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Life in the *Limes*
Life in the *Limes*

Studies of the people and objects of the Roman frontiers presented to Lindsay Allason-Jones on the occasion of her birthday and retirement

*edited by*

Rob Collins and Frances McIntosh

OXBOW BOOKS
Oxford & Philadelphia
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume is a result of a career of curiosity, enthusiasm, and good-will demonstrated by Lindsay through her life, endearing her to people around the world. This resulted in very high interest in contributing to this volume; however, the decision was taken to accept papers that focused on the primary themes found throughout Lindsay’s research: Roman frontiers, the people of the Roman world (especially women and children), and material culture. The contributors are to be congratulated and warmly thanked for their prompt delivery of interesting papers.

There are many people to thank for their help in making this volume possible, not least those organizations providing grants that contributed to the cost of publication, namely the Mark Fitch Fund, Newcastle University, the Royal Archaeological Institute, and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. English Heritage kindly provided permission for reproduction of images of objects in their collections and the use of survey data free of charge. Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne kindly provided permission to reproduce images of items in their collections.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA  
Archaeologia Aeliana, journal of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne.

BAR  
British Archaeological Reports.

Britannia  
Journal of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.

CSIR  
Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani.

GMA  

ILS  
Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae.

JRA  
Journal of Roman Archaeology.

JRS  
Journal of Roman Studies.

JRMES  

LIMC  
Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae.

MAMA 9  

ORL  
Fabricius, E., Winkelmann, F., and Stade, K., various dates, Der Obergermanisch-Rätische Limes des Römerreiches.

PGM  

PSAS  
Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

RIB  
The Roman Inscriptions of Britain.

Suppl. Mag.I, II  

TAACW  
Transactions of the Antiquarian and Archaeological Society of Cumberland and Westmorland.

Tab. Sulis  
The helmet in the MFA
This helmet, or more accurately helmet bowl or skull (parallels indicate that it is only half of a head defence), has long been on public display in room 110 of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where first I saw it during a visit in February 2011 (Fig. 12.1). Although the piece has previously appeared in print, this was a very brief account and photograph in a little-known volume. Because it is of considerable academic importance yet has hitherto escaped the attention of wider scholarship, I requested permission from the MFA to study and publish the helmet more fully. Further scientific examination is currently continuing, and so the following is a preliminary note on this important artefact, in anticipation of a fuller future publication.

The artefact, which hereafter I call the Boston helmet, is also highly relevant to the theme of the present volume, celebrating the work of Lindsay Allason-Jones who has contributed so much to our understanding of Roman metalwork and other material culture, particularly from Britain. The Boston helmet has important things to tell us about martial cultural interactions in another important but far less well-understood zone of the imperial limits: the lands where in the early centuries AD Rome faced Parthia, the only other empire surviving on her borders. More specifically, it manifests interactions between Rome and those peoples who found themselves living in the zone of contact, uneasy coexistence and sometimes violent confrontation between the two empires, a great swath of territory running from the Black Sea to the Arabian Desert.

The MFA holds very little information about the helmet, which lacks an exact provenance, although available information suggests it was found in eastern Turkey or Iran. When I first saw it in 2011, it was displayed on a mount as though a complete head defence, with its long curled apex projecting forwards, the case label identifying it as ‘Parthian’. However, especially to scholars of Roman military equipment, which archaeologically is attested in exceptional detail, the general design and construction of the artefact as a piece of armour is immediately familiar. This was never more true than when I first saw it, while the furore in Britain surrounding discovery of a Roman helmet with a strikingly similar ‘Phrygian cap’ form, at Crosby Garrett, Cumbria, England, was still continuing following its sale at auction in October 2010, and its subsequent disappearance from public view (Fig. 12.2; Worrell and Pearce 2011, 402–7; Worrell et al. 2011; Breeze and Bishop 2013).

