

# Roman face masks from the Kops Plateau, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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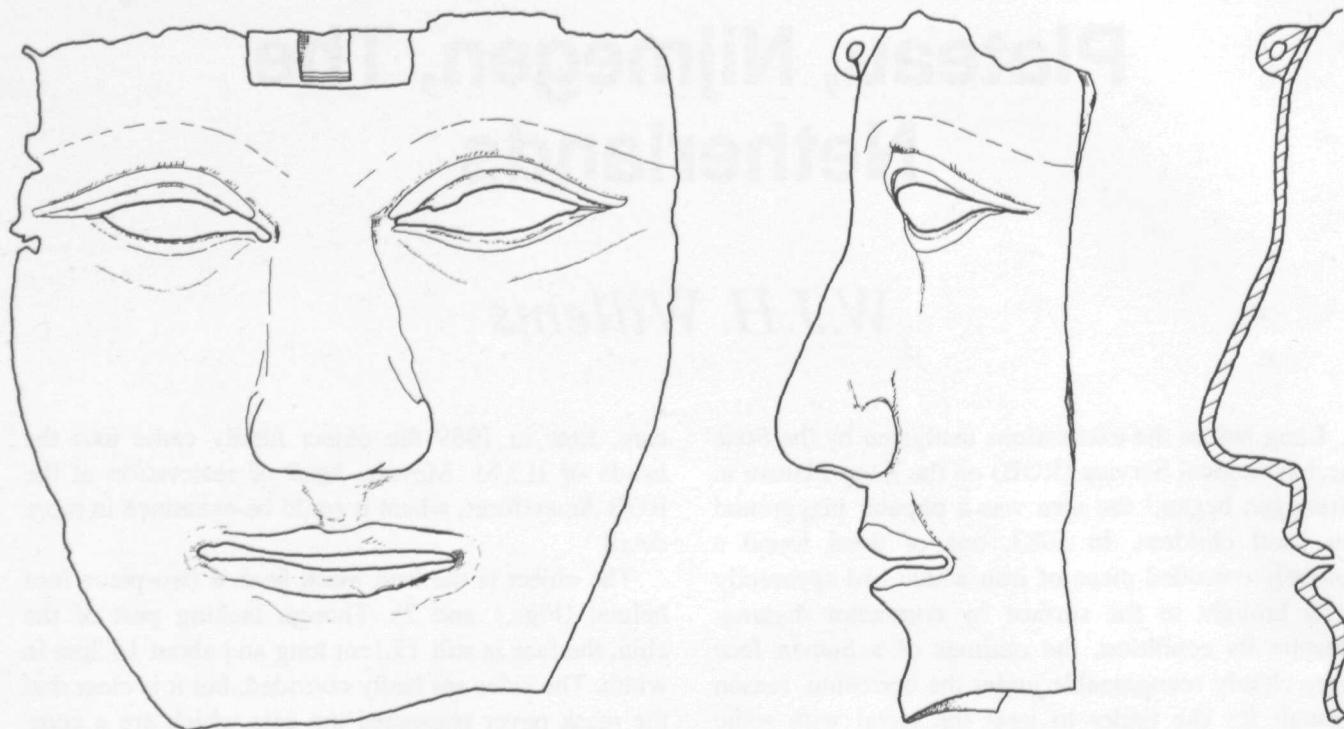
Long before the excavations instigated by the State Archaeological Service (ROB) on the Kops Plateau in Nijmegen began,<sup>1</sup> the area was a popular playground for local children. In 1983, one of them found a severely corroded piece of iron which had apparently been brought to the surface by contractor digging. Despite its condition, the outlines of a human face were clearly recognizable under the corrosion, reason enough for the finder to treat the metal with some

care. Late in 1989 the object finally came into the hands of H.J.M. Meyers, head of restoration at the ROB Amersfoort, where it could be examined in more detail.

The object is the iron mask from a two-piece face helmet (Figs.1 and 2). Though lacking part of the chin, the face is still 15.1cm long and about 14.3cm in width. The sides are badly corroded, but it is clear that the mask never possessed the ears which are a com-



*Fig.1: Nijmegen: iron face mask from the Kops Plateau.*



*Fig.2: Iron face mask from the Kops Plateau.*

mon feature on most of the comparable helmets of this kind. A hinge at the centre of the forehead originally joined the mask to the brow of the skull-cap. The absence of ears suggests that the helmet would have been fitted with cheek-pieces, even though no attachment holes were discovered during the restoration. Such holes are, for example, visible on the mask from Vechten, one of the few helmets which is directly comparable (Fig.3). Another similar mask is the spectacular recent find from Kalkriese near Osnabrück.<sup>2</sup>

The facial features, with a pronounced, rather fleshy nose and open eyes are rather different to those of the Vechten mask. The latter is also of iron, but is covered by 'bronze' sheeting. During the restoration process, there was a suspicion that the Nijmegen example may have been silvered but the traces were too fleeting for any certainty to be obtained. It is, however, noticeable that most, if not all of the iron masked helmets were originally either silvered or bronze plated.<sup>3</sup> When new, they would have made a fine display, flashing in gold and silver.

