

A NOTE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE IMPERIAL GALLIC HELMET

P. Connolly

In his Armour of Imperial Rome, H. Russell Robinson drew attention to the Celtic origin of the Imperial Gallic helmet, pointing to the similarities between the Agen/Port group of Celtic helmets and the Roman iron helmets of the Julio-Claudian period.

The Agen/Port group of helmets are made of iron with a simple rounded cap that follows the shape of the head. Both types are designed specifically to protect the wearer from the slashing blows of the Celtic long sword. The two types have identical cheek-pieces which are sharply scalloped at the level of the eyes and mouth, the scallops being accentuated by embossed crescents. Apart from these features they are quite dissimilar. The Agen type (fig.1a) looks rather like an English bowler hat but with a double rim as a protection against slashing blows. The lower rim is slightly enlarged at the back and decorated with a crescent shaped moulding. The Port type (fig.1b) consists of a simple skull cap with a brow ridge designed to break the force of a downward blow. The lower edge of the rim is turned out at the front to form a narrow peak. A separate neck-guard, which extends the nape of the neck downwards before turning out to form a narrow back peak, is riveted onto the helmet. The upper part of this neck-guard is strengthened with two ridges and the neck peak has a crescent shaped moulding similar to the Agen type. The Agen type was probably for infantry and the Port type, with its deeper neck, for cavalry. Unfortunately the dearth of first century Roman cavalry helmets makes it impossible to substantiate this.

The most obvious 'Agen/Port' feature to appear on Roman helmets of the first century AD is the scalloped cheek-piece which turns up, virtually unchanged, on the Roman helmet from Nijmegen, Robinson's Imperial Gallic Type A (fig.2). This helmet is clearly derived from the Port type; the ridges at the nape of the neck and the lunate neck-guard decorations both appear on it. On the basis of the evidence available at the time of going to print (1975) Russell Robinson assumed that the large integral neck-guard, the applied reinforcing strip on the brow (which replaced both the brow ridge and the small peak) and the purely decorative eyebrow pattern, which seemed to have evolved out of the now defunct brow ridge, were Roman modifications. The pattern of development seemed obvious and Robinson used the apparent evolution of the eyebrows to place undated helmets in sequence. This method has already been criticised in general by M. Bishop¹ but four recently published helmets illustrate how complex the development really is.

1. Helmet of Port type from Mesnil-sous-Jouvièges near Rouen in northern France (fig.3).² This helmet is clearly not Roman as it has an applied neck-guard, decorated rivet heads and comes from an undeniably Celtic grave. However, it has eyebrows very similar to Robinson's Imperial Gallic A and a lunate moulding just below the attachment point on the cheek-piece, which, had the cheek-piece been a chance find, would have been identified as Roman from the first quarter of the first century AD.

2. Helmet of Port type from Reka in Jugoslavia (fig.4).³ This helmet has an applied neck-guard and a rivet in the centre of the forehead which is a regular feature of Port type helmets but it also has fully developed multiple eyebrow motives on the brow - a supposedly Roman feature.

3. Helmet of Agen/Port type from Siemiechów in Poland (fig.5).⁴ This helmet has a brow ridge that is clearly derived from the Agen type and bears a remarkable resemblance to the Roman brow reinforce. The neck guard is an integral part of the helmet. The Roman features convinced its publisher that it was Roman but few Celtic or Roman military equipment experts would agree.

4. Helmet of Port/Imperial Gallic A type from Hedel (Gld) in the Netherlands (fig.6).⁵ This helmet has features that are both Roman and Celtic. It has a brow reinforce and clearly once had an integral neck guard, both Roman features, but it also has rivets with decorated heads which stand proud of the surface of the helmet; this is totally un-Roman but it is not an uncommon feature of Celtic helmets.⁶ The Hedel helmet also has a large rivet in the centre of the forehead; this is a Celtic feature found on no other Roman helmet. Although this helmet may be Roman it is undoubtedly of Celtic manufacture.

