Treasures from Trimontium's Fields

THE CRUICKSHANK COLLECTION

The National Museums of Scotland and the Trimontium Trust

For over 30 years Jack and Caroline Cruickshank walked the fields of Trimontium, chasing the plough furrows to glean fragments of Newstead's Roman past – sherds of pottery and glass, fragments of metal and, rarest of all, decorated gemstones. Over the years they have built up a magnificent and very important collection of material to shed light on life at Trimontium. With Jack's sad death in 2000, a great wealth of knowledge on Trimontium died too. Now Caroline has generously donated their collection to the National Museums of Scotland, where it can take its place alongside James Curle's discoveries and the other finds made by generations of long-suffering fieldwalkers. This will ensure its long-term future and make it available to a wider public – firstly in the Borders, as the cream of the collection will be coming to the Ormiston Institute in Melrose from Easter 2001 for a special display.

The collection is rich and varied. The pottery and glass expand the range of artefacts known from the site quite markedly – the pottery, for instance, includes a fragment of a clay lamp, a rare find for a Scottish site, while the glass features a fine range of gaming counters, beads, bangles and vessel glass.

Individual finds of note include a clay slingshot – a first from Newstead. While there were units of specialised slingers, there is no evidence of such a garrison at Trimontium. The sling was probably an expedient weapon at times of need, or a hunting weapon. We know from finds of boar's tusks at Newstead that hunting was practised, and an altar from the site to Diana, the goddess of hunting (now on display in the Trust's museum), bears thanks for a good day's sport. While it would be a brave man to tackle a wild boar with a sling, it would be suitable for smaller game such as hares or birds. But it was also used against humans – there is good evidence from the Dutch fort of Velsen that slingshot

Fig. 1

was used to repel an attack during the Frisian revolt of AD 28, while numerous finds from the artillery training ground at Burnswark in Dumfriesshire show that it was in regular use among the Roman soldiery.

Fig. 3

The metal finds are of particular interest. While iron does not survive well in ploughsoil, bronze fares rather better, and the Cruickshank collection includes some very interesting pieces. Some of the choicest are illustrated in fig 1. They include a bell which may have been fitted to horse harness or used as a charm to ward off evil spirits (top left). Unsurprisingly there is a range of military metalwork, such as a strap end from a soldier's belt (bottom right) and pieces of cavalry harness. The dumb-bell toggle (top right) would have been a decorative strap fitting from horse harness, but is a style more at home in a Celtic than a Roman workshop – a reminder that most of the troops at Newstead were recruited not from Italy but from Britain, Gaul or Germany, if not indeed from the Borders itself.

There is a range of ornaments too, especially brooches – the broken 'trumpet' brooch (bottom left) is a typical British-made brooch, the most common type found in Scotland, but the beautiful little 'knee' brooch is in origin from the Rhineland, and was much favoured by soldiers. This example (bottom centre) has been decorated by covering its surface in tin or silver.

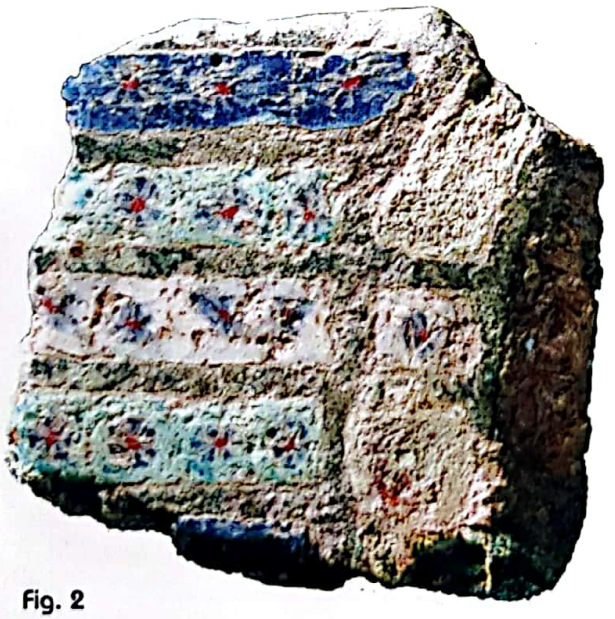

Fig. 2

One of the highlights of the collection looks at first sight unimpressive – a small piece of enamelled bronze only some 15 mm long. But on closer inspection its true beauty becomes obvious (fig 2). It is a fragment of an enamelled belt plate, and the quality of the surviving enamelling can only make us marvel at what the intact object must have looked like. The decoration is made up of tiny blocks only a few millimetres square, many of them made by twisting tiny rods of melted glass together - the overall effect must have been stunning.

But it is not just attractive things which are interesting. An example is lead – one

of the problem metals of the Roman period. The Cruickshanks picked up a good range of lead objects – but we have no idea what many of them were for! Lead was used for many purposes in the Roman period – for instance as weights, whorls, and sheets for lining water tanks. Yet many of the Cruickshank finds do not fall into obvious categories. This is an area which will require a lot more work, and these finds should stimulate some new research.


Fig. 4

However the undoubted highlight of the collection is the gemstones. These are well-known from Walter Elliot and Martin Henig's work. Yet it is only when you see them for yourself that you appreciate the true quality of these tiny, marvellous works of art. Two examples are illustrated here (figs 3-4) – a magnificent head of Jupiter, the father of the gods, and a scene of two Cupids wrestling. This is the kind of image which really brings the Roman world alive.

Hopefully this will serve as a taster for the 2001 season's exhibition in the Trust's museum, which features all the above and more. It should be both an example of the wealth which Trimontium still has to offer and a fitting tribute to the skill and persistence of the Cruickshanks in their years of treading the Newstead fields.

Looking at this rich range of material should make us ask, what next? How do we continue to exploit Trimontium's wealth? The work of individual stalwart fieldwalkers such as Walter Elliot and Bill Lonie is vital. To build on this, the site needs a long-term, systematic fieldwalking programme, recording in detail the full range of finds and exactly where they come from. This is no small undertaking, but is the kind of project which the enthusiasts of the Trimontium Trust are well-suited to carry out over a number of years – and which the National Museums would be happy to support and encourage. This would allow us to build on the excavation results and on the fieldwalking endeavours of the Cruickshanks, the Mason brothers and Walter Elliot (to name but a few), to develop a broader picture of the Trimontium complex. As the major Roman site in southern Scotland, it deserves no less.

I hope this may spur discussion of how we can deal with this magnificent legacy. In the meantime, we can admire the material in the Cruickshank collection and let it transport us back to Trimontium 2000 years ago .....

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