottery, most of it unprovenanced body sherds, was also discovered in several crates in a farmhouse near the site. All this material is now in the National Museum in Edinburgh and has been catalogued. Few metal objects were involved but among them were a number of iron fragments with applied bronze mounts. At first sight these appeared to be parts of iron armour, but a little investigation showed that the fragments were in fact part of an iron flask. The flask has now been pieced together by Mr John Brown and Mr Alex Quinn of the Museum's Conservation Laboratory, and drawn by Miss Helen Jackson. Its catalogue number is FRA 3435.

The flask (fig 1) was found in a box labelled, in different hands, both 'Pit 91' and 'outer annexe ditches West Side'. Although Curle does not mention the fragments of flask in his description of Pit 91 (1911, 113, 137) this seems the more likely location for such an object to survive in. Pit 91 was a well some 17 ft 6 in (5.3 m) deep and dated to the Antonine period. The flask was partly full of a corroded deposit, probably mud. Mr Cliff McCawley of the Museum's Research Laboratory found it to be too corroded for any assessment of the organic contents.

The body of the flask is about 14.5 cm in diameter and 10 cm wide. It has been made in two identical halves, joined together by a slight overlap down the centre of the sides. A separate bronze collar is fitted at the top, with a pair of broad bronze straps on either side terminating in a pair of decorative bronze plates. In the U-shaped slot at the top of each plate some fitting to take a handle must have been fixed. The neck is now broken, but would have been rather longer and fitted with a stopper or cap. The bronze fittings seem to have been soldered to the iron walls. The flask has been restored from fragments and a number of pieces are still missing. The iron-work is corroded, and in some areas warped, so the section in fig 1 is diagrammatic.

\* National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh

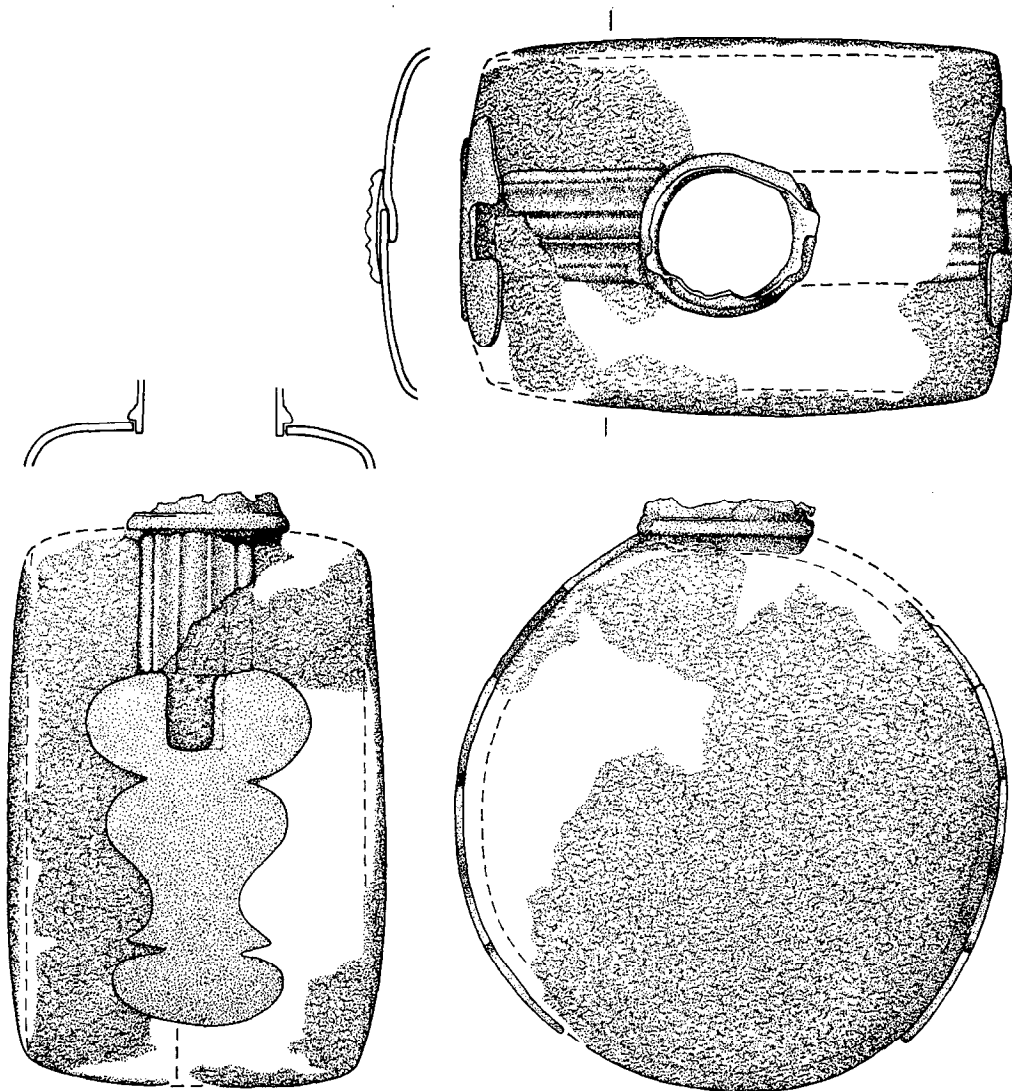


FIG 1 Iron flask with bronze mounts from Newstead (scale 1 : 2)

Flasks of this kind are generally known as 'pilgrim flasks' or 'stirrup flasks', and are containers for water or other liquid with one or both sides flattened to make them easier to carry on the person. The present example is quite similar to the water bottles issued to troops in the 1939–45 war. Roman examples in pottery are known, and glass flasks also occur (La Baume 1964, pls 79–81; Follman 1976, 420) but surviving metal flasks of Roman date seem to be most unusual. The only example so far noted by the writer is an enamelled bronze flask with a swing handle from Istria (Henry 1933, 143, pl 1) which gives an idea of the handle fittings that the Newstead flasks once carried. Metal flasks may well have been quite common, but circumstances did not favour their survival. Metal flasks are better known from other periods when it was customary to put them in graves, thus ensuring a higher rate of recovery by archaeologists; as, for instance,

the bronze flasks found in Villanovan graves of the 8th-century BC (Hencken 1968, figs 173, 179, 184).

#### REFERENCES

- Curle, J 1911 *A Roman Frontier Post and its people: The Fort of Newstead in the Parish of Melrose*. Glasgow.
- Curle, J 1913 'Notes on some undescribed objects from the Roman fort at Newstead, Melrose', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 47 (1912-13), 384-405.
- Follman, A B *et al* 1976 'Jahresbericht . . . 1974', *Bonner Jahrbucher*, 176 (1976), 381-441.
- Hencken H 1968 *Tarquinius, Villanovans and Early Etruscans*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.
- Henry, F 1933 'Emailliers d'Occident', *Prehistoire*, 2 (1933), 65-146.
- La Baume, P 1964 *Romanisches Kunstgewerbe*. Braunschweig.