

A CHASED CHEEK-PIECE FROM STANWIX

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The cheek-piece which forms the basis of this note was discovered at Barn Close, Brampton Road, Stanwix, during construction work before 1936.¹ It was donated to the Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, in that year, and was accessioned as a single item.² There is no archaeological record of its discovery, and no other items with this provenance were donated to the museum in this or later years, apart from three Roman coins,³ and it is therefore not possible to say anything concerning the precise circumstances of its recovery. Nonetheless, although the precise find spot is not known, Barn Close itself is within the south-east corner, and thus the praetentura, of the Hadrianic fort of Stanwix, known to have been garrisoned by the ala Petriana milliaria probably from its foundation to the closing years of Roman occupation, and it is a reasonable presumption that the cheek-piece came from a stratified or disturbed Roman deposit within the fort, and was not associated, for example, with a burial or other non-specifically military deposit. Apart from brief notices,⁴ the Stanwix cheek-piece has not been published, presumably on account of its rather unspectacular appearance when compared with other items of the same general class. This is regrettable, as not only can the item be ascribed with some confidence to a known unit, and does provide interesting information concerning its production, but there is every reason to believe that cheek-pieces of this type were more common than generally supposed: moreover, the previous publications contain certain errors in describing the manufacture and decoration of this piece. It is hoped that publication of the Stanwix find might prompt identification of similar examples now surviving only as fragments.

The cheek-piece, which comes from the wearers' left-hand side of the helmet, survives about seven-eighths complete, with some damage to the upper margin and to the stylised ear, the former caused by cutting and the latter by breakage and loss through corrosion. It measures 150 x 110mm, and is 1mm thick. It is formed from copper alloy, with some tinned areas, a golden surface surviving on the outer side, where not tinned, contrasted with a chestnut-brown patina on the reverse, suggesting that there may have been some post-discovery cleaning. The leading and rear edges are both folded over, the leading edges slightly cusped and the rear edge rounded. The position of the ear indicates that this cheek-piece was only slightly shaped to fit into a protector, although as currently displayed at Tullie

House, it is restored with a prominent shape on its leather backing (Pl.1). There is no surviving evidence for the hinge, nor for the original backing of this piece, although an iron backing may be confidently assumed, necessitated by the thinness of the metal and suggested by the 10mm wide folded over-edges: such iron backing-plates rarely survive, or at least are rarely reported, but have been noted on other examples of the same specific class, e.g. that from Heddernheim⁵ and indeed on other plainer versions and some of the more highly decorated examples.⁶ It is reasonable to assume that decorated cheek-pieces of this general type, even certain of the more elaborate examples, with or without ear protectors, come from service helmets rather than parade-gear, as can be seen from the Heddernheim and other helmets, or even those depicted on early cavalry tombstones.

The decoration is simple, if not naive, in conception and execution, and consists of a stylised ear, of which only the lobe survives, with a pearled border surrounding a design of two crossed oval shields on a punched background. Pearled borders are a common feature on cheek-pieces of this type, whether highly-decorated or plain, although cabled borders are perhaps equally common. The stylised ear also requires no further comment, being present on the majority of cheek-pieces of auxiliary cavalry origin. The principal design, of crossed shields on a punched background would, however, appear to be unusual, the overwhelming majority of published cheek-pieces being of the highly decorated type, commonly with mythological scenes, such as the Dioscuri, the Imperial Eagle, Mars, Victory, etc. This type of cheek-piece, however, is surely that represented on several early cavalry tombstones, for example that of C. Romanius, from Mainz, with a rosette, or one from Worms, with feathering.⁷ Actual examples are rare, or perhaps more accurately are rarely published. Leaving aside those of probably legionary or at least infantry origin, there are a number of low-relief or plain auxiliary cavalry cheek-pieces, which belong to the same general class as the Stanwix piece. Plain examples have been discovered at Valkenburg and Nijmegen, both with a raised central area demarcated by a plain border, and no decoration other than the stylised ear.⁸ The surviving cheek-piece of the Witcham gravel-pit helmet is a development stylistically on these, with an embossed semi-circle beneath the hinge together with a stylised ear, and with traces of five bosses, now missing, but probably plain, in view of the other bosses on this helmet. More akin to the Stanwix example is one of the Heddernheim helmets, which retains a right cheek-piece, with a chased rosette in place of the stylised ear, and a chased pearled border: at the top of the piece is a chased design representing locks of hair, surmounting a half-rosette. Finally, there are fragments from Dormagen and Heddernheim, the former with stylised ear, and a pattern of overlapping scales contained



Pl.1: The Stanwix cheek-piece (scale 1:1).