These four helmets underline the difficulty of plotting an evolution pattern for Roman helmets. The author has no conclusions to draw and will express no surprise when a helmet of Port type complete with brow reinforce and integral neck guard is discovered in a purely Celtic context.

NOTES

1. BISHOP, 1987.
2. SCHAAF, 1985, Abb. 9-11; SCHAAF, 1986.
3. SCHAAF, 1985.
4. JAŹDŹEWSKA, 1986.
5. YPEY, 1982.
6. Cf. Port type helmet from Mons-et-Montels in southern France, ROBINSON, 1975, 43, plates 96 and 97.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BISHOP, M., 1987: 'The evolution of certain features'. in: M. Dawson (ed) Roman Military Equipment; The Accountments of War, BAR International Series 336 (Oxford 1987), 109-139
- JAŹDŹEWSKA, M., 1986: Ein römischer Legionärshelm aus Polen. Germania 64.I, 61-73

- ROBINSON, H. RUSSELL, 1975: The Armour of Imperial Rome (London 1975)
- SCHAAF. U., 1985: Studien zur keltischen Bewaffnung, Jahrb. Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz 32, 695-699
- SCHAAF. U., 1986: Alizay und Mesnil-sous-Jumièges: zu drei bemerkenswerten Spätlatènewaffen aus der Haute-Normandie. Actes du VIIIe colloque sur les ages du fer en France non-Mediterranéene, Revue Aquitania, Supplement 1, 293-298
- YPEY, J., 1982: Een romeinse ijzeren helm uit het begin van onze jaartelling, gevonden bij Hedel (Gld). Westerheem 31, 101-103

FIGURE CAPTIONS

- Fig.1a:** A well preserved Agen type helmet from Giubiasco, Switzerland.
1b: The helmet from Port bei Nidau, Switzerland.
- Fig.2a & b:** Side and front view of the Augustan Imperial Gallic A type helmet from Nijmegen in the Netherlands.
2c: Detail of the neck guard.
- Fig.3:** Port type helmet from Mesnil-sous-Joumiges, near Rouen in northern France.
- Fig.4:** Helmet of Port type from Reka in Jugoslavia.
- Fig.5a:** Helmet of Agen/Port (?) from Siemiechów in Poland.
5b: The brow reinforce of the Siemiechów helmet seen from underneath.
- Fig.6a & b:** Side and front view of Celto-Roman helmet from Hedel (Gld) in the Netherlands.
6c: Plan view of the brow reinforce.
6d: Detail of the neckguard of the helmet from Port bei Nidau.