Archaeological parallels, both general and specific, confirm what inspection of the MFA piece itself suggests, namely that it is actually only part of a more elaborate head defence: it protected the crown, neck and ears only; the wearer’s face and forehead had originally been defended by a separate enveloping facemask, now lost, but evidently of a form similar to that which survived on the new Crosby Garrett find. Encountering the Boston piece was doubly timely from my point of view, as I was also working on a publication discussing a decorated copper alloy cheekpiece from Hatra, Iraq, on which is depicted a male bust sporting a similar Phrygian cap (Fig. 12.4, no. 8; James 2013). Additionally, I had recently become aware of another more broadly related piece, with a lofty forward-projecting apex terminating in an eagle face, in a museum in the South of France (below).
Provenance, acquisition, records and publication

Museum documentation records that the MFA was offered the helmet for purchase by an Iranian dealer, Mohammad Yeganeh in 1978, and preserves a short report of work conducted on the helmet to authenticate it prior to acquisition (Examination no. 78.95). This recorded receipt of the object by the Museum laboratory on 19 October 1978, and its examination using X-rays (which are also preserved), metallographic sampling and UV inspection. The helmet had already been ‘restored’ when it reached the laboratory, although the Museum also acquired a photo of the fairly intact right side of the helmet in its unrestored state, probably taken by or for the dealer (print numbered T76/1749), showing the find crumpled and still quite extensively encrusted with corrosion products. The report noted and described the extensive recent repairs to the piece (indeed partial reconstruction of its left side and cosmetic treatment) using epoxy and fibreglass. The X-rays showed little not already apparent to the naked eye. A small squarish sample was cut from the edge of the piece for energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence (the unfilled site clearly visible in 2012). This analysis showed the metal to be a copper alloy with 14–16% zinc, i.e. a brass. A photomicrograph of a section showed corrosion products over a ‘dezincified’ surviving metal surface and a brass core, which was noted to be consistent with corrosion processes of a genuinely antique brass artefact.

Satisfied that it was a genuine antiquity, the MFA purchased the piece via the Morris and Louise Rosenthal Fund on 14 February, 1979, and gave it the accession number 1979.41. The only previous publication of the object was a single page of text and a photograph in a little-known illustrated volume of acquisitions published by the Museum in the decade following its acquisition (Boston Museum of Fine Arts 1987, 100–1). The brief text discussed the distribution of the fabric Phrygian cap (kidaris) it was evidently imitating, and noted that it was the only known example of this kind of helmet.

In the publication, again, no exact provenance is given; it was assessed to be ‘Probably from Iran or Eastern Turkey’, and described as ‘Parthian, first century BC to fourth century AD’ [sic] (Boston Museum of Fine Arts 1987 100–1). Nothing further has subsequently come to light about the circumstances of discovery of this artefact, nor is it now very likely. The general provenance given is plausible on stylistic details (below). Its elaborate surface decoration is certainly consistent with ornament depicted on headgear in the wider Parthian milieu, while its ‘Phrygian cap’ form also fits such a regional context. Its state of preservation suggests deliberate burial, most likely in a grave (broadly contemporaneous helmets were found in a tomb at Tell Oum Hauran, near Nawa, Syria (Abdul-Hak 1955; Robinson 1975, 121, pls 345–8, 133, pls 397–8; Garbsch 1978, nos N1 and N2). Alternatively, it may have been a votive offering, perhaps from a shrine. It must be presumed to have been recovered during an illicit excavation, after which it was smuggled to the West. Soon after the helmet was purchased, Mohammad Yeganeh’s name occurred in association with other near-certainly looted items coming illicitly from, or via, Turkey (Gill 2007). The probable damage and loss of precious contextual data this implies are of course strongly to be deplored; however, the artefact has now been publicly displayed for many years, and especially given other, clearly related recent discoveries it is timely to publish it, to seek to salvage something of its scholarly value.

Description

I examined the object at the MFA on 17 April 2012, photographing and drawing it, and discussing it with current curators Rita Freed and Lawrence Berman, and conservator Pamela Hatchfield. The helmet bowl is made of thin brass plate (see supra). Although this exceeds 1 mm in thickness at points around the edge, overall the metal was generally considerably thinner, as was directly visible at cracks and holes (especially at weaknesses created by punching and chasing), and generally indicated by the way impressed surface decoration shows as dimples and ridges on better-preserved areas of the interior. The piece is correspondingly very light: currently it weighs 832 g, after loss of some original metal and addition of unquantified amounts of restoration material.

