

THE MILDENHALL TREASURE.

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The discovery of the Mildenhall treasure, at West Row, on the edge of the Fens, near Mildenhall, in Suffolk, was first made public in June 1946. On July 1st an inquest was held, at which the silver was declared Treasure Trove, and consequently the property of the Crown. It was immediately acquired by the British Museum, and since the 20th of the same month it has been on public exhibition. It was stated at the inquest that the treasure had been accidentally discovered some four years previously.

The treasure consists of the following pieces :—

1. A large dish and two platters with relief figure ornament. The dish bears an outer frieze showing a lively Bacchanalian scene with Bacchus, Silenus, Hercules and Pan, and maenads and satyrs. An inner frieze shows nereids riding on the backs of sea-monsters, and in the centre is a striking mask of Neptune. The ornament on the platters shows Bacchanalian figures.

It has been suggested that the ornament on the above pieces was executed by chasing. (See Plate I, Figures 1 and 2).

2. A large dish, ornamented with a close-meshed, incised pattern inlaid with niello. The circular ornamental grooves on this dish are among a number of indications which show that many pieces of the treasure were finished on a lathe, or some similar device.

3. A flanged bowl with lid. The flange of the bowl is ornamented with an incised foliate scroll originally inlaid with niello. The lid was probably not originally designed to go with the bowl; it is surmounted by the figure of a Triton blowing on a conch, and bears an upper zone of conventional foliate ornament, and, on the lower part, a relief frieze showing combats between centaurs and wild beasts, interspersed with human masks. (See Plate II, Fig. 3)

4. Four large flanged bowls. The flanges are ornamented with relief friezes of animals and trees, divided into sections by human masks. (See Plate II, Fig. 4).

5. Two small flanged bowls, the flanges ornamented with a form of vine-scroll.

6. A fluted bowl, engraved with foliate ornament and a design of interlocked triangles. Fitted with a pair of swing-handles, now detached.

7. A pair of goblets, perhaps designed so that when inverted, the base of each would serve as a small platter. (See Plate III, Fig. 5).

8. Five bowls and four handles of ladles. The handles, which are now detached, are cast in the form of dolphins, and are partly gilt.

9. Eight spoons:

a. A "christening" spoon, with the inscription "PAPITTEDO VIVAS" (Long life to Papittedo.)

b. A similar spoon with an inscription to Pascentia.

c. A set of three, inscribed with the Chi-Rho monogram between Alpha and Omega.

d. A set of three; the bowls are decorated with foliate ornament.



FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.

PLATE II.



FIG. 3.

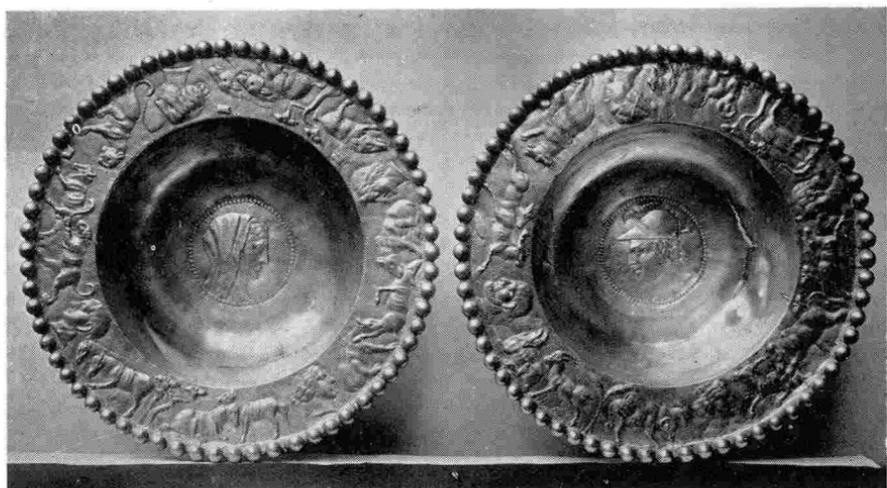


FIG. 4.

PLATE III.



FIG. 5.

THE PLACE OF MANUFACTURE AND DATE OF THE TREASURE.

It is hardly possible at present to reach a definite conclusion as to where the Mildenhall Treasure was made. However, the presence of what appear to be Greek inscriptions on the two platters, and the quality of the finer pieces in general, suggest that these at least were imported into Roman Britain, probably from the eastern Mediterranean area.

As regards date, the heavy beaded borders of the Neptune Dish and two platters, and the conventional use of incision for certain features of their ornament, seem to indicate that these three pieces were made in the fourth century, in spite of the purely classical style of the figures. A comparison with other fourth-century pieces suggests that they were made quite early in the century. Many of the other pieces are closely paralleled in the Traprain treasure and other finds dating from the fourth century, and in fact there can be little doubt that all, with the possible exception of the Covered Bowl (but not its lid), are of fourth-century date. The spoons with Christian inscriptions can hardly have been made before the official recognition of Christianity about 320 A.D.

CONCLUSION.

We may imagine the Mildenhall silver being acquired gradually, two or three pieces at a time, over a period of a century or so, by some wealthy family of Romano-Britons. Buried by its owners in some time of peril, it escaped mutilation at the hands of barbarian raiders, and has survived some fifteen or sixteen centuries in such perfection that, seeing it to-day, we feel that the men who made it might still be alive.