

Roman Cavalry Sports helmet from Crosby Garrett, Cumbria

The helmet was examined by the writer on 22nd July 2010 at Christie's Auction House Old Brompton Road. It was part way through a process of restoration in preparation for sale at auction. The form of the helmet, its condition, patina, corrosion products and soil accretions appeared entirely consistent with its former use, demise, burial and re-discovery in Cumbria and I see no reason to doubt its given provenance.

It proved to be a damaged, but near-complete, Roman cavalry sports helmet - a copper-alloy two-piece face mask visor helmet, with reserved tinning on the mask. Such helmets were worn by Roman auxiliary cavalymen on the occasion of the colourful 'cavalry sports' events. These were flamboyant displays of military prowess, performed in front of military commanders and emperors, by elite cavalry units, involving complex manoeuvres on horseback and mock battles. Both horse and rider were resplendent in richly-decorated suites of equipment, most lavish of which were the helmets. Unlike their combat gear, with which they were issued and required to return at the end of their period of service, cavalry sports equipment is likely to have been commissioned and purchased by individual soldiers. Certainly it appears to have been among their personal possessions, for the helmets, especially the visor masks, are widely-found, not just in and around forts, but often in graves and other non-military contexts, and occasionally as individual finds (Garbsch 1978, 61-76).

The face mask of the Crosby Garrett helmet corresponds to those of Robinson's Cavalry Sports Type C (Robinson 1975, 114-7) and to those of Kohlert's Type V (Kohlert 1978, 23-4), which date from the end of the 1st to the mid-3rd century AD. This group of masks, some of iron more of bronze, is characterised by idealised ('Greek') youthful male faces, mostly clean-shaven, with luxuriant curly and wavy hair. The distribution is wide - from Algeria to Romania and from Syria to Britain - with the greater number in Germany and the Netherlands (above all the sensational discovery at the fort of Straubing in 1950, which included four 'classical' as well as three 'oriental' masks). One mask (from Aintab, Syria) is in the British Museum collections (which also include a Type E mask from Nola, Italy and the celebrated Type B helmet from Ribchester, Lancs.). The fine iron Type C example from the fort at Newstead, Borders (one of three sports helmets from the fort in the collections of the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh - Curle 1911, 164-173) is unusual for preserving both parts of the helmet - the head piece of all forms of Cavalry Sports helmet survives intact far less frequently than the mask.

Like a number of other complete sports helmets, including that from Ribchester, the mask of the Crosby Garrett helmet would have hinged at the centre of the brow - within the curly hair (Jackson and Craddock 1995, 80). At the neck it was fastened by a leather strap, which encircled the nape of the head piece and was secured by its eyeleted ends to an iron stud beneath each ear of the mask (see Robinson 1975, Plates II and III and Figs. 139 -132).

The survival of the head piece of the Crosby Garrett helmet, albeit broken and distorted (now restored by Christie's), is exceptional and even more so on account of its unusual Phrygian form (the so-called 'Phrygian cap'), which gives the face the appearance of a beardless Jupiter Dolichenus. Furthermore, an associated bronze figurine in the form of a winged griffin was clearly originally attached to the top of the helmet – the curvature of the griffin's base-plate together with remains of solder on its underside correspond exactly to the curvature and patch of solder preserved on the crest of the head piece. The griffin was the companion of Nemesis, goddess of fate, both of whom were often associated with gladiatorial combat. As a symbolic agent of death, its image was entirely appropriate for the finial of a helmet worn by an élite cavalryman of the Roman army.

Further examples of winged griffin figurines in military contexts include those from the forts at Strageath, Perthshire (Frere and Wilkes 1989, 149, Fig. 74 no. 50) and Trawscoed, Dyfed (Davies 1987). More significantly, however, the griffin finial of the Crosby Garrett helmet references another celebrated find, the Ribchester Helmet, part of a hoard of military equipment discovered by a clog-maker's son at Ribchester in 1796. The local antiquary, Charles Townley was able to secure the Ribchester helmet and most of the hoard (Jackson and Craddock 1995, 75), but one of the items that eluded him was described to him in a letter by the Rev. T.D Whitaker, who had seen the whole hoard soon after its discovery (Townley 1815, 11-12). With it, said Whitaker, was "a sphinx of bronze, which, from the remains of solder on the lower side, and also from its curvature, appeared to have been attached to some convex surface, probably to the top of the helmet" (cited in Watkin 1883, 153-4). The 'sphinx', it appears, was subsequently lost by some children to whom it had been given to play with. Perhaps the object was truly a sphinx, but, as another hybrid creature, it is conceivable that a griffin was confused with a sphinx. At all events, although some Roman cavalry sports helmets are surmounted by repoussé eagles, as, for example, that from Tell Oum Houran, Syria (Garbsch 1978, Plate 16, 2-4), I am not aware of any other surviving example that retains a cast crest figure of the type on the Crosby Garrett helmet.

In summary, the Crosby Garrett helmet is an immensely interesting and outstandingly important find, the prize possession of an auxiliary cavalryman who served in one of the crack Roman cavalry regiments stationed in the frontier region of northern Britain at a critical period in the history of the province. Its face mask is both extremely finely-wrought and chillingly striking, but it is as an ensemble that the helmet is so exceptional and, in its specifics, unparalleled. It is a find of the greatest national (and, indeed, international) significance, both for its intrinsic interest and for the additional light it can be expected to shed on the manufacture and supply of prestige military equipment as well as on military dispositions in northern Britain in the decades preceding, spanning and following the construction of Hadrian's Wall. In addition, as an object of beauty and top-quality craftsmanship and a most powerful iconic symbol of the might of Rome it has an obvious display potential, and that potential would undoubtedly best be realised in the context of the region in which it was found.

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