A ROMAN HELMET IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Whilst visiting the Museo de las Casas Reales in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic, the writer observed a Roman copper-alloy helmet affixed 7ft up on a wall in the Sala des Armas. On that occasion, March 1987, it was not possible to examine or record the helmet beyond taking record photographs in exceedingly poor lighting conditions, but the cursory examination possible indicated the presence of a number of interesting characteristics. Perusal of the Guide Catalougue to the Museums Armoury,[1] revealed the item to be correctly recorded therein, but subsequent research and enquiry elicted the information that there is apparently no other record of its existence, while several details of the helmet were quite unusual, and not previously recorded in association. In view of this, a return visit was made to the Museum twelve months later in order to fully examine and record the helmet, and the opportunity is taken here to draw wider attention to its existence and its unusual characteristics.

Examination of the helmet would not have been possible without the kind co-operation and help of the Museum's staff, in particular the Director, Eugenio Perez Montas, and his assistant, Snra M-T. Gonzales, while study-leave and travel assistance was generously granted by the writer's employers, through the kindness of Emilia Laboda, Vice-President, Raymond and Whitcomb, New York. Thanks are also due to those friends and colleagues who helped in the project and subsequent research, especially Lindsay Allason-Jones, John Augelli, Mike Bishop, Peter Connolly, Jon Coulston and Valerie Harte, and to Keith McBarron for the drawings of the helmet, although all the comments and interpretations in this published paper are solely the responsibility of the writer.

PROVENANCE

The helmet, with the majority of the other items in the Museum's Armoury, was originally part of the private collection of the Mexican General Adolfo Leon Ossorio, and has been on display in the Dominican Republic since 1955. The collection was acquired by the Dominican Republic in 1973, and since 1983 has been on permanent display in its present location, the Sala des Armas, Museo de las Casas Reales. Despite extensive search, it has not been possible to identify the origin of the helmet. There is no record with the collection to assist in this, but examination of the available literature would indicate that it was not acquired in the recent past at a public auction, suggesting that it was either a long-standing family possession, or that it was acquired privately through a dealer. Further speculation is unwarranted, although it might be noted that General Ossorio's family was of Spanish origin. In view of the origin of this helmet, and given the absence of any certain provenance, to eliminate any ambiguity in nomenclature, it is proposed that this item should be referred to as

Fig.1: The Ossorio helmet, front view (all photos: the author).

