

Roman Ironworking and an Anvil from Nassington

by Adrian Challands

E. T. Artis located and perhaps excavated over 60 iron smelting sites (Artis (1828), pl. 1) which he attributed to the Roman period. These sites (the nearest to Durobrivae is some 5 km north-west) lie on or near iron-bearing rocks. Later work carried out by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments added to the number of sites and widened their distribution westwards along the Nene Valley. One problem is that iron smelting was carried out in the area in the Iron Age, mediaeval and possibly post-mediaeval times. Dating evidence, if any is recovered in field surveys, is often limited in its validity. However, even taking this into account, it is obvious that iron working added significantly to the prosperity of Durobrivae.

The Roman blacksmith's anvil (fig. 12) was recovered during field-walking 600 metres north-west of Nassington village. It lay within a spread of iron slag 5 metres in diameter, situated on an outcrop of Northampton Sand Ironstone, which occurs on the edge of a small valley cut by a stream running into the River Nene. The Nassington anvil is a small block of iron weighing just over 6 kg, having a working surface 12 cm square which tapers down from 12 cm to a base 6.5 cm square.

Vulcan, the god of fire and iron, was the patron deity of smiths and ironworking. Vulcan is portrayed using a simple block anvil in a number of contemporary reliefs (Manning (1976), pls. 3 and 4) which show the anvil set into what has been interpreted as a block of wood. Indeed, modern blacksmiths still place their bigger anvils on a substantial timber.

It is perhaps significant that Vulcan is often portrayed on Nene Valley colour-coated pottery vessels, usually beakers. The design is either executed in barbotine or painted. Painted wares have been dated to the third and fourth centuries A.D. The pottery fragment (fig. 13) found at Durobrivae in 1893 and now in Peterborough Museum illustrates part of a Vulcan scene which is painted on a dark brown colour-coated vessel in white clay slip with additional detail added in orange clay slip. Depicted left is Vulcan's left arm holding a pair of tongs upwards, the jaws of which are missing. In the centre is a block of wood in which a block-anvil

similar to that from Nassington is set. To its left is a separate beak anvil. In the Silchester anvil (Boon (1974), 253) the beak and flat striking surface are incorporated into a single implement as in the modern anvil. To the extreme right is what may be the hood of a raised hearth forge (Manning (1976), 6-7) with sparks rising from it.

It is unfortunate that the amount of research, backed up by modern excavation, to have been carried out on Roman iron-smelting and working sites in the Lower Nene Valley is small, considering the large scale of iron-ore exploitation and what must have been a major local Romano-British industry. To obtain more accurate information on the scale of Roman workings, in the absence of pottery dating evidence for slag scatters, it is possible that diagnostic iron artefacts such as the Nassington anvil may prove helpful.

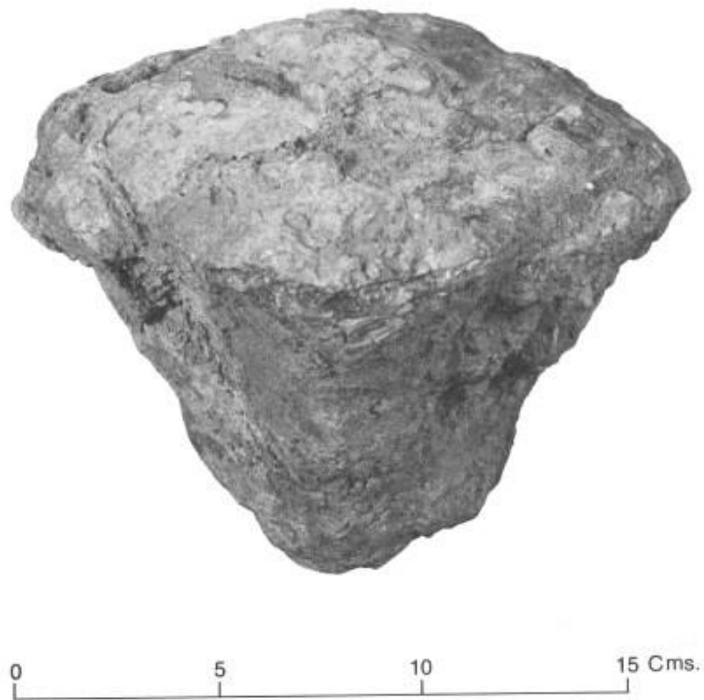


Fig 12 A Roman anvil from Nassington

Bibliography

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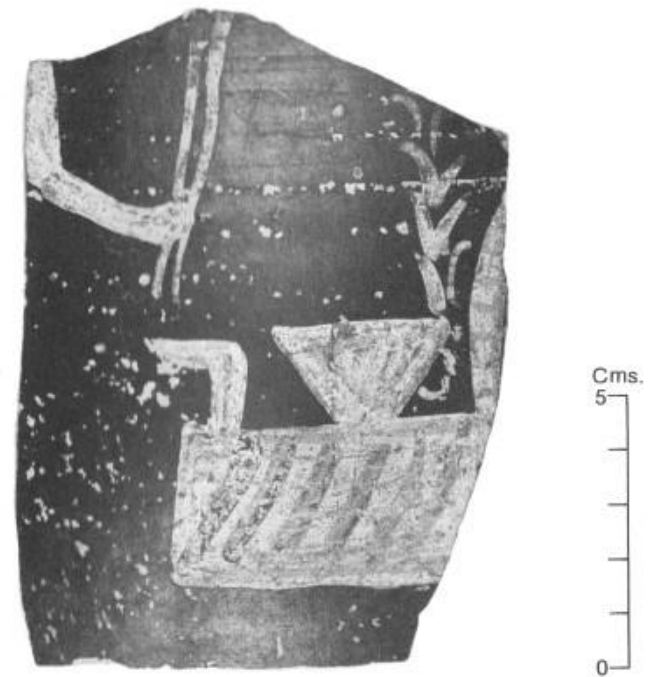


Fig 13 Ironworking scene on a Nene Valley potsherd