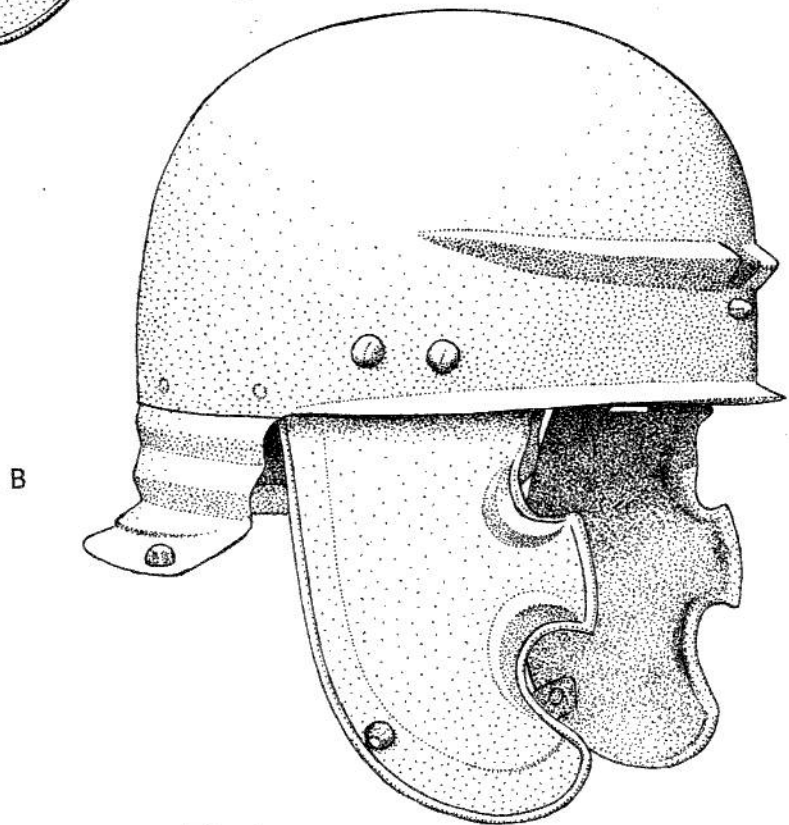
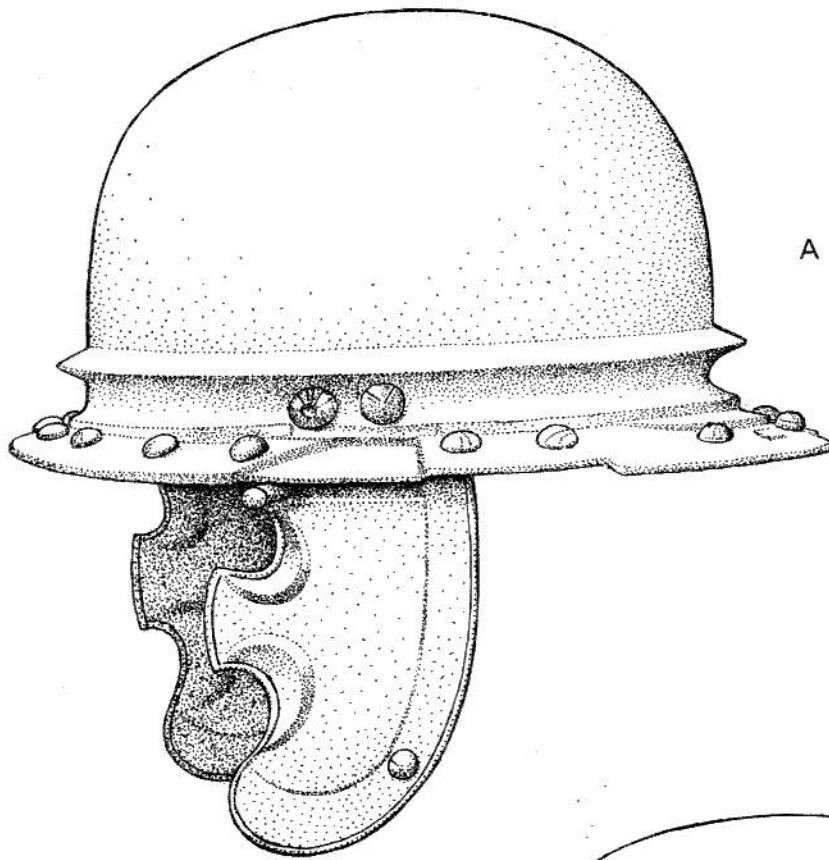