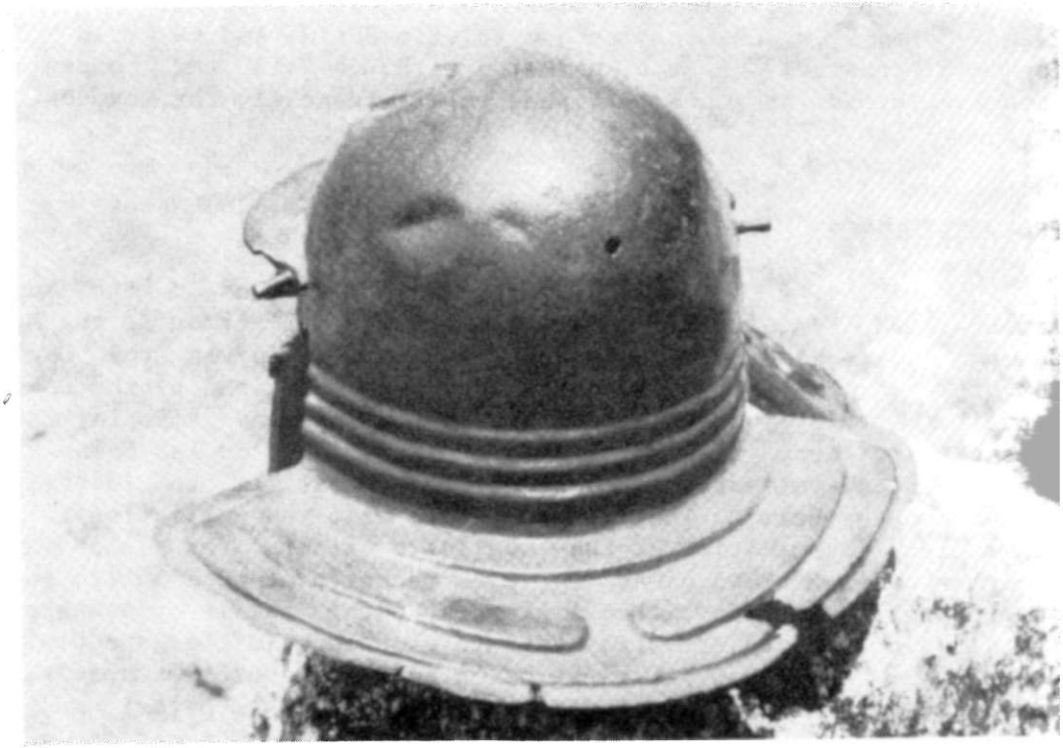

Fig.2: The Ossorio helmet, rear view.

the Ossorio Helmet.

DESCRIPTION

The general condition of the helmet is excellent. It is virtually complete, with limited erosion of the thinner metal parts, specifically around the edge of the neck-guard, the upper edges of the cheek-pieces, and the lower edge of the bowl above the wearer's right-hand cheek-piece, this now being restored with a resin substitute. The wearer's left-hand cheek-piece is still attached to the hinge-plate by its original iron rod, although its right-hand twin has corroded through, and this cheek-piece is now held in place as displayed with soft-metal wire. Evidence for corrosion of the helmet is minimal, which might be considered remarkable, given the local climate, and that it is displayed with no protection whatsoever on the wall of the Museum, adjacent to a unglazed north-facing window-opening, sometimes closed at night with wooden shutters: the general humidity and internal temperature of the room, however, does not appear to vary greatly from one day to another. It is clear that the helmet has been professionally conserved at some date, probably immediately prior to its re-display in 1983, and externally it glows with a distinct golden sheen, there being traces of rust-coloured staining on the inside. Pittings remain from earlier outbreaks of 'bronze disease', now stabilised, and the surface of the helmet has been laquered, while solder has been used to secure the projecting brow-reinforce to the bowl. Nonetheless, some cuprous chloride encrustation is evident on the neck guard, and some 'bronze-disease' is present within the bowl.

In profile, the bowl is deeply rounded, slightly more than hemispherical, with a flattened back and three occipital ridges above the neck guard, a rounded front, and a skull-cap that fits tightly to the crown of the head. It is apparently as much as 2 mm thick on the top, but is reduced to 1 mm at the edges, including the neck-guard. The front is decorated with prominent lentoid 'eye-brows' on either side of a short medial ridge (Figs.1, 3-4, 9), these taking a double-form more reminiscent of actual eye-openings than eye-brows. The lower edges of the bowl are not turned over, or 'knocked-back', and have been left roughly, if regulary, finished, and although there are rectangular cut-outs behind the cheek-pieces for the ear-openings, there is no indication of any separate ear-guards that might once have been attached. The sloping neck-guard projects on either side of the helmet to its full depth, and is embossed with three steps, the centre one of which has been interrupted with a shallow channel set slightly off-centre, the raised step terminating on either side with rounded edges (Fig.2).

Affixed to the front of the helmet, below the 'eye-brows', is a 3 mm thick solid brow-reinforce, set at an angle to the main plane of the helmet, and decorated with serrations and a longitudinal furrow-groove along the edge. The width of the brow-reinforce narrows at both ends, where it is decorated on both the upper and the lower sides with ridge-and-groove marks, five on each side, before being flattened to form 'rat's-tail' terminals, these carrying an incised chevron pattern (Fig.6). The brow-reinforce is attached to the helmet with a single projecting waisted rivet at each terminal, the convex end of this being

Fig.3: The Ossorio helmet, right front view.

Fig.4: The Ossorio helmet, left front view.

decorated with a scored cross.

The hinge-plates for the cheek-pieces are attached to the interior of the bowl by two waisted rivets similar to those used for the brow-reinforce, although not decorated on their domed heads. Each plate is formed from a waisted strip of bronze, folded in half, and the upper edge roughly cut to form a D-shape with a projecting tab on the straight side. The tab is wrapped around an iron bar, which is secured to the top of the cheek-piece by a simple folding over of the upper edge of this, a central cut-away having been left to receive the tab. Both cheek-pieces survive for the helmet, and are virtually identical (Figs.7-8). They are shaped to follow the jaw-line at the rear, with irregular cusping at the front for the mouth and eyes. They have been embossed to give a raised edge around the jaw line, and to give crescentic mouldings behind the forward cusps. The edges have been left as cut, with no attempt at knocking-back.

