

A RE-ASSESSMENT OF ROMAN 'BRONZES' FROM RICHBOROUGH ROMAN FORT, KENT

During the 1920's and 1930's a major campaign of excavation which began in 1922 was undertaken at Richborough by Mr Bushe-Fox and reported in the Society's Research Reports VI, VII, X and XVI. As is to be expected of excavations at a major Roman supply base, the quantity of finds is considerable. There are, for example, fifty-thousand coins alone.

At the time of the excavation, examination and conservation facilities for archaeological material were almost non-existent in this country. It was therefore anticipated that a re-examination of the material now being undertaken in the AM Laboratory's Conservation Section under the direction of Mr Cross would provide new information.

The need to undertake this work arose from the fact that some of the material in the Department's Site Museum at Richborough required care and maintenance conservation prior to re-display. Further, and more important, upwards of 10,000 bronze objects held in a reserve collection on site needed conservation to halt decay. Approximately 2,000 objects have been dealt with so far and the cleaning of these has led in a great number of cases to discrepancies being found between the objects as illustrated in the Richborough Report series and as now observed subsequent to this recent conservation.

Many of the discrepancies are quite minor and do not affect the interpretation of the object, but a number show quite major differences. The most striking are certain items described as undecorated and made of bronze which on cleaning have now proved to be solid silver and highly decorated. Leading examples are a fine brooch of cross-bow type and finger rings decorated with monogram (Plate 00) and clasped-hands motif.

A further point of interest is that the early brass brooches are both from types thought to have been made in Britain (such as the Colchester A brooch) and others thought to have been imported, such as the Aucissa and eye-brooches. On the other hand, all the high-lead brooches so far examined are of types probably made in Britain. It is hoped that further work will show whether its use is general or is confined to British workshops. Indeed it now becomes of some interest to determine what substance there is to the suggestion in Richborough I that extensive metal-working had been carried out on the site in the late first and early second centuries, including the observation that an unfinished brooch was found in the vicinity of the metal working activities.⁽²⁾ This could have been a key object but unfortunately on cleaning it has been found to have been incorrectly described and is indeed finished and also enamelled.

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- (1) Justine Bayley, Sarnia Butcher and Ian Cross, "The Analysis of Roman Brooches from Richborough Fort, Kent", Ancient Monuments Laboratory Report, No 2002, 1976 and in the forthcoming report of the Archaeometry Conference, Edinburgh, 1976.
- (2) Reports of the Research Committee of the Soc of Antiq, VI (1926), 13 & pl. XII, No 5.