

A ROMANO-BRITISH CULT OBJECT FROM BOLDRE, HAMPSHIRE

By ANNE ROSS

THE search for this sculptured stone followed a report received from Mr. Sidney Jackson of Shipley, Yorkshire, who had been told about its existence by Miss Carol Jackson of Woodstock, Oxford. The stone was resting on a makeshift base beside the gate of Oak View cottage, Warborne Lane, Portmore, in the parish of Boldre, Hampshire. A former owner of the cottage, Mrs. B. M. Barron, told how a boy staying at Oak View had seen the stone in a disused gravel pit then used as a rubbish dump, and had pushed it home on a pram also taken from the dump. The pit, situated beside the Portmore to South Baddesley lane at sz 33959692, was on the Newtown Park estate which, at the time the stone was found, was owned by Mr. R. D. Pretty. Mr. Pretty had no knowledge of the stone, and could not account for it being in the dump. Oak View passed into the ownership of Mr. E. A. Steer, who kindly allowed the stone to be taken to Southampton for examination, and suggested that it should be offered on loan to a Hampshire museum. Professor F. Hodson, University of Southampton, identified the stone as Bembridge Limestone, most of which occurs on the Isle of Wight at places indicated on fig. 23. There is also one exposure of this particular limestone on the mainland, at the summit of Creech Barrow hill, some 40 km. to the west on the Isle of Purbeck where, according to a record held by Archaeology Division, Ordnance Survey, Mr. J. B. Calkin found sherds of Romano-British pottery and a coin of Licinius (c. A.D. 320) in the debris of a recent military excavation in 1952.

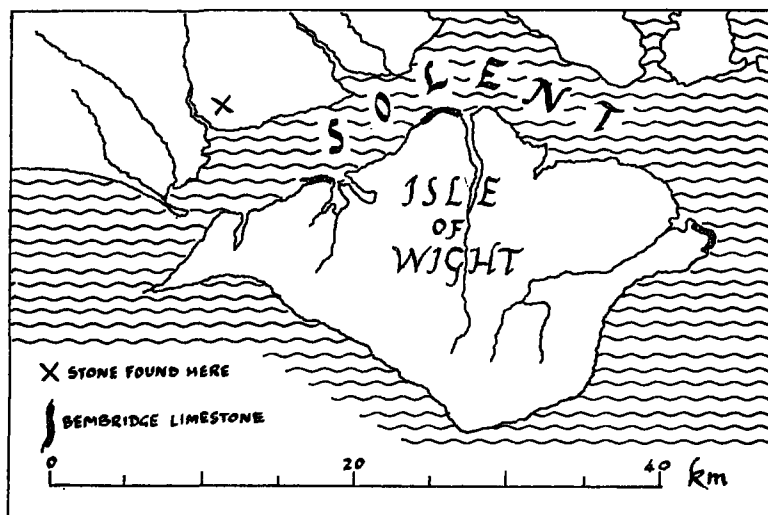


Fig. 23.

The lower part of the face of this ram-horned head has been fractured, and this has imparted a grotesque appearance to the countenance which must have been lacking in its original state. The remaining undamaged features, however, and the vigorously executed ram-horns, demonstrate clearly that there must always have been an element of fierceness – even malevolence – in the expression. Viewed frontally, the face has a mask-like appearance. The tooling of the stone is very apparent; the fact that this extends to the frame-like ridge which extends from one side of the head to the other suggests that this feature was intended as some sort of radiate halo or ornament of a kind known elsewhere in Celtic iconography. The back of the stone is unworked and untooled. Different aspects of the stone are shown in plates IV and V. The head, not including the radiate band, measures 25 cm. in height and 17.5 cm. in breadth from horn to horn. The two longer axes of the stone measure 30.5 cm. and 45.5 cm. respectively, and the maximum height is 28 cm.

There are several parallels to this head from the British Isles, the closest perhaps being the horned cult figure from Tanderagee, Co. Armagh. Found in a bog there, it was placed in a rock-garden (like so many cult stones that are unearthed and the antiquity or significance of which are not immediately appreciated) and finally taken to the Protestant Cathedral in Armagh (Ross, 1967, pl. 46). It would seem to have been connected with a pagan sanctuary on Armagh Hill; several other stone figures including animal sculptures have been recovered from the same area. The horns on the Irish figure are mere vestigial stumps; but, as in the case of the Boldre head, the eyebrows extend across the head in an unbroken line, a typically Celtic feature. The eyes of both are circular and convey an impression of fierceness, as do the huge snarling mouths – that the Hampshire head had a very similar mouth before it was damaged is demonstrated by the fact that the moustaches likewise sweep aggressively upwards in a manner that such a grimace would occasion. The Irish figure has no ears indicated; the Portmore head has a pair of well defined ears. Other parallels to various features can be cited – the horned head from Muirton, Perthshire (Ross, 1967, pl. 22a), the head from Birrens, Dumfriesshire (Ross, 1967, pl. 22c), the little bronze terret from Aldborough, Yorkshire (Ross, 1967, pl. 34a); and perhaps the closest parallel to the sweeping ram-horns can be seen on the horned head from Netherby, Cumberland (Ross, 1967, pl. 21a), which likewise has a mouth with drawn-back lips, suggestive of fierceness and militancy. One may also point to the janiform head from Leichlingen, Kr. Rhein-Wupper, Germany, on which the ‘ears’ would seem in fact to be ram-horns, and one of the profiles of which bears a certain resemblance to that of the Portmore head (Powell, 1958, pl. 64).

The cult of a horned god, who may bear bull or ram horns, is known throughout the pagan Celtic world (Ross, 1967, 127–67). In the British Isles the main distribution of those recovered to date is in north Britain, where the chief characteristics of this god-type would seem to have been evil-averting – and therefore protective to their devotees; aggressive, and often phallic, indicating fertility. This is clearly the deity of a warlike, pastoral people. Such horned gods are, however, known in other parts of Britain, including the south. One example comes from Smithfield, London (Ross, 1967, pl. 51a), the oolitic limestone of which it is fashioned showing its origin to have been somewhere in the region of Bath (*Aquae Sulis*); one comes from *Aquae Sulis* itself

(Ross, 1967, pl. 55a), another from Caernarvon (Ross, 1967, fig. 108). Some examples in metal are also known – one from Richborough (*Rutupiae*), for example (Ross, 1967, fig. 94), one from Icklingham, Suffolk, and so on. The Portmore head adds new weight to the evidence for such a divine type in the south as well as in the north of Britain. It is not easy to give a close date to the sculpture, but the comparative material and the very native style of the features would seem to place it somewhere in the period between the late first century B.C. and the end of the second century A.D.

Acknowledgements

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