

A ROMAN BRONZE HELMET FROM HAWKEDON

By K. S. PAINTER, M.A., F.S.A.

In April 1965 a Roman helmet was ploughed up on land belonging to Mr. H. H. Cawston of Hawkedon, Suffolk, about ten miles north-west of Lavenham (grid reference TL 793545). The helmet was examined at the Armouries of H.M. Tower of London and at the British Museum. Through the good offices of Mr. A. R. Edwardson, Curator of the Moyse's Hall Museum, Bury St. Edmunds, it was placed on temporary display during October and November, 1965, in the Exhibition of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities at the British Museum. Subsequently it was purchased by the British Museum at a sale at Messrs. Sothebys on 13 June 1966, and is now part of the collections of the Sub-Department of Prehistory and Roman Britain (registration no. 1966, 6-5, 1).¹

The helmet (Plate VII and Fig. 6) is of bronze and has a very wide neck-guard which still retains part of its bronze binding hammered on to the serrated edge.² The width of the helmet including the neck-guard is 44 cm. (17.5 in.). The height of the cap is 19.5 cm. (7.8 in.), and its diameter is 25.5 cm. (10 in.). The weight of the helmet is 2,280 grammes. A few traces of tinning remain in the bronze, and in antiquity the polished helmet would have been bright silver in appearance. The front edge of the helmet has a double curve repeating the line of the eyebrows of the wearer. At the centre of the neck-guard, between two perforations and the edge, there is a stamped panel reading:— OQ.³

The weight of the helmet—more than twice the weight of the heaviest of three first-century legionary helmets in the British Museum—and the width of the neck-guard suggest that it was not a mere parade-piece. The same features would have made it cumbersome in battle. The helmet may well, therefore, have been gladiatorial, similar to those shown in use on a relief of the early-first century A.D. found in the Via Ostiense in Rome,⁴ or, more closely,

¹ The helmet has been briefly published in 'Roman Britain in 1965' in *Journal of Roman Studies*, LVI (1966), 209 and 221 and pl. X, 4 and 5; and in *Antiquaries Journal* (1968).

² The binding on the leading edge of the left-hand side of the neck-guard shown in the photographs and drawings, was lost between its temporary exhibition in the British Museum and its return to the Museum after the sale.

³ The ending suggests a maker of Etruscan origin and therefore a factory in Campania in central Italy.

⁴ *Boll. comm. arch. comunale di Roma* LXXVI for 1956-8, 37 ff. and tav. ii.

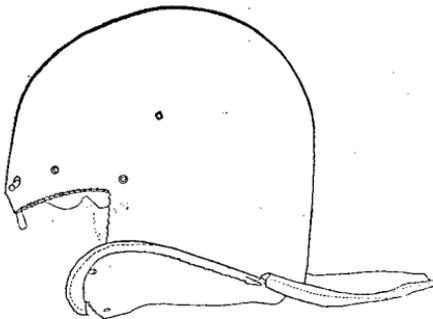
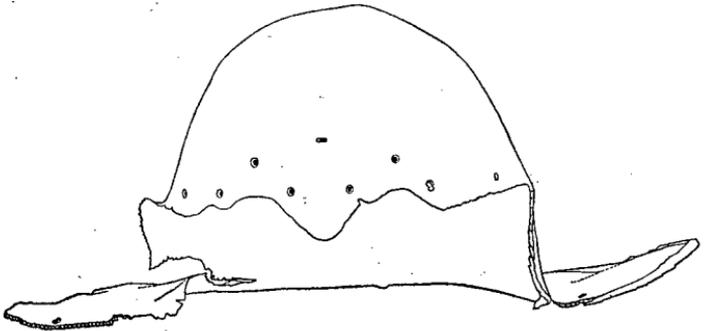
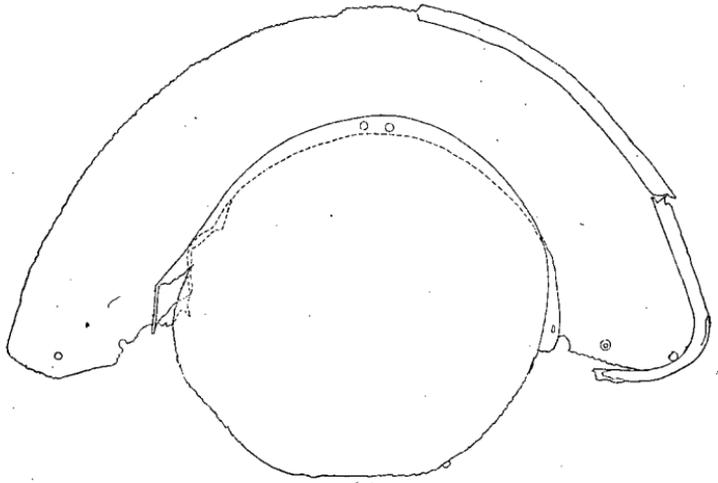