Fig.1

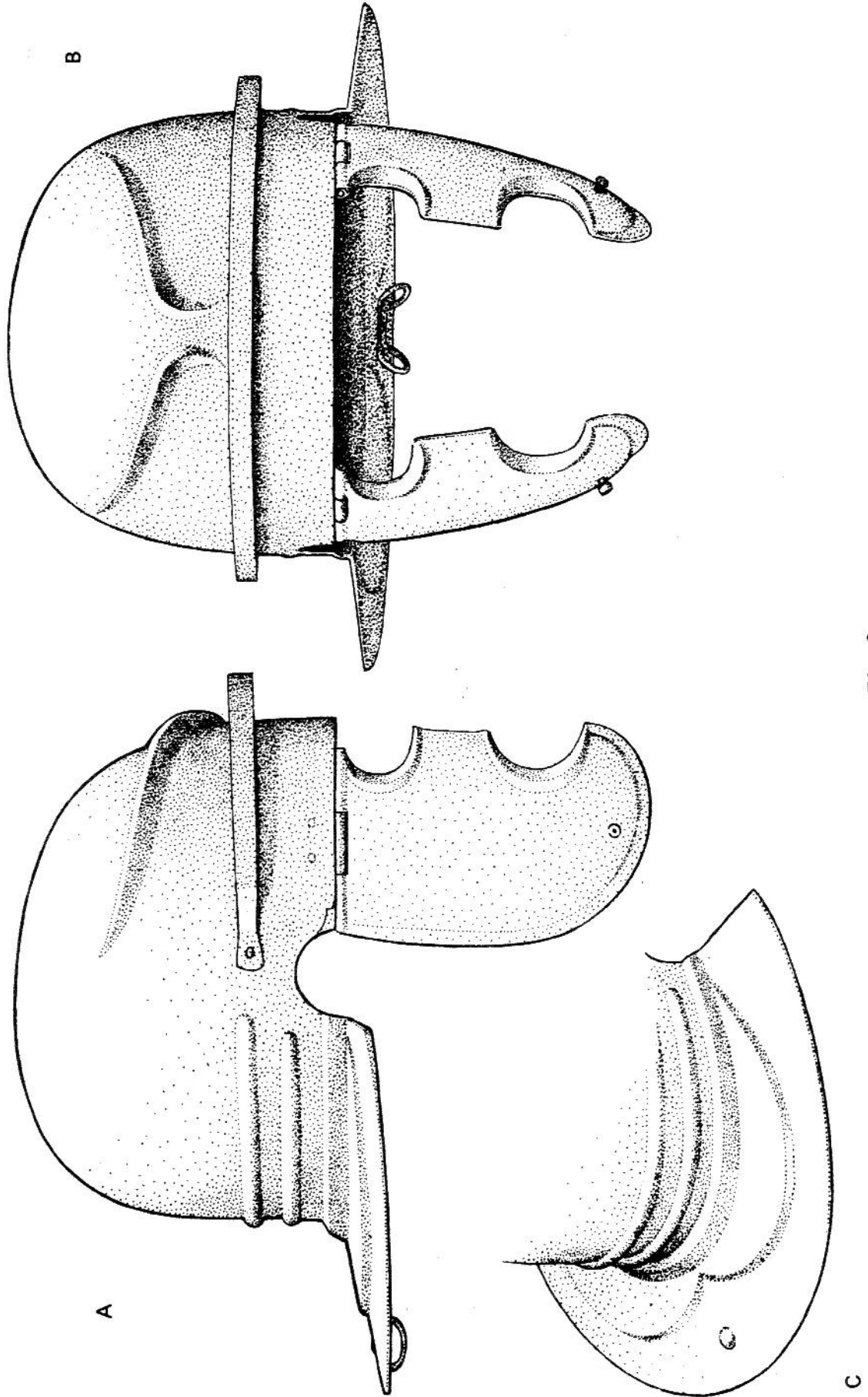


FIG. 2

Fig.3