Despite close examination, there is no evidence for any ownership or other markings, or for any original lining, other than some iron-rust stains within the bowl and on the inner surfaces of the cheek-pieces. Assuming that the helmet as seen represents a completed, rather than an unfinished item, these stains might indicate that an iron-lining had once existed, to which a cloth 'cap-comforter' or other form of internal padding may have been fixed. That said, there is no evidence for how such an iron lining might have been attached, but some form of edge-binding at least would have been necessary for the rims of the helmet and the cheek-pieces, as these are not knocked-back, and are all left as sharp metal edges, which would have been dangerous for the wearer without some covering. There is equally no evidence for any fastening loops for the cheek-pieces which must surely have been present if the helmet had been completed, suggesting that these were somehow affixed to the cheek-piece lining, whatever form this took.

Certain technological aspects involved in the manufacture of the helmet are immediately apparent on close examination. The interior of the bowl has a number of circular domed indentations, up to 5 mm in diameter, roughly spiralling outwards from the centre, which indicates that it has been manufactured by being drawn down over a series of stakes by repeated working with a raising hammer, before finally being finished off on a ball-headed stake, smaller punch-marks inside the raised eyebrow and occipital mouldings indicating that these were formed by working from the inside of the bowl at a later date, presumably using some type of external former. Larger, semi-circular indentations are apparent on the inner surface of the neck guard, again indicating the use of a raising hammer, which was also used to form the series of steps on the projecting flange. The surface of the bowl and the neck guard have been planished, and polished to produce a smooth surface, although there are a few 'burnishing' and file marks left on the neck guard, and some file marks remain along the sides of the eyebrows. On the other hand, the brow-reinforce was cast in one piece, and subsequently decorated by filing to form the central longitudinal groove, serrated edge, and the ridge-and-groove and chevron markings on the terminals, before being attached to the helmet with a single waisted-rivet on each side. The cheek-pieces, however, were produced by embossing, probably having been beaten into a metal die, as is indicated by the pattern of the hammer-marks on the reverse side of

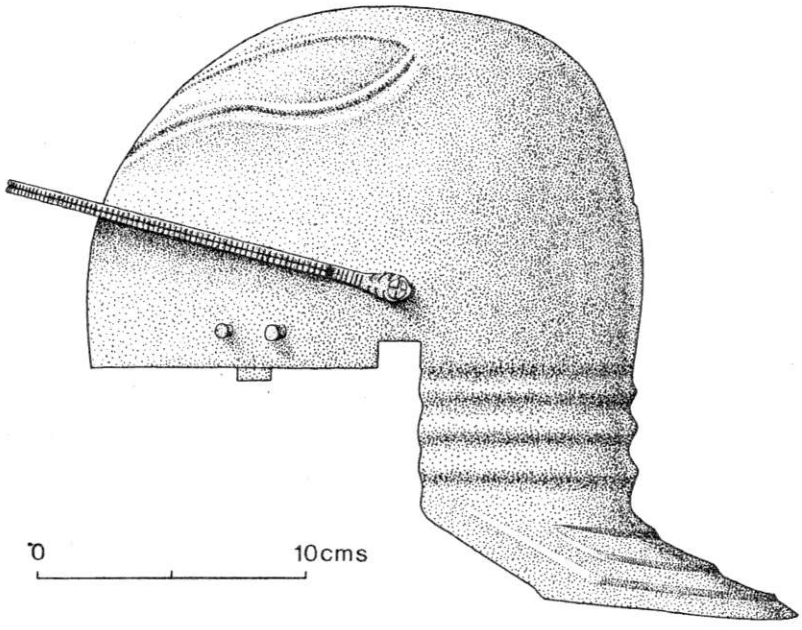

Fig.5: The Ossorio helmet, side view (drawing by K. McBarron; scale 1:3)

them. 'Burnishing' marks indicate some attempt at producing a finish, but there is no evidence for chasing or any other form of decoration: examination of the hinge plates and the point of attachment indicates that the hinge plates were first rivetted inside the helmet, then the cheek-pieces held in place, the upper edge having already been turned over, with the iron suspension rod being fed through, before being finally secured by hammering down the ends of the upper edge of the cheek-pieces.