within a double cabled-border, the latter with a stylised ear, and a scale pattern beneath a half-rossette, with a scroll pattern further down.⁹

Owing to the circumstances of its discovery, there is no evidence to date the Stanwix piece by, other than through stylistic analysis. It has been claimed that the piece is probably third century,¹⁰ presumably on account of its poor decoration. Consideration of the other pieces within this general group, however, would allow a date-range from the first century to the later second, and further speculation on this point would be unfounded, beyond noting the Hadrianic date for the foundation of Stanwix. It should be noted, however, that there is an early type cavalry tombstone from Stanwix (RIB 2030) which might imply an pre-Hadrianic foundation on the site (if it does not derive from a cemetery associated with the earlier fort in Carlisle), although the Dis Manibus formula in full, as on this tombstone, also occurs on the tombstone of Flavinus at Hexham, of late Flavian, more properly, Trajanic date (RIB 1172).

Detailed examination of the low-relief decoration on the Stanwix piece indicates that this was produced entirely by chasing, rather than embossing or engraving, as is often claimed for this and other cheek-pieces. Chasing involves the hammering of the surface of the item with shaped punches, for example a beader, to produce shallow or deep depressions (pointille), or a hollow beader, with its open circular or oval end, to produce a raised area by driving down the surrounding metal, or a straight- or curved-edged beader to produce lines. This particular method of working is well suited to the production of low relief decoration. The other processes are quite distinct: embossing involves the hammering of the piece from behind while it is either supported in a soft bed (as in much silverwork) or, as in repousse work, while it is hammered into a metal die (as used to produce the sheet bronze decoration on toilet boxes and mirrors); engraving, on the other hand, requires the actual removal of strips of metal by cutting the surface with a graver, with a 'V'- or 'U'-shaped blade. The production of the more elaborate cheek-pieces evidently involved a combination of all three techniques, although chasing was by far the most commonly used one: embossing in nearly all cases was restricted to the central motif, chasing to the border and other low-relief areas, with engraving restricted for background detail or for sharpening the embossed areas. That chasing was the sole method used in the manufacture of the Stanwix and other pieces of the same class is clear from the absence of hammer marks on the reverse, and the sharp indentations made by the beaders used to form the pearled border and the other decorative motifs.¹¹

Decoration of the Stanwix cheek-piece was completed by

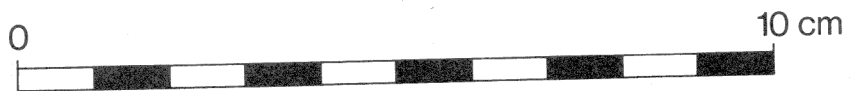
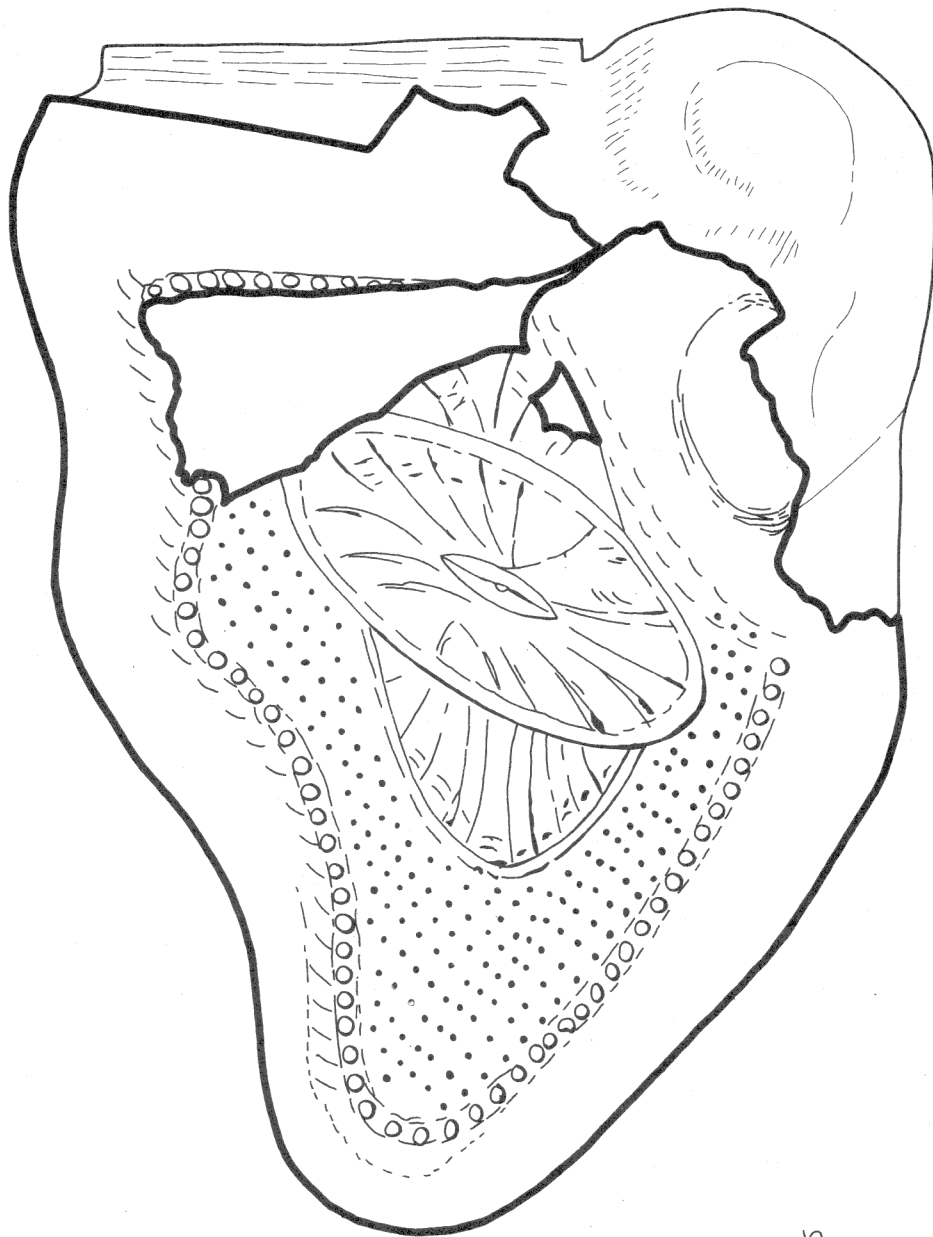