FIG. 6.—Roman Helmet from Hawkedon.

to a visored helmet from Pompeii now in Naples Museum.⁵ The extra weight would clearly have given extra protection; but whether the extra protection was wanted in the arena itself or only during practice is not so certain. The particularly heavy swords found at Pompeii, for example, are thought to have been for practice, and it may be assumed that lighter swords were used in actual combat.⁶

The practices of gladiatorial combats came to the Romans from Etruria, where originally they were part of the ceremonies at important funerals. The first recorded instance of their appearance in Rome was at the funeral games given by his sons in honour of M. Brutus in 264 B.C. On that occasion only three pairs of gladiators were engaged; but in 174 B.C. at the funeral games of T. Flamininus thirty-seven pairs fought, and finally at private displays, such as these funerals, 100 pairs became common. At the games given by Julius Caesar as aedile in 65 B.C. 320 pairs fought. Under the Empire the numbers steadily mounted and Trajan exhibited 5,000 pairs in his triumph over Decebalus.

Gladiators were usually prisoners of war, slaves bought for the purpose, or condemned criminals. They were trained in a school (*ludus*) under very harsh discipline by a professional (*lanista*) who either owned the establishment himself or was employed by the state or private persons. Under the Empire the slaves were often joined by free men who, being reduced to poverty, hired themselves to a *lanista* at a wage, and were bound by an oath (*auctoramentum gladiatorium*) to serve for a fixed period. A small number of women are known to have adopted the gladiatorial career, and a relief from Halicarnassus (now Budrum in Turkey) shows two women gladiators fighting. Even a few men and women of rank entered the arena and fought, either of their own accord or at the emperor's bidding.⁷

The most substantial evidence for gladiatorial combats in Britain consists of the amphitheatres which survive at Cirencester, Silchester, Dorchester (Dorset), Chichester, Richborough and Caerwent. Professor Frere has pointed out that, as the amphitheatres were cheaply constructed of ramps of earth rather than in the masonry style of the Continent, they are easily destroyed, and more must have existed, for instance at the four *coloniae* and at London. A few smaller examples are known from country areas, as at Charterhouse on Mendip; but it is not certain whether these served the same purpose. Others again are known at the fortresses

⁵ A. de Franciscis, *Il Museo nazionale di Napoli* (1963), fig. 90, top centre. I owe this reference to Professor Dr. H. Klumbach. A full technical description, reconstruction and discussion of the helmet will be published in a later paper. — see *British Museum Quarterly* xxxv

⁶ M. Grant, *Gladiators* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967), p. 40.

⁷ For an excellent recent account of gladiators see Grant, *o.c.* (note 6, above).

of Chester and Caerleon and also at at least one auxiliary fort (Tomen-y-Mur); here their main purpose was undoubtedly arms-training, though they may have served for entertainment on occasion.⁸ There is some epigraphic evidence that gladiators were recruited in the province, for about A.D. 205 L. Didius Marinus held the office of procurator in charge of the gladiators recruited and trained in Gaul, Britain, Spain, Germany and Raetia. A graffito on a sherd of samian from Leicester—*Verecunda the dancer: Lucius the gladiator*—is another indication that they may have been seen in Britain.⁹ Familiarity with the arena, too, is suggested by statuettes of gladiators from South Shields and London, by mould-blown figured glass cups, by colour-coated vases from Colchester and the Nene Valley, and by the famous mosaic of cupids dressing and acting as gladiators at the Bignor villa.¹⁰

The evidence for gladiatorial shows, however, is so sparse that it might previously have been argued that acrobats and wild-beast shows were almost the only entertainments offered in the arenas of Britain; but now the helmet from Hawkedon is positive evidence that gladiators probably did fight in the province. Where, then, are such combats likely to have taken place? The expense of games of any sort was very great, and, although private individuals occasionally financed such shows, it was normally only the provincial assemblies or the municipalities that were able to indulge in the plays and games which were given every year in all the principal towns of the empire and at the yearly meetings of the provincial councils. The cost came second only to the outlay for public works and, except in so far as it was met by the contributions required of magistrates and by private gift, was defrayed by the municipality. At Urso in Spain in the first century B.C. each duovir and aedile was called on to contribute at least 2,000 sesterces, and the city added from the public treasury 2,000 for each duovir

⁸ S. S. Frere, *Britannia* (London, 1967), p. 308. Tomen-y-Mur: V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Roman Frontier in Wales* (1954), p. 37.