DISCUSSION

It is generally assumed that helmets of this type, with a deep nape protection and widely flaring neck-guard, were worn by cavalry.[2] Be that as it may, an exact parallel for the Ossorio helmet cannot be found, nor does there seem to be any particular close parallel for its unusual combination of disparate features. Certain aspects of the helmet are what would be considered undoubtedly 'Celtic'. For example, the deep bowl and occiput of this helmet, with its series of occipital mouldings, can be best compared with the Port bei Nidau helmet,[3] for most of the Imperial series of helmets have shallower necks, with occipital mouldings that commence above the level of the lower rim of the bowl. Other features of the helmet can also be best paralleled within the Agen/Port group, for example the projecting rivets with their domed heads, absent from the classic Coolus, Montefortino and Imperial series, yet frequently present on the Agen/Port helmets, as in the examples from Thiele and Mons-et-Monteils,[4] and - similarly waisted and decorated - in the recent Hedel find.[5] Further, the cheek-pieces, roughly formed though they are, are more at home with those of the Agen/Port series, with their almost straight rear edges, and the near-symetrical forward edge, and embossed crescentic mouldings behind

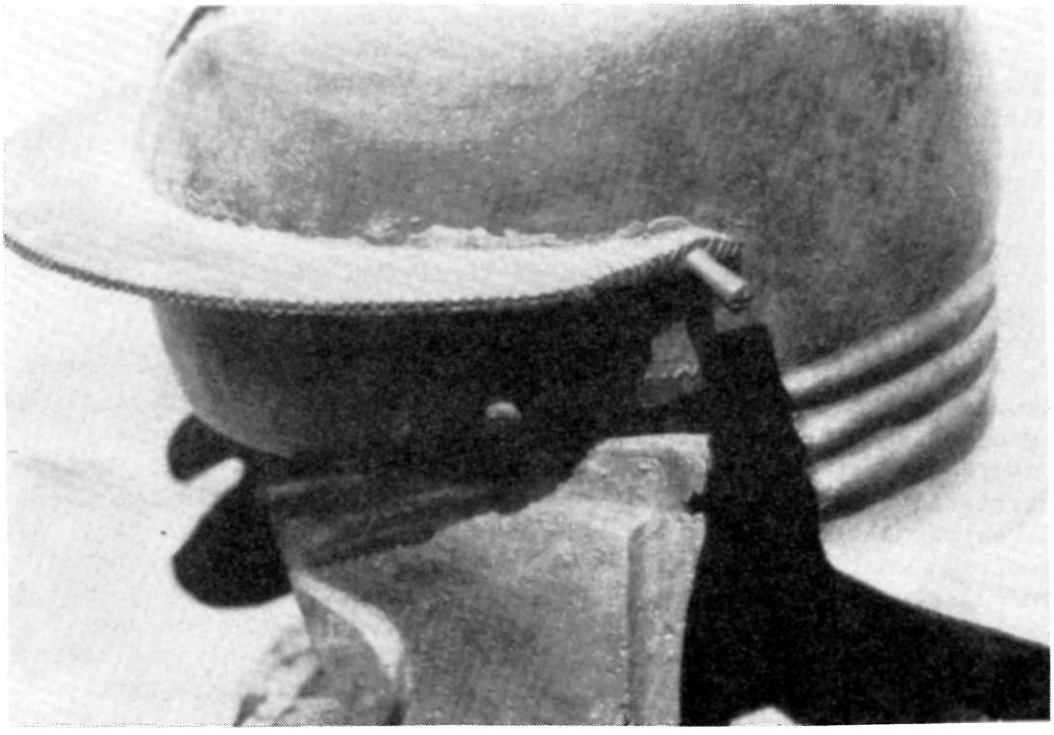

Fig.6: The Ossorio helmet, detail of brow reinforce.

Fig.7: Left cheekpiece.