No traces of specific use wear or pre-depositional damage (such as weapon impacts) have been observed, although some such evidence could have been obscured by burial damage, corrosion, and heavy restoration. Overall dimensions of the piece today (likely close to the originals) are: max. height c.400 mm; width c. 220 mm; front to back c.240 mm.

In its current state the helmet surface generally comprises greenish copper salts, with some areas of dull reddish metal (‘dezincified’ alloy now overwhelmingly copper) and a few small patches of gold-coloured metal (intact brass, apparently exposed during the heavy-handed ‘restoration’ process which prioritised cosmetic appearance). Originally, then, the helmet would have been a bright gold colour, unless there was any secondary treat-
ment of the surface, e.g. through silvering or tinning. No indications of this were observed, but the possibility has yet to be investigated scientifically.

The method of manufacture now seems fairly clear, as a result of close inspection, and discussion of the piece with MFA staff. I owe particular thanks to Rita Freed for a crit-
ical conversation while inspecting the helmet, which helped elucidate how it was made. The bowl appears to have been formed from a single sheet of brass plate: there are no indications of any join in the thin metal across the brow area, or down either side. However, the extreme overhanging apex cannot plausibly have been formed by raising the bowl over a stake, from a flat plate to a rough hemisphere to the elongated ‘Phrygian’ form. Most conclusively, as Rita Freed pointed out, even if the basic helmet shape could somehow have been formed by raising, it would seem to be impossible to create the back-to-back repoussé flowers which adorn the apex: these had been hammered out from the inside.

The proposed interpretation is that the piece was indeed formed of a single piece of plate, continuous across the brow and down the sides, in a process of hammer-forming and repeated annealing requiring great skill. The plate was worked from the rear to form the repoussé rosettes on the overhanging apex (see below); the lateral rosettes and the chain of ‘pearls’ linking the flowers were likely executed at the same time. Then the sheet was folded to position the flowers back to back. The emergent bowl was then closed by a seam which ran from the front root of the overhanging apex, running around it, over the top and down the back of the bowl. This long join was skilfully disguised in the form of the narrow axial ridge, for strength the plate edges probably overlapped and soldered/brazed, rather than butted edge to edge. Near the lower edge, the join area is only discernible now in the décor of the central ‘ringlet’ by a narrow band visible as subtly different texture/colour in the metal.

The outer surface of the helmet was almost entirely covered with decoration executed in two related ways: larger, localised, raised motifs and decorative elements created by hammering from the back of the plate (repoussé work, more correctly repoussé), and finer depressed detail, dots and lines across almost the entire surface created by hammering with a narrow-pointed instrument (chasing), from the outside. Both techniques displaced metal without removing any. The smaller repoussé elements are raised 1–2 mm out of the plane of the surrounding plate. The major flower motifs are elevated as much as 6–8 mm. As we have seen, at least some of the repoussé work must have been executed before the plate was closed into the bowl form. It is likely that all the chased decoration was undertaken afterwards: the bowl could simply have been filled with pitch for this work, which was then all melted out afterwards.
The main elements of the decoration comprise:

- A plain, narrow, chase-defined ridge over the top and down the back of the helmet to an intersection with:

- a border, repoussé with chased cabling, across the nape of the neck, below which is:

- a series of 11 repoussé elements covered with slightly sinuous chased lines, representing the wearer’s hair in ‘ringlets’;

- a repoussé/chased cable border parallel with, but 10–15 mm back from, the edge of the face aperture;

- a large, six-petalled repoussé/chased flower (or perhaps star or sun: see below), c.55 mm diameter, occupying the whole of each side of the overhanging apex. The repoussé centre was punched to simulate stamens, the petals ornamented with chased lines.

- Another large, eight-petalled repoussé flower, also c.55 mm across, chased in the same way, within an octagonal repoussé/chased border, in the middle of each side of the helmet,

- On each side, a curving row of domed repoussé ‘beads’ or ‘pearls’ connecting the two flower motifs, and continued from the eight-petal motif to the face-framing cable border.

