

The Ryedale Roman Bronzes

Romano-British

4th - 5th Century A.D.

Bronze

H: 8.7cm

An extraordinary collection of Romano-British bronzes unearthed by metal detectorists James Spark and Mark Didlick in a field belonging to the Lupton family, near Ampleforth in Ryedale, North Yorkshire, in May 2020, since dated c. 43-410 AD. The assemblage contains a portrait bust of an Antonine emperor, most likely Marcus Aurelius, a plumb bob, an architectural tool used to establish a vertical datum as a precursor to the modern spirit level, a horse and rider figure, probably the god Mars, and a horse head handle, possibly for a key or a knife. The bust is presumed to be a portrait of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. His features, and in particular his stylised hair and beard, resemble both his portraits and those of other Antonine emperors, Antoninus Pius, Lucius Verus, and Commodus. There is a resemblance to the bronze head found at Brackley and purchased in 2011 by the Ashmolean Museum, which also is presumed to be a portrait of Marcus Aurelius. Other similar busts of similar sizes have been found, although this is the northernmost find of this type. The skilled modelling, completely in the round, suggests this object was designed to be viewed from all angles. This, combined with the rivet holes present on the thin, spatulate chest plate, suggest that the bust was designed to be fixed to another element, probably a kind a sceptre, making this a spectre head. The plumb bob is a solid conical object with a blunted tip and topped by a domed fungiform terminal. A hole pierces the centre of the top of the domed terminal, another crosses transversally through its neck. These likely relate to the object's suspension. It is similar in form to other Roman examples, e.g., one in bronze in the British Museum (1975,0429.6), and conforms to the Roman shape. The horse and rider figure is cast in one, meaning the entire thing was cast using one mould. It is incomplete, missing what was probably a spear in the right hand and a shield in the left. The modelling of the individual features, though worn, is very fine; the helmet is delineated by moulded lines and a crest is visible, the rider's tunic and belt is clearly defined and may have held further decoration, and the horse is modelled in considerable detail. Its eyes protrude unusually far from the head, suggesting it may have originally worn a chamfron. Its back legs are bent, as if running at a canter, and the front right leg is raised to suggest forward motion. The whole effect is that of a mounted warrior riding at full tilt towards an enemy. Similar horse and rider figures are documented in over 25 examples in Britain, though, like the Antonine bust, this is the northernmost example yet known. Integrally cast examples, such as this one, are rarer and tend to be more finely moulded, as this one is. They are taken to be provincial interpretations of the god Mars. The final object is a zoomorphic handle in the shape of a horse protome (forequarters). This is again modelled in some

detail, in particular the horses head and mane. It's two forelegs extend outwards, giving an impression of forward motion, compounded by the ears laid flat against the mane. This was possibly a key, or maybe knife handle. Two possible reasons for the group being found together have been posited. The first is that they were a miscellaneous collection of scrap bronze, with only some coming from a ritual context. This compares to a similar hoard found near Gloucester in 2020. The second, and by far the most likely reason, is that they were a specific ritual assemblage, grouped for a purpose. Sceptres with emperor or god heads were likely priestly regalia and have been documented in structured deposits of votive origin. The horse and rider also fit the votive context, and the horse handle could be seen as a substitute votive for animal ritual sacrifice. The plumb bob can be explained in that, as a common architectural tool, it could be used in a foundation offering, for the blessing of a new building – perhaps the putative shrine from which the other objects derive.

Literature:

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