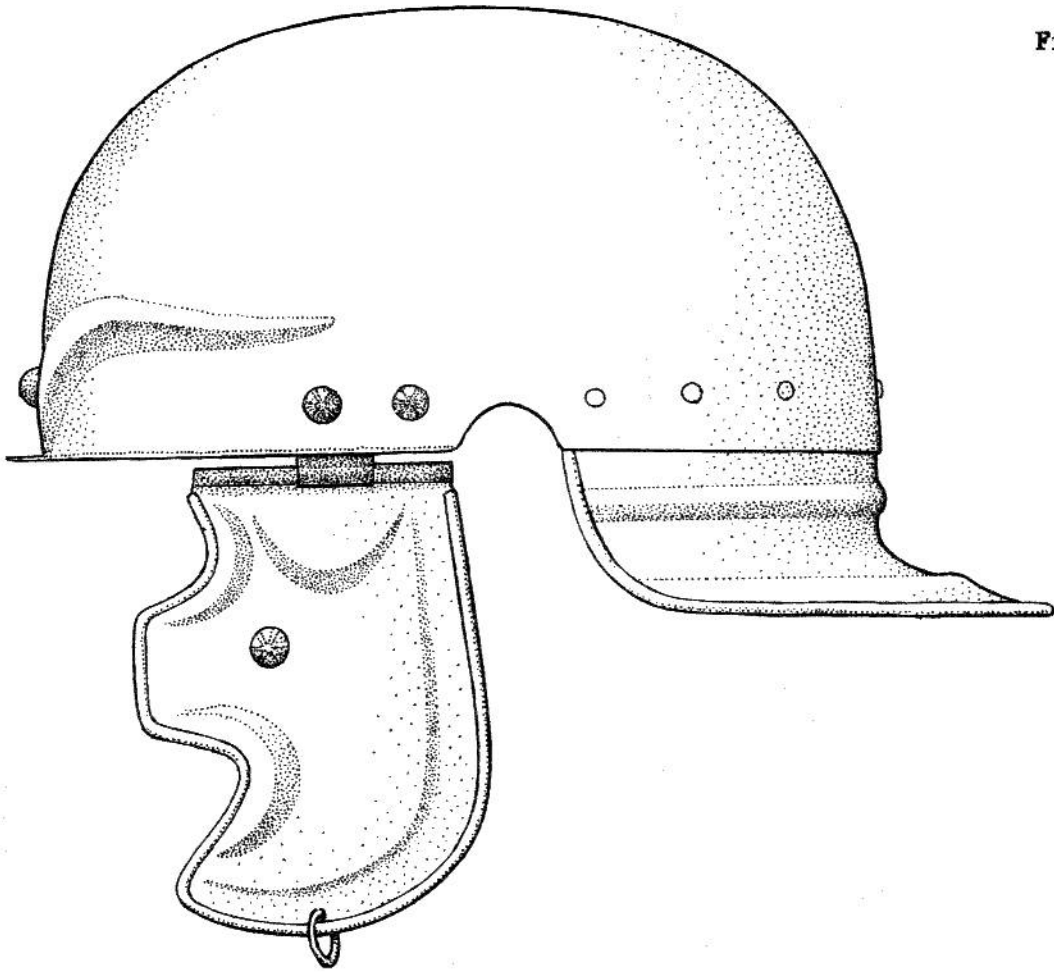
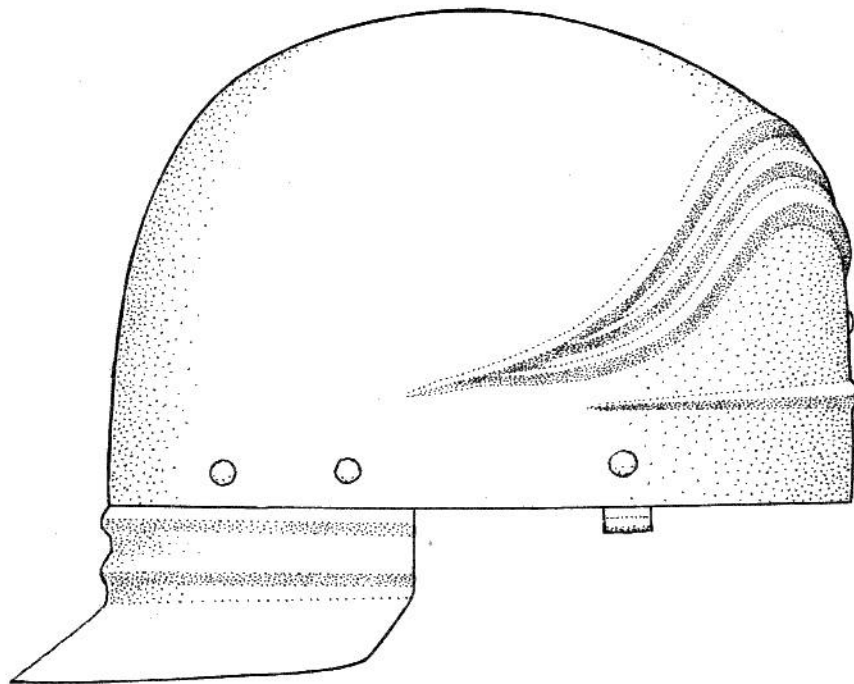