Fig.8: Right cheekpiece.

the eye and mouth openings, similar features only appearing on the (typologically) earliest of the Imperial series,[6] although the general shape can be seen on certain Coolus helmets.[7] Whether or not eye-brow mouldings in general should be considered a Roman or a Celtic feature is debateable. They are often regarded as a Roman feature, but they certainly appear on 'Celtic' prototypes.[8] That said, those on the Ossorio helmet cannot be precisely paralleled amongst any of the known finds of this period, forming a lentoid shape quite distinct from the normal straight or slightly wavy-line.

On the other hand, other features of the helmet are purely 'Roman', but can be shown to derive from the Agen/Port series, for example the wide flaring neck-guard, decorated with a series of stepped ridges: in this case, however, the ridges do not form the concentric or the more usual lunate pattern familiar from other helmets, as for example on the Hebron or the Nijmegen helmets.[9] Undoubted 'Roman' features on the Ossorio helmet include the separate brow-reinforce, a feature not yet found on Celtic helmets, and in its solid form restricted to typologically early Roman ones, as on the Coolus and 'Imperial-Gallic' finds from Nijmegen;[10] as was observed, 'It is possible that it was soon realised that such a stout band ... was uneccessary, and it must have had a tendency to cause the helmet to tip forward over the wearer's eyes',[11] which might account for the brow-reinforce on the Ossorio helmet being set at an angle, instead of horizontal, like virtually every other helmet of this period. That said, the writer knows of no other reinforce which is decorated in this particular way. Finally, another feature absent from Celtic helmets, and from the Coolus and Montefortino series, is the provision of cut-outs in the lower rim of the bowl to accomodate the wearer's ears, a feature which first appears on the Nijmegen helmet,[12] and which is almost invairably present on all other Roman helmets, generally surrounded with a flanged ear-guard. These, however, are always cut to a semi-circular shape, and the Ossorio helmet appears to be unique in having square cut-outs, while there was evidently no provision made for any form of ear-guard.

It has been assumed throughout that the helmet, as seen today, is a completed item, and it might be noted in passing that helmets of this generally poor quality are often associated with the late Republican or early Imperial army,[13] an idea which may be of relevance in considering the somewhat bastard origin of the Ossorio helmet. If it is a finished item, it should therefore, as noted, have had some form of internal lining, on account of the sharp metal edges, and given the need to fasten the cheek pieces in order to hold these close to the head and prevent the helmet from falling off. The nature of this lining cannot be determined. There are no rivet holes by which such a lining could have been attached, although the presence of iron-stains within the bowl have suggested that an iron-lining might have somehow existed. The Ossorio helmet is certainly strong enough by itself to have witstood most blows, except possibly on the neck-guard, and the need for an iron lining might be questioned: the iron stains could well have been formed by the presence of iron objects within the bowl of the helmet when it was originally 'lost', for there are several well-known cases where helmets have been deposited with iron objects in association, a particulary relevant example here being that from Chassenard.[14] It has to be assumed that any lining was probably of cloth or even