⁹ For Marinus' post see *CIL* III 6753. For his whole known career, H.-G. Pflaum, *Les Carrières Procuratoriennes Équestres Sous le Haut-Empire Romain* II (Paris, 1960), no. 295, pp. 765-769. For the Leicester fragment *CIL* VII, no. 1335, 4.

¹⁰ South Shields statuette: J. M. C. Toynbee *Art in Roman Britain* (London, 1962), no. 53 (Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle). London statuettes: J. W. Brailsford, *Antiquities of Roman Britain* (1964), p. 54, no. 4, pl. 15 (British Museum, no. 88, 7-19, 97); J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (Oxford, 1964), p. 118, pl. XXXI b (London Museum). Glass cups: L. Berger, *Römische Gläser aus Vindonissa* (Basel, 1960), pp. 66-67, nos. 29 (Leicester), 30-32 (Colchester), 43 (Kent), 44-45 (Topsham, Devon). Colchester cup: J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain*, pls. 176-177 (Colchester and Essex Museum, Colchester). Nene Valley cup: J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain*, pl. 193 (Peterborough Museum). Bignor mosaic: J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain*, pls. 225-6.

and 1,000 for each aedile.¹¹ Pliny's letters to Trajan refer frequently to the large sums which were being spent by the cities in his province on theatres, amphitheatres and baths.¹² The gifts and bequests made by private citizens added materially to the sums spent each year.¹³ The central government was aware of the large financial burden which these festivals laid on the municipalities, and Dio Cassius (52.30) makes Maecenas advise Augustus to forbid them outside Rome; but the earliest known formal action looking to economy in such matters seems to be the *senatus consultum de sumptibus ludorum gladiatorum minuendis* of about A.D. 176 or 177.¹⁴ The bill limited the amount of money which could be spent on gladiatorial contests. The provisions of the bill show that, to make the new arrangement easier for those who gave the games, the emperors had already provided for the remission of the tax paid to the *fiscus* of one-third or one-fourth of the gains made by the *lanistae*. The sum of two million or three million sesterces which it was estimated the treasury would lose annually, in consequence of the remission of this tax, gives some conception of the large amounts spent on these games.

For these reasons it is likely that the helmet from Hawkedon was used at one of the leading towns of the province of Britain, at games given in connection with some religious festival or in commemoration of some important public event by a wealthy individual or by a priest or magistrate, part of the cost in the latter case being borne by the municipality. The expenses involved were for the hiring of gladiators from the *lanistae*, whether from the state teams such as were later controlled by the *procuratores familiarum gladiatorum* or from privately run enterprises. The nearest town where the Hawkedon helmet could have been put to such use is Colchester, the leading town of the province in the first century A.D., a *colonia* at which there is likely to have been an amphitheatre and finally the centre of the imperial cult in Britain and therefore the meeting place of the annual provincial assembly.¹⁵

¹¹ *CIL* II 5439 *Lex Coloniae Genetivae Iuliae seu Ursonensis*, cc. 70-71 (also printed in F. F. Abbott and A. C. Johnson, *Municipal Administration in the Roman Empire* (Princeton, 1926), pp. 300-317, no. 26. Contributions required of magistrates, etc. for the outlay by a *sacerdos Romae et Augusti* at Lyon, see H.-G. Pflaum, *Le Marbre de Thorigny* (Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, cccxii, 1948).

¹² *Epp.* 23, 39.

¹³ Abbott and Johnson, *o.c.*, p. 434.

¹⁴ Abbott and Johnson, *o.c.*, no. 110, pp. 430-435 = *CIL* II 6278. J. H. Oliver and R. E. A. Palmer, 'Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate' in *Hesperia* xxiv (1955), pp. 320 ff.

¹⁵ Colchester: I. A. Richmond, 'Roman Essex' in W. R. Powell (ed.), *A History of the County of Essex, Vol. III, Roman Essex* (Victoria History of the Counties of England, London, 1963), pp. 1-13. For traces of what may be an amphitheatre, Richmond, *o.c.*, p. 10 and M. R. Hull, *Roman Colchester* (Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, xx, 1958), pp. 105-106.