Fig.4



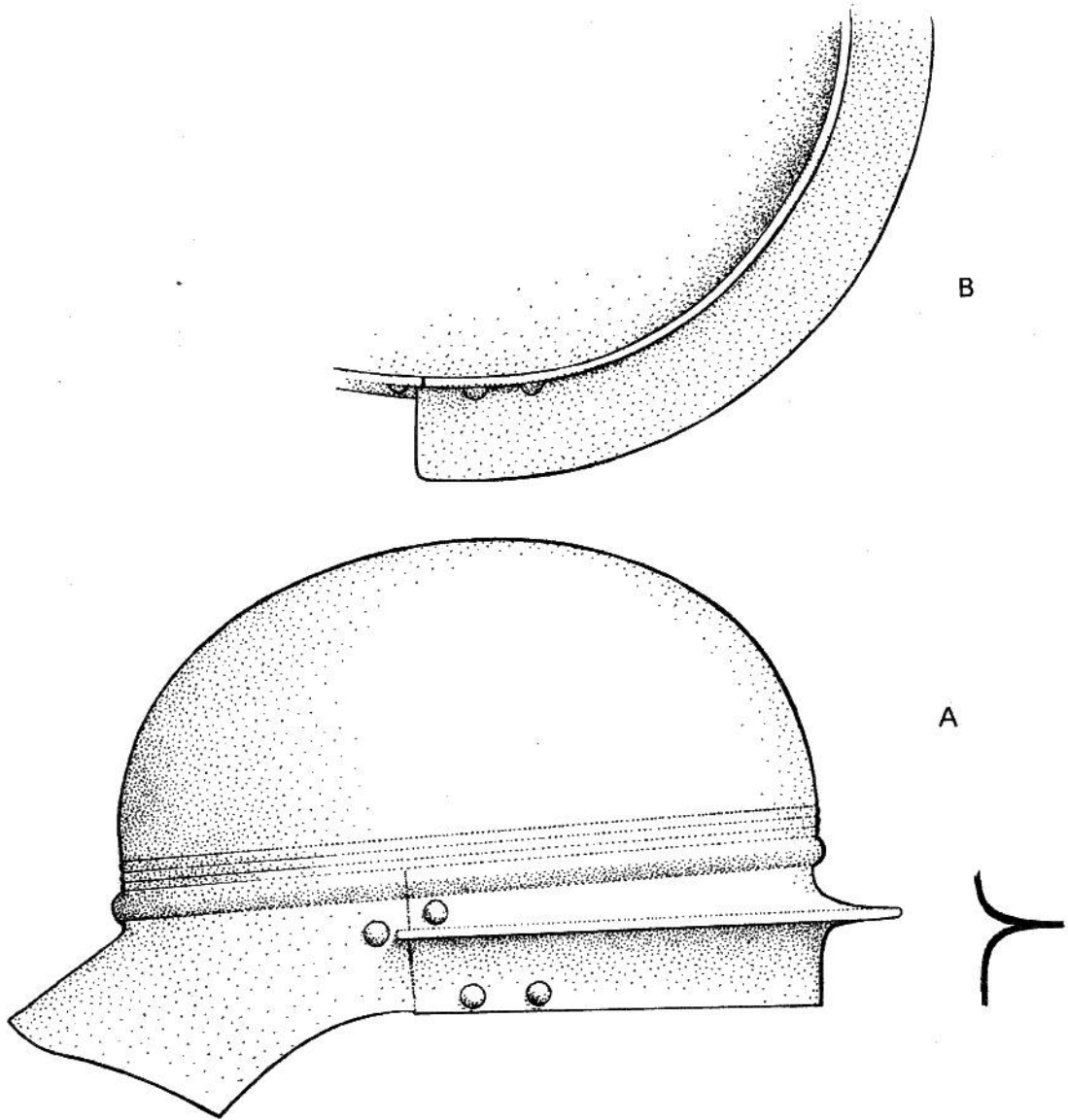