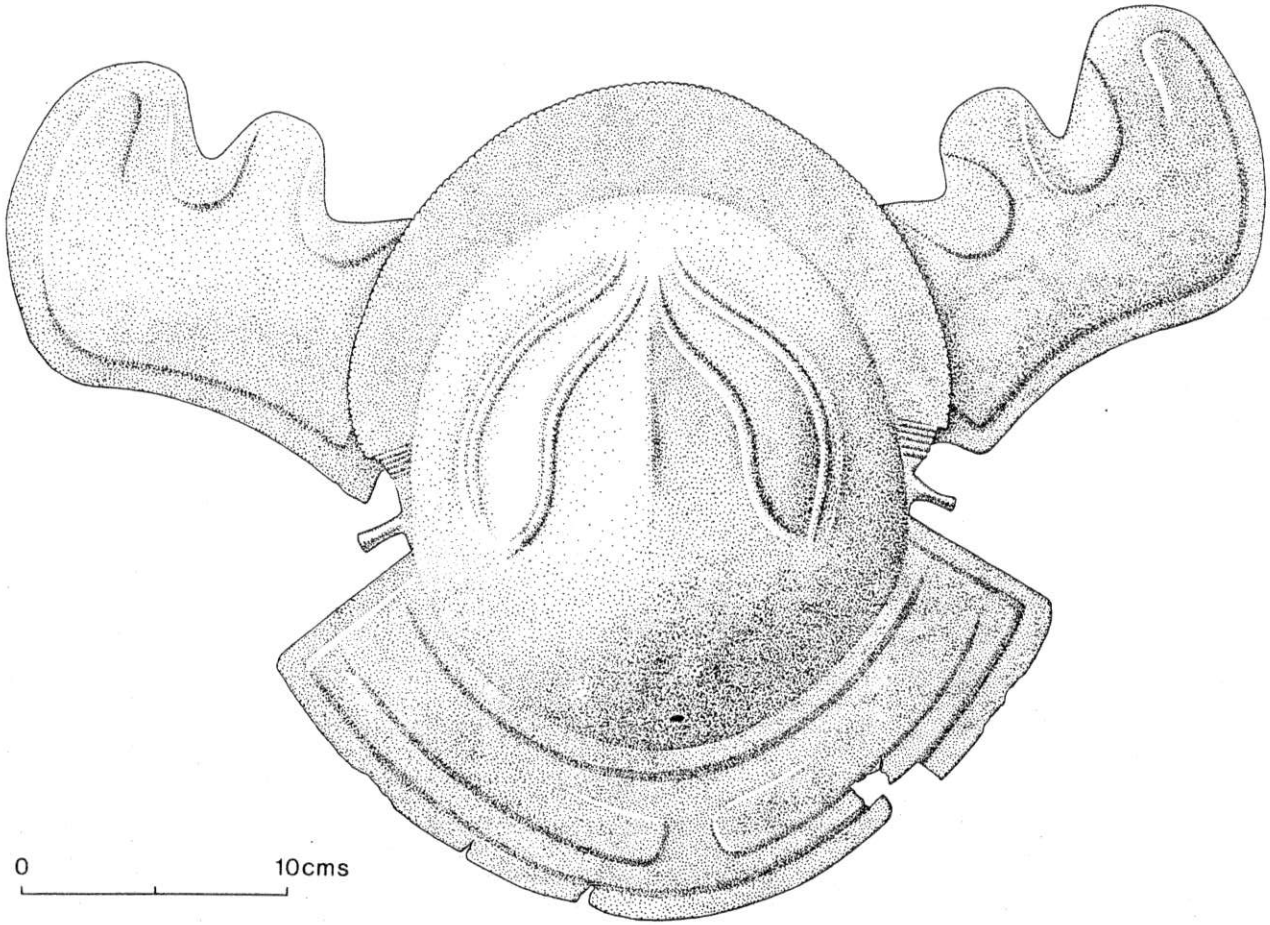

Fig.9: The Ossorio helmet, top view (drawing by K. McBarron; scale 1:3)

cloth-and-leather, and that it was somehow stuck inside the helmet, the cheek-pieces being tied with thongs attached to this.

No attempt will be made here to fit the Ossorio helmet into any typological pattern, or even to assign a firm date to it within any evolutionary sequence: Bishop[15] and Connolly[16] have shown the difficulties in attempting to distinguish an objective chronological framework based on typology alone. That said, the helmet remains somewhat enigmatic, in its unusual combination of both 'Celtic' and 'Roman' characteristics, as we understand these, while if forced to speculate, a late Republican or early Imperial date would seem appropiate.

NOTES

1. LANZA & DAVID, 1984, 13.

2. ROBINSON, 1975, 89.

3. ROBINSON 1975, 43, 95; also CONNOLLY, this volume, Fig 1b.

4. ROBINSON 1975, 43, 94, and 96-7.

5. CONNOLLY, this volume, Fig 6.

6. As with the Nijmegen helmet, ROBINSON 1975, 50, 100.

7. As in that from Schaan, ROBINSON 1975, 28, 41.

8. As for example the Port bei Nidau and Reka finds, CONNOLLY, this volume, Figs 1b and 4.

9. ROBINSON 1975, 70, 178; and 50, 102: for the Nijmegen find, see also CONNOLLY, this volume, Fig 2c.

10. ROBINSON 1975, 40, 47; and 50, 100.

11. Ibid., 45.

12. CONNOLLY, this volume, Fig 2.

13. PADDOCK 1985, 145.

14. ROBINSON 1975, 118, 337-8.

15. 1987, 112.

16. This volume, above p.227.

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