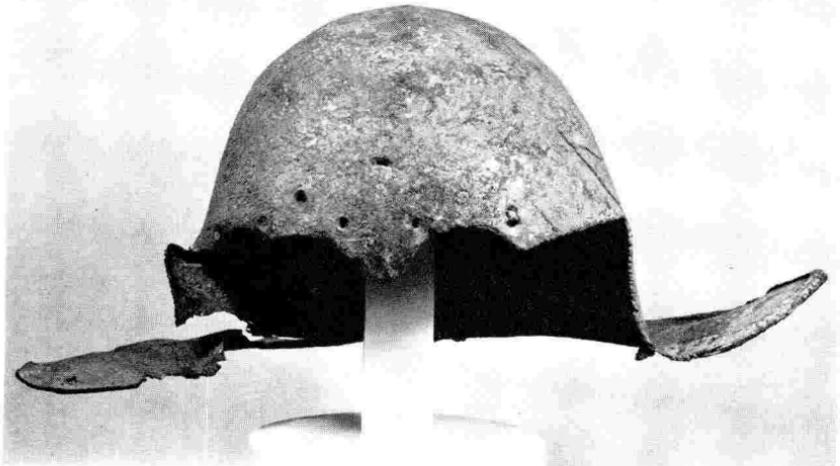
Yet, if the helmet was used at Colchester, why was it found at Hawkedon? A settlement probably existed at Hawkedon, for a Roman burial was found there in a globular amphora containing two fragments of pipeclay statuettes of Venus.¹⁶ The amphora and a fragment of one of these statuettes are in the museum at Bury St. Edmunds, and it would not be surprising if more evidence for such a settlement were now to come to light; but whatever its size the settlement is not likely to have been one of the leading towns of the province, provided with an amphitheatre, and a reason must therefore be sought for the taking of the helmet from Colchester to Hawkedon. The date of deposition is presumably within the first century A.D., to which the helmet's type suggests it belongs. A possible explanation may be found in part of Tacitus' description of the revolt of the Treviri and Aedui of Gaul under Florus and Sacrovir in A.D. 21 (*Annals* III, 43 ff.):

'A more formidable movement broke out among the Aedui . . . Sacrovir with some armed cohorts had made himself master of Augustodunum, the capital of the tribe . . . He . . . distributed . . . arms which he had secretly manufactured. There were forty thousand (men), one fifth armed like our legionaries; the rest had spears and knives and other weapons used in the chase. In addition were some slaves being trained for gladiators, clad after the national fashion in a complete covering of iron. They were called *crupellarii*, and though they were ill-adapted for inflicting wounds, they were impenetrable to them . . . (When the Roman army and Sacrovir's forces met, the Roman) cavalry threw itself on the flanks, and the infantry charged the van. On the wings there was but a brief resistance. The men in mail were somewhat of an obstacle, as the iron plates did not yield to javelins or swords; but our men, snatching up hatchets and pickaxes, hacked at their bodies and their armour as if they were battering a wall. Some beat down the unwieldy mass with pikes and forked poles, and they were left lying on the ground, without the power to rise, like dead men. Sacrovir (fled) with his most trustworthy followers'.

The parallel in Britain to this situation is the revolt of Boudicca some forty years later. One can imagine how useful gladiatorial equipment from the sacked city of Colchester, perhaps with freed

¹⁶ G. E. Fox, *s.v.* 'Hawkedon' in 'Romano-British Suffolk', p. 307, in W. Page (ed.), *Victoria History of the County of Suffolk* I (1911).

PLATE VII



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum
Roman Helmet from Hawkedon.

gladiators, might seem to the poorly armed rebels,¹⁷ and how ineffectual in combat against trained Roman troops such heavy armour may have proved to be, as Sacrovir's gladiators found at Augustodunum. Some of the damage to the newly discovered helmet may have been caused by a Roman hatchet or pickaxe striking, as Tacitus describes, 'at the bodies and the armour as if they were battering a wall'. This explanation is only theoretical; but perhaps it may receive consideration until chance or careful fieldwork proves otherwise.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ostorius Scapula disarmed the Britons in A.D. 50, though this was in vain resisted, particularly by the Iceni; Tacitus, *Annals* xii, 31: *detrahere arma suspectis . . . parat. quod primi Iceni abnuere . . .* This explains Suetonius' remarks to his troops when they met the Britons in the final battle of the Boudiccan revolt, that the enemy was without arms; Tacitus, *Annals* xiv, 36: *inbelles inermes cessuros statim . . .*

¹⁸ I must acknowledge the generous and continuing help of many colleagues, including particularly J. W. Brailsford, P. Compton, A. R. Edwardson, S. S. Frere, H. Klumbach, I. H. Longworth, W. H. Manning, Miss M. O. Miller, W. Reid, H. R. Robinson, R. P. Wright.