This accords well with their purpose, for they were

never intended for use in battle. These are the cavalry sports helmets, worn on parade and in displays (*armaturae*).<sup>4</sup> Several hoards of more or less complete sets of such parade armour have been found, comprising helmets together with scale armour, greaves, phalerae and horse chamfrons, in various combinations.<sup>5</sup>

Although there is no reason to suspect that the new face mask from Nijmegen belonged to such a composite hoard, it is perhaps significant that this is the fourth of these relatively rare group of helmets to be found in Nijmegen. Two of the helmets are of the same type as the Kops Plateau mask, with compact featured, usually beardless, male faces and a hinge placed centrally on the forehead.<sup>6</sup> The finest specimen of this sort is displayed in the Provincial Museum Kam (Fig.4). It has a silvered bronze and iron skull and still comprises a mask with browband, cheek-pieces and neck guard, along with fragments of the iron casque.<sup>7</sup> This helmet was found under the railway bridge on the south bank of the river Waal. The second mask comes from the Gildemeester collection and was discovered 'in the river Waal near Nijmegen'



*Fig.3: Iron face mask from Vechten.*



*Fig.4: Silvered face mask from Nijmegen.*





*Fig.5: Iron face mask with ornamental hairstyle from Nijmegen-Ubbergen.*

in the last century. This piece, which displays a remarkable similarity to the silvered helmet<sup>8</sup> is now in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden.

The third helmet from Nijmegen (Fig.5) is somewhat different.<sup>9</sup> It belongs to a category of 'wigged' or 'barber's model' since they all possess elaborate and highly detailed hairstyles. Here the hinge is located at the top of the skull. The mask, which comes from the Guyot collection, has been in the possession of the municipality since 1850 and was found in Beekmansdal at Ubbergen, at the foot of the Hunerberg. In view of the accepted Hadrianic to early-third-century date of these helmets, this mask is probably to be associated with one of the units stationed in the second-century fort.

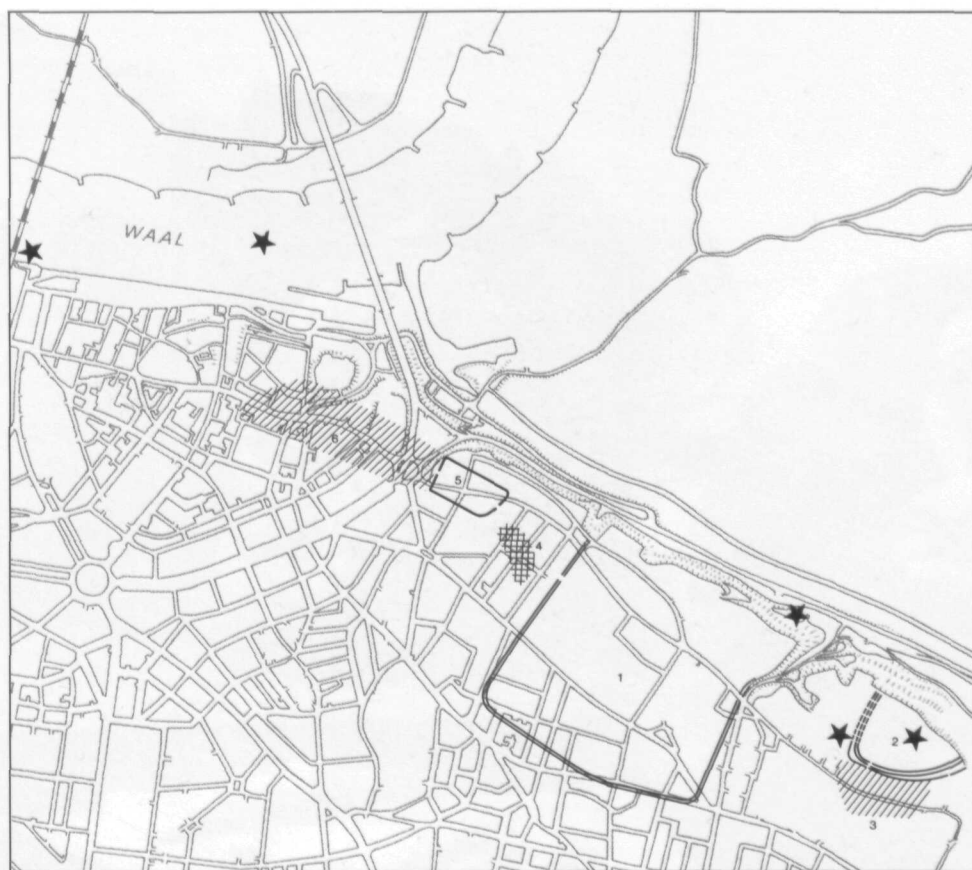
The other three helmets are rather earlier in date. Such short-faced masks, lacking hair, appear from the Augustan period and last into the beginning of the second century.<sup>10</sup> The two Nijmegen finds are considered to be Flavian in date, and that from Vechten is dated to the second half of the first century. This is probably also true of the new Kops Plateau mask, although in this case it is likely to date to before A.D.70.