Fig.5

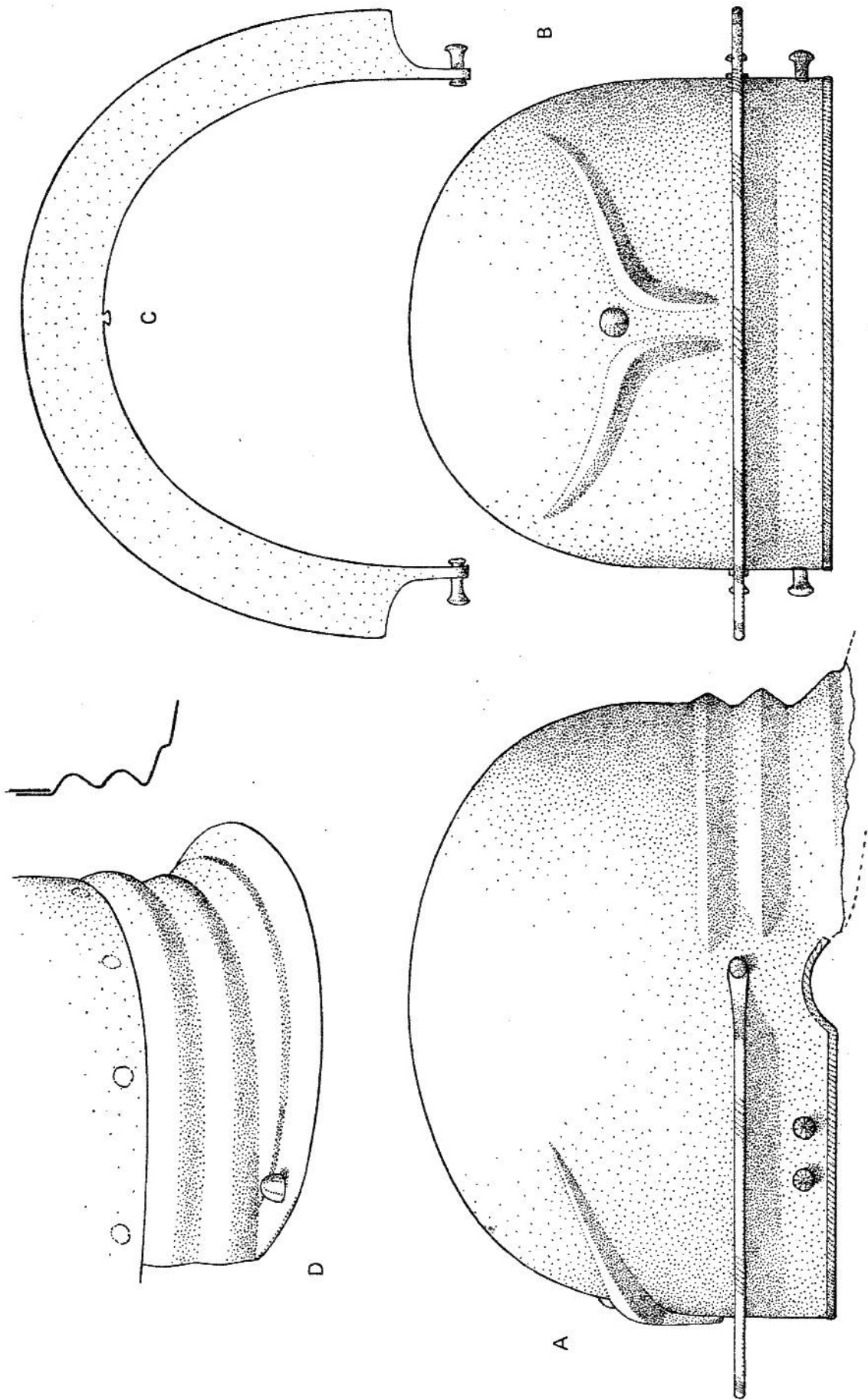


FIG. 6