Fig.1: The Stanwix cheek-piece (scale 1:1).

tinning. This is restricted to the shields, ear, pearled border and outer edges of the cheek-piece, and was intended to make them stand out from the punched background: as has been noted, the golden appearance of the background might owe its present appearance to cleaning after discovery, but the absence of any visible tinning in the depths of the punched depressions confirms that this area was not originally tinned, and such surface treatment perhaps having been subsequently removed through injudicious cleaning. Tinning is a common technique on many Roman military bronzes, and several civilian items also, and was the final stage in the finishing of the piece in question. The method is recorded by Pliny, and was recommended by him - with particular reference to drinking receptacles - to prevent the formation of verdigris: the process used by the Romans was presumably to wax those surfaces that were not required to be tinned, whilst flushing the remaining areas with the molten metal.

It would be most unwise to speculate on the organisation behind the production of the Stanwix and other decorated auxiliary cheek-pieces, whether they were official issue from central government, or produced uniquely by each auxiliary regiment, for individual issue or purchase. My feeling is for the latter, given the variety in styles and techniques that has been recorded in the equipment, such variety perhaps reflecting the amount of cash any one soldier was prepared to pay: certainly, the highly decorated or even full-closed helmets were not restricted to officers, as is shown by the ownership marks they sometimes bear. Localised small-scale production of auxiliary equipment is certainly known at Stanwix, and presumably at other sites, the Stanwix fabrica producing scabbard chapes and mail armour amongst other items,¹² and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility, and certainly within the bounds of practicality, that larger items such as helmets and their cheek-pieces might also have been produced on a regimental basis according to an approved pattern.

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NOTES

1. NGR NY403572
2. 29.1936
3. 27.1944.1 and 2, and 55.1945.10
4. TOYNBEE, 1964, 297; ROBINSON, 1975, Pl.403 and 135; ROBINSON, 1979, 9; GARBSCH, 1978, No.76
5. FISCHER, 1973, 98, Abb.22,1
6. For plain examples, see those from Nijmegen and Valkenburg published respectively in KLUMBACH, 1974, No.45, Taf.44, and GROENMAN-VAN WAATERINGE, 1967, Fig.76; for decorated examples, e.g. that from Newstead, ROBINSON, 1970
7. Both conveniently published in ROBINSON, 1975, Pls.302 and 292
8. GROENMAN-VAN WAATERINGE, 1967, Fig.76; KLUMBACH, 1974, No 45, Taf.44
9. MULLER, 1979, 126-127, Taf.21, 12; FISCHER, 1973, 98, Abb.22,1
10. ROBINSON, 1975, 135
11. A fragment of what is probably one of these cheekpieces in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester shows signs of having been embossed: NP 63-4 7 (FU) (50) (information from M.C. Bishop, who inspected this and other pieces by kind permission of the Grosvenor Museum).
12. COLLINGWOOD, 1931

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