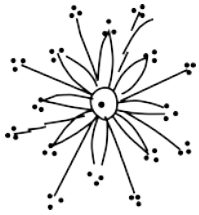
THE CROSBY GARRETT HELMET



THE CROSBY GARRETT HELMET

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with a Foreword by

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an Introduction by

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and with contributions by

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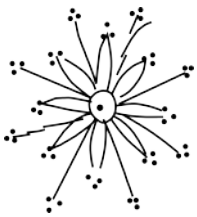

DESCRIPTION

M C Bishop

The Crosby Garrett helmet is of a type known as a Roman cavalry 'sports' helmet, made for use in a form of mock combat known as the *hippika gymnasia* (see below). It was never intended as a battle helmet although, as will become apparent, it was still necessary for it to provide the wearer with some degree of practical protection.

There are two principal components to the 407mm-high helmet: the bowl, covering the top, sides, and rear of the wearer's head, and a mask modelled to resemble a human face (Figures 1–10). The rear half was designed to overlap the front and both components, which were hinged together at the top, were fashioned as single pieces of copper alloy, with the area of the face tinned. Examination with a portable X-ray fluorescence spectrometer produced average results of 82% copper, 10% zinc, and 8% tin (Worrell *et al* 2011), indicative of a tin brass.

The face mask, in common with all such helmets, is disturbingly expressionless. At first glance, the most striking element is the pierced eyes, designed so that the rider had sufficient vision whilst mounted to allow for control of his horse and accurate aiming of weapons. Each eye incorporates a pierced circle to suggest the iris and the pupil, a feature which helps to indicate a likely date for the helmet. Incised strokes on the lids of both eyes are used to represent eyelashes. Gracefully arching eyebrows are modelled as narrow ridges of raised, inward-pointing chevrons, rather than realistically rendered. The nose is delicate, has pierced nostrils, and has been dented at the tip before deposition. A pursed, slightly protuberant mouth completes the face which has a fleshy, youthful appearance. The lips are parted, separated by a horizontal slit with a circular expansion at either end. The face mask is framed to the top and either side by three rows of luxurious, yet stylised, curls of hair. These conceal the ears that are often an emphasised component of such face masks. Below the position of the ears, near the rear lower corners of the face mask, are the remains of ferrous studs, used for securing the front and rear halves of the helmet by means of a strap or straps. Taken together, the features appear markedly feminine, which is unsurprising amongst cavalry sports helmets.

The helmet bowl, rather than imitating hair as was so often the case with sports helmets, rises to a forward-pointing, rounded peak typical of a Phrygian cap. The Romanised oriental god Mithras was often depicted wearing a similar piece of headgear. A cast figurine of a griffin – a mythical winged and beaked creature – has been soldered to the top of the helmet (Figure 10). Its fur is suggested by incised, upward-pointing arrows on the body and parallel incisions behind its legs and on the ruff around its neck, whilst the feathers of its raised wings are similarly incised. There is a loop behind the neck of the creature, which is depicted seated, with its front right paw resting upon a two-handled vessel with a flared base (a *kantharos*). Below the *kantharos*, which is decorated with incised arcading, is a concave, oval setting for a jewel or glass-paste gem, now missing. That in turn sits above another loop. Although the griffin appears like an afterthought, perched atop the peak of the Phrygian cap, the incorporation of the jewel (found on other, similar helmets) suggests it was always envisaged as part of the original design and may have served to support a

Arrian on face-mask helmets

'2. The riders themselves, according to rank or because they distinguish themselves in horsemanship, set off with golden helmets of iron or bronze, in order to attract the attention of onlookers by this means. 3. Unlike battle helmets, these defend not only the head and cheeks but, conforming to the faces of the riders, have openings for the eyes which do not hinder the vision and yet offer protection. 4. Crests of yellow hair, which have no function other than to act as decoration, hang down from the helmets. These flutter as the horse trots or if a light breeze blows, and offer a fine spectacle.'
Arrian, *Technē taktika* 34

face-mask helmets becomes apparent. The danger inherent in this was also acknowledged by the horses' heads being protected with chamfrons which covered their face and ears (Figures 36–8). The horses were also provided with openwork metal eye-guards, either integral with the chamfron or attached separately, according to the type used.

The opposing team now rode past and attempted to hit those outlying men with dummy javelins. This is the point at which another manoeuvre was undertaken by the defending team, whereby some members rode out and attempted to cast their own dummy javelins at their attackers as they went past, crossing their path as they did so. This was called the *Petrinos* in Celtic.

The Cantabrian Circle saw the two teams riding in opposing circles and, at the point where they almost touched, exchanging dummy javelins whilst defending themselves with their shields.

Then, after some more javelin throwing (including a turning throw, known in Greek as *xynema*), the cavalry would demonstrate the *Touloutegon*, where the riders defended themselves from an attack from the rear using both spears and drawn swords.

The final task for the cavalrymen was to mount, fully armoured, onto a galloping horse, known as *Hodoiporikon* (or 'the itinerary'). The Late Roman writer Vegetius stressed the importance of being able to vault onto a horse (Milner 1996, 18). Arrian noted that a number of 'barbarian' manoeuvres were introduced by Hadrian, emulating the Parthian and Armenian mounted archers (renowned for loosing arrows backwards whilst retreating, the so-called 'Parthian shot') and the Celtic and Sarmatian lance-armed troopers.

Each of these evolutions seems to have been derived or adapted from a regular combat tactic. Not all of Rome's enemies were equally sophisticated, and derisory comments about British cavalry preserved in one of the writing tablets found at the fort of Vindolanda (Northumberland) suggest that 'Celtic' cavalry were not all the same (*Tab. Vindol.* II.164).

The manoeuvres described are clearly a ritualised form of training for both men and horses, with units divided into competing teams. Both horses and riders were afforded some protection, since even practice javelins could potentially cause serious injury. Horses had chamfrons to protect their faces, complete with openwork eyepieces, so that the horse could see where it was going. The men wore brightly coloured Cimmerian tunics and, Arrian tells us, some of the more distinguished

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The Crosby Garrett helmet is one of the most significant and spectacular finds from Roman Britain for many years. Fashioned in two pieces, bowl and tinned face mask, it was used by a Roman cavalryman in the ritualised form of training known as the *hippika gymnasia*. This sumptuously illustrated booklet provides detailed photographs of the helmet, together with a description of it and insight into the archaeological background to the find, and places the helmet within its wider context amidst Roman arms and armour.

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