The Kops Plateau was the location chosen for a succession of three early Roman military camps,

dating from about 12 B.C. until the Batavian Revolt of A.D.69 (Fig.6).<sup>11</sup> The find location of the helmet can be fixed with a fair degree of certainty. Assuming it had not been greatly displaced, it was found in the area just outside the south-west corner of the camp, in an as yet unexcavated part of the plateau. Dozens of refuse pits dating to the period of the camp have been located in the immediately adjoining areas which have already been excavated. This is, unfortunately, not conclusive, since, although they have greatly thinned out, the easternmost suburbs of the 10th legion's *canabae legionis* extend onto this part of the plateau from the fort on the Hunerberg. This settlement was founded shortly after A.D.70 and was occupied into the second century.

A helmet is, of course, by its very nature more likely to belong to a specifically military context. A mask of the type has also been found in the early legionary camp of Haltern.<sup>12</sup> In addition, as has already been mentioned, the mask belongs to a cavalry helmet, which corresponds well to the general character of the finds from the Kops Plateau. The excavations have already produced large amounts of horse gear, along with horse bones and even an inscription mentioning a *turma*.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the face mask is no longer the only one



**Fig.6:** Roman Nijmegen between 12 B.C. and A.D.25: 1. legionary fortress on the Hunerberg; 2. military camps on the Kops Plateau; 3. annex; 4. cemetery; 5. military camp at the Trajanusplein; 6. the early nucleus of the civilian settlement Batavodorum. The approximate find spots of the face masks are indicated by ★.

from the Kops Plateau. During the preparation of this article, the number of cavalry sports helmets has increased dramatically. Excavations during the past year have yielded no less than three virtually complete specimens from the centre of the camp (Fig.7). These are still undergoing restoration. Two complete helmets were found together in a small pit in the corner of a building. Presumably they were deposited there by a cavalry officer and never retrieved. In any case, they were carefully hidden and the helmet belonging to one of the three face masks on Figure 8 was provided with an unique and beautifully decorated cloth cover, preserved by the iron-oxides of the helmet.

The number of sports helmets from Nijmegen has now reached seven, and it is quite likely that further discoveries will be made in the three years the excavations have still left to run: work will go on until September 1995. So far, apart from the helmets with face masks, the remains of some 20 other iron helmets have been found. Unfortunately the condition of the iron is so poor that restoration is impossible. Bronze

helmets have not been found at all. Several of the identifiable iron specimens are probably also cavalry helmets.

In this context it is of interest to mention some of the more exceptional finds of the previous years.<sup>14</sup> Amongst the dozens of strap terminals and harness mounts, the silvered and nielloed bronze pendants of Figure 8 deserve mention. These trifid mounts are typical of the horse harness illustrated on Figure 10. They could also be suspended from the phalerae serving as strap junctions or as decorative mounts on the harness. Comparable, though undecorated and usually smaller, pendants are regularly found amongst the excavated material. However, the specimens illustrated, which were found close together, are unlikely to have formed a work-a-day set, and bear comparison with the well-known hoard from the Rhine at Doorwerth.<sup>15</sup>

Another exceptional find is formed by two bronze saddle horns (Fig.9) found together in a pit. The set comprises the front and the rear horn, belonging to the



Fig.7: Three new face masks from the Kops Plateau at the restoration laboratory of the ROB.

left side of the saddle.<sup>16</sup> Both horns have sewing holes around the edges and a circular aperture at the base. Again, these are not isolated items: there is also a lone front horn, but of much greater significance is the recent discovery of a complete set of four decorated horns.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, mention should be made of a special form of horse control, namely the hackamore, five of which have already been identified. Figure 11 illustrates a decorated specimen. The hackamore, which could also be used in combination with a conventional bit, is relatively common in military contexts. No less than seven are known from the legionary camp of Haltern.<sup>18</sup> Despite numerous depictions there is still no consensus on the manner in which the hackamore was used.<sup>19</sup> Its function is, however, clear enough. The metal slides over the horse's muzzle and it could for instance be fitted on a horse with a tender mouth so as to avoid using a bit. But in combination with a bit, it considerably strengthens the rider's control over his mount. This is the arrangement favoured here, and in

the reconstruction drawing Figure 10.<sup>20</sup> An additional parallel from modern dressage riding may also be relevant: the use of a hackamore gives the rider firm control even when using only one hand on the reins. For a Roman cavalryman carrying both shield and lance this consideration must have been of paramount importance.

The metal finds reviewed here make it clear that at any rate the early Roman camps on the Kops Plateau sheltered a mounted contingent of considerable size, although whether legionary cavalry or an auxiliary *ala* are concerned remains uncertain. Indeed, the camp could well have been used by both since it was drastically reconstructed on several occasions. For the present it is assumed that at least the first of the series of defences was constructed for a legionary detachment. In part, this conclusion is based on the presence of an exceptionally large building which may be interpreted as a *praetorium*.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the later camps could just as well have been intended to house auxiliary troops. Hopefully, the excavations of