The intermediate surface fields not subjected to repoussé were filled with repeating chased ornament. This comprised a grid, in places almost orthogonal but in others strongly rhomboidal, defined by ‘cables’ comprising a pair of lines with short angled ‘dashes’ between. The resulting pattern of quadrilaterals was not entirely symmetrical about the roughly axial ‘cable’ down the brow of the piece. Each quadrilateral contained a circle, within which was a cross and four ‘dashes’ aligned on its points. Lines of punched decoration, surrounding the circles and bordering the quadrilateral fields, filled much of the remaining space.

Little of the surface, then, was left undecorated, except around the underside of the overhanging apex and along the upper/rear axial ridge, perhaps because it was difficult to add chased detail to these areas without denting the helmet, although they could be artefacts of heavy-handed restoration. The main area without chased or repoussé ornament were around the edges of the aperture. A strip of plain metal 6–8 mm deep was left all the way around, including the lower edge of the neck guard below the repoussé ‘ringlets’. This was entirely featureless, except for apparent traces of a very slight secondary ridge in front of the repoussé cabling around the face aperture. However, this might represent the remains of solder or brazing used to apply the only observed addition to the bowl: some kind of edging-strip, fragments of which remain in situ at several points. These fragments, extensively distorted by corrosion, were observed on the outer surface only. Most of this applied edging is lost, but it apparently originally ran all the way around the aperture, perhaps in the form of another cabled border. It was evidently of different composition, today with surfaces of greyish/whitish corrosion products, perhaps indicating high lead or tin content. It may originally have been of a colour contrasting with the gold of the main brass construction.

Four small holes c.1.5 mm in diameter were also punched through the plate across the brow area, two pairs, either side of the centre-line, punched from the outside. These holes are likely to have been used to attach the face mask. There is no trace of any riveted hinge-plate attachment, so it is likely that the face-mask simply had a leather-strip ‘clam-shell’ hinge laced on via the four holes, opening forwards and upwards like a medieval helmet visor, perhaps only far enough to allow donning and doffing. There is no indication of how the helmet was held shut either; perhaps it was simply by laces attached to the lower rear corners of the mask, tied around the nape of the neck above the ‘ringlets’, as was clearly the method used on the Crosby Garrett parallel.

There are no indications of any other attachments, e.g. for crest-holders, although it should be noted that the Crosby Garrett helmet appears to have been surmounted by a small cast gryphon figurine apparently simply soldered on, an addition which could easily have been lost. The British helmet also had loop attachments, perhaps for coloured streamers.

**Discussion**

The basis of the MFA’s original identification of this helmet as Parthian appears to have been based on its supposed area of discovery, its ‘Oriental’ Phrygian cap form, and its manufacture in brass, a known feature of metalworking in pre-Roman Anatolia, and used in some Hellenistic coinages of the region (Ponting 2002). At the time of its discovery, no very close archaeological parallels to the Boston helmet were known. Indeed, no helmet has yet been identified from the Parthian empire itself, although several later Sasanian examples are attested (James, 1986). Neither are there very clear iconographical representations of Parthian helmets. On the other hand, there was a widespread tradition across the later Classical and Hellenistic Greek world of making ‘Phrygian’ or ‘Thraced’ helmets with overhanging apices, their modern names reflecting recognition that their overhanging apices were inspired by the Phrygian
cap. Yet in their general form, especially with regard to facial and neck protection, they were much more inspired by Greek armour traditions than the textile headdress, which primarily offered a model for an apex which served just as a crest to exaggerate the height of the wearer; they are nowhere near such direct reproductions of the form of the cloth headdress as the Boston helmet. If the Greek helmets and the Boston piece express processes of imitation of the same textile artefact in metal, they represent distinct and parallel traditions of armour-making.

However, as was observed above, a number of key characteristics of the Boston helmet – its general conformation, brass construction, and elaborate repoussé and chased decoration – show that it is clearly intimately related to Roman helmet designs, specifically imperial forms current from the later first to third centuries AD. This would already have been apparent had knowledge of the helmet spread through the Roman archaeological community previously, even before discovery of the particularly close comparator from Crosby Garrett.

Substantial numbers of copper alloy bipartite ‘face helmets’ are known from the Roman Empire, from Britain to Syria (Robinson 1975, 107–27; Garbsch 1978, 62–71). These form part of an even wider population of helmets and other armour boasting rich repoussé and chased decoration, commonly exhibiting horror vacui like the Boston piece. And many of these Roman examples are made of brass rather than tin bronzes.
New Roman helmets continue to come to light, of which the Crosby Garrett helmet is but one example. A further relevant recent appearance (like the MFA piece, of uncertain origin) is a tall, ‘quasi-Phrygian’ eagle-headed helmet now in the Moungins Museum of Classical Art, France (Fig. 12.3; Fischer 2012, 112 and Abb. 307; citing Junkelmann 2011). This piece clearly relates to a much older and more fragmentary find from Ostrov, Rumania (Robinson 1975, 135, pls 407–10; Garbsch 1978, no. O58). These helmets, while diverse in appearance, all nevertheless belong in terms of technique, style and iconography to a well-understood Roman imperial tradition of armour-making. To be sure, they are ‘orientalising’: many, although probably not all, Roman helmets with face masks were designed for the ritualised equestrian performances described by Arrian in his treatise Technē Taktikã (De Voto 1993), in which exotic stereotypes (Amazon, Trojans) may have been pitted against ‘Greeks’. One wooden shield from Dura-Europos, perhaps intended for such quasi-theatrical displays of cavalry skills, is painted with scenes of the Trojan War; another shows Greeks fighting Amazons (James, 2004, nos 616 and 617).

What, then, of the Boston helmet? Could this simply be a ‘stray’ Roman piece which ended up in the territory of Parthia or an Arsacid satellite like Armenia? An item of Roman armour has even been found in a Partho-Sasanian sanctuary at Masjid-i-Solaiman, Iran, likely a votive offering of spoils of war (Ghirshman 1971, 174, pl. iiiia). In fact,

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**Figure 12.4** Near Eastern headgear from iconographic sources: 1. On coin of Tigranes II of Armenia (first century BC); 2. Statue head with Phrygian cap, Hatra (probably second–third century AD); 3. Statue of King Sanatruq, Hatra (third century AD); 4. On coin of Orodes I of Parthia (first century BC); 5. Relief of Shapur I at Darab (third century AD); 6. Relief of Shapur I, Naqsh-e Rajab (third century AD); 7. Relief of Bahram II and his court, Naqsh-e Rustam (third century AD); 8. Bust in Phrygian cap with astral symbols on a Roman-style copper alloy cheekpiece from Hatra (third century AD). (Drawings by Simon James)
details of the decoration of the MFA piece actually suggest something more complex.

If the general design, construction and embellishment techniques featured in the Boston helmet indicate strong links to the Roman armies – and incidentally help narrow down its dating to the first three centuries AD, most likely between 100 and the mid-third century – the details of its decoration would be clearly anomalous in a Roman milieu. Besides simulating (and often idealising) facial features and hair of the wearer, embellishment of Roman pieces draws on a repertoire concentrating on distinctly Classical figures (gods and heroes), symbolic animals (e.g. lions, snakes, especially eagles) and motifs (e.g. eagle’s wings and feathers, shields, battle trophies). The Boston helmet stands out strongly from this background, in that such motifs are absent. Decoration is primarily geometric, with the exception of the stylised ‘flowers’ and ‘ringlets of hair’ at the neck. Further, the ensemble of repoussé and chased elements is clearly intended to be ‘read’ in conjunction with the overall shape of the piece to constitute a skeuomorph in metal of a quilted fabric headdress, apparently encrusted with rows of pearls, something unparalleled in Roman helmets, at least before the fourth century.

However, by comparison with the relative archaeological riches of Europe, we still know so little about the archaeology of Rome’s major eastern armies that it remains just possible that the Boston helmet represents a regional Roman military fashion. Yet, while the eastern finds we do have, such as the pair of helmets from a grave near Nawa in Syria (above) do indeed indicate that some distinctly eastern traits can be identified in local armour, such pieces seem overall to remain much closer to the wider imperial decorative tradition than the Boston helmet does.

We should probably take the Boston piece much more at face value, and place weight on the combination of its apparent general provenance in Turkey or Iran, with the detail of its skeuomorphism. The precise combination of ‘quilting’ and ‘Phrygian’ shape is hard to parallel. However, sculptural and numismatic iconography dating to the last century BC and the first few centuries AD reveals that Phrygian caps were actually worn by prominent individuals in many parts of South-west Asia, including Armenia and Commagene (Young 1964) and, in Northern Mesopotamia, at Edessa and Hatra (James 2013: Fig. 12.4, no. 2). In this region such caps were used alongside other aristocratic or royal headgear, notably a form of ‘mitre’ with a fore-and-aft ridge and parabolic profile. Both hat types are depicted on nobles in early Sasanian royal reliefs (Fig. 12.4, nos 5–7). And notably a statue of King Sanatruq of Hatra depicts the king in a ‘mitre’, the surface of which is covered with ‘quilting’ in a pattern closely similar to that on the Boston helmet (Fig. 12.4, no. 3). It is also at least an interesting coincidence that a ‘Roman-style’ cheekpiece from Hatra bears a depiction of a male in a Phrygian cap with a flower, or more likely star or sun, on the side (Fig. 12.4, no. 8; James 2013), echoing that on the MFA piece. Star or sun symbols on the sides of hats also feature on first-century BC coins of Orodos I of Parthia (Fig. 12.4, no. 4) and Tigranes II of Armenia (Fig. 12.4, no. 1). The Hatra cheekpiece additionally sports a crescent and disk on the apex, which, with the star/sun, forms a pair of astral symbols in the same locations as the flowers (if such they are) on the Boston helmet. These examples converge to suggest that the cultural context of the Boston helmet is to be sought within the western fringes of the Arsacid world, and the zone of contention with the Roman Empire.

Is the Boston helmet perhaps, then, a western Parthian imitation and adaptation of a Roman cavalry helmet? It could be: there is certainly other evidence for apparent eastward transmission of Roman traits to Partho-Sasanian helmet design from Dura-Europos, where an iron helmet belonging to one of the Sasanian attackers sported a ‘Roman-style’ crown reinforcement and probably Roman-inspired mail neck-defence (James, 1986). However, I would question the assumptions underlying such a hypothesis, especially of any simple binary opposition between distinct and well-defined ‘Roman’ and ‘Parthian’ martial cultures across which borrowings could occur. While Roman military culture may have been quite strongly homogenising, it is not clear that the Arsacid world was so uniform in these regards. As we learn more from archaeological finds – we hope, from properly sanctioned excavations – I suspect that we will rather find growing evidence for multi-directional exchanges of military practice, technology, styles and fashions across this vast zone, without any single sharp boundary, with the Roman military and the Arsacid court as just two foci with a number of others between and around them, from the Eurasian steppe to the north, via polities like Armenia and Commagene to Hatra and the peoples of the dry steppe to the south.

If we then consider the longer temporal context alongside the wider geocultural picture, I anticipate we will be able to see how multiple regional military traditions evolving in interaction in alliance and conflict around the boundary zone between Rome and Parthia, all themselves descended from roots in the Hellenistic era, and before that from earlier traditions of the Classical Greek world and the sprawling
Achaemenid empire – in which Phrygian headdresses were already widely worn. The manufacture of the Boston piece and many contemporary Roman helmets from brass may itself reflect this common descent from earlier Southwest Asian traditions of metalworking, representing a cultural network into which Rome became integrated in the last century BC, contributing to widespread Roman use of brass in Augustan times and beyond, for a range of artefacts from armour to imperial ‘orichalcum’ coinages. Rather than imitating Roman armour, then, the Boston helmet may rather attest Near Eastern models of the last century BC and the first two centuries AD, from which Roman examples like the Crosby Garrett piece were derived. Perhaps they were adapted from eastern helmets brought into the empire as spoils of war – or by copying examples owned by ‘Parthian’ and ‘Arab’ auxiliary recruits, such as those already stationed at Mainz in the first century AD (Selzer 1988, nos 90 and 91).


Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to current and past staff of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for their generosity in facilitating and supporting the present study: curators Rita Freed, Lawrence Berman, and conservator Pamela Hatchfield. Former curator Tim Kendall kindly supplied information on the acquisition of the Boston helmet. Dr Matthew Ponting also generously provided valuable information on early brass. Finally, I would also like to thank the editors of the present volume, Rob Collins and Frances McIntosh, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the celebration of Lindsay’s work.

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