

The Crosby Garrett Helmet

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Editor's note: The following article provides contextual information for the forum regarding a recent and controversial metal detecting find.

The helmet and mask visor were found in May by a former student in his 20s from Peterlee, Co Durham who had been detecting with his father for some years in Crosby Garrett, Cumbria. I first saw the helmet and met the finder when the helmet first arrived at Christie's in June 2010. At this point, the face-mask, folded helmet and fragments of the helmet and the crest attachment in the form of a griffin were noted. The face-mask had been placed face-down on a bed of cotton wool with the other components of the helmet in a large plastic box and no attempt had been made to remove the soil from the back of the mask. The finder reported that the helmet was found with the mask and griffin crest attachment detached, with the visor lying more or less complete and face down, with the helmet in pieces (34 fragments and a further 34 smaller fragments). The appearance of the fragments suggests strongly that the helmet had been broken up and folded before burial. There was significant damage represented by a large hole at the chin and damage at the outer edge of curls. Unfortunately, at no time before the sale of the helmet on October 7th, was it possible to undertake formal archaeological conservation of the object.

From observation of the helmet prior to its restoration and from the comments of the finder it was possible to establish some limited information on its depositional context. After several phone conversations I finally learnt more of the location of the findspot than that it was in found in 'Cumbria', and it was possible on 30th August for Dot Boughton and Stuart Noon, Cumbria and Lancashire Finds Liaison Officers to visit the findspot of the helmet where the refilled hole was still visible, with the finder, and to obtain a 12 grid figure reference. There is nothing recorded on the HER in the environs of the findspot. According to the finder he had been detecting in Crosby Garrett for the last seven years, usually with his father, and I see no reason to doubt this. His father has previously reported a small number of finds to the PAS from the parish, although these do not come from the findspot of the helmet. They have also found other occasional Roman finds on land owned by the owner of the helmet findspot.

Although no Roman garrisons are documented in the immediate vicinity, the findspot of the helmet lies in an area with a substantial Roman military presence on a key route leading to the northern frontier. The nearest is c. 6km at Brough and there are others further to the north-west in the Eden valley (e.g. Kirkby Thore, Brougham, Old Penrith).

Stanwix, the garrison of the only thousand strong cavalry unit known from Roman Britain, is c. 50km to the NW. To the east of the Pennines over Stainmore are further garrisons. Findspots of other sports helmets are varied. In many cases they have been found within or in the immediate environs of garrisons, often of auxiliary cavalry units (*alae; cohortes equitatae*) (Garbsch 1978). In several cases however there is no closely associated fort or fortress, for instance, at Guisborough (North Yorkshire) and Worthing (Norfolk) among the UK examples. The recent discussion by Nicolay (2007) of the 'lifecycle' of Roman military equipment provides various possible models by which the helmet may have come to be deposited in a context away from a garrison, by hoarding, votive deposition or burial with the dead. In this case of the Crosby Garrett helmet, votive offering or hoarding of loot might better explain the deposition at this findspot, but in the absence of excavation this must remain speculative.

The sale of the helmet

From an early stage I appealed to the finder to allow the Tullie House Museum to acquire the helmet and later James Ede (managing director of the antiquities dealer Charles Ede Ltd and a valuer for the Treasure Valuation Committee) and I had offered to facilitate a private treaty sale for Tullie House. Later Lords Renfrew, Howarth and Redesdale, representing the All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group, wrote to Christie's urging such a private sale. Finally, three days before the sale, Andrew Mackay (Tullie House Museum) drove to Peterlee to see the finder and Hilary Wade (director of Tullie House) simultaneously went to Crosby Garrett to meet the landowner. Letters were delivered pleading dialogue (no sums were discussed). Unfortunately, all approaches failed.

Christie's commissioned Darren Bradbury to restore the visor and helmet for sale. Ralph Jackson (Curator of Roman Collections, British Museum) and I asked that restoration await a full scientific examination, as this could have answered important questions, but this request was not responded to and the full restoration went ahead. Had archaeological conservation taken place then we might have learned more of the way in which it was buried, and among other things, features such as impressions of textile fabrics which can survive in metal corrosion products might have been identified. It was clearly a great shame that it was not possible to undertake such formal archaeological conservation. However, on the day of Christie's press release of the helmet, Ruth Fillery-Travis, a student at UCL Institute of Archaeology and I visited Christie's in West Kensington to take further measurements and to analyse the helmet with a portable x-ray fluorescence spectrometer. A number of analyses were undertaken on areas of the visor, helmet and griffin, and confirmed that the object was made of a copper alloy common in the Roman period. The results of this analysis and a discussion of the data will be published in due course (Fillery-Travis, in preparation).

The new owner of the helmet remains anonymous but it is known that he lives in Britain and that this was not his first purchase of an antiquity. It is hoped that an archaeological investigation will take place in 2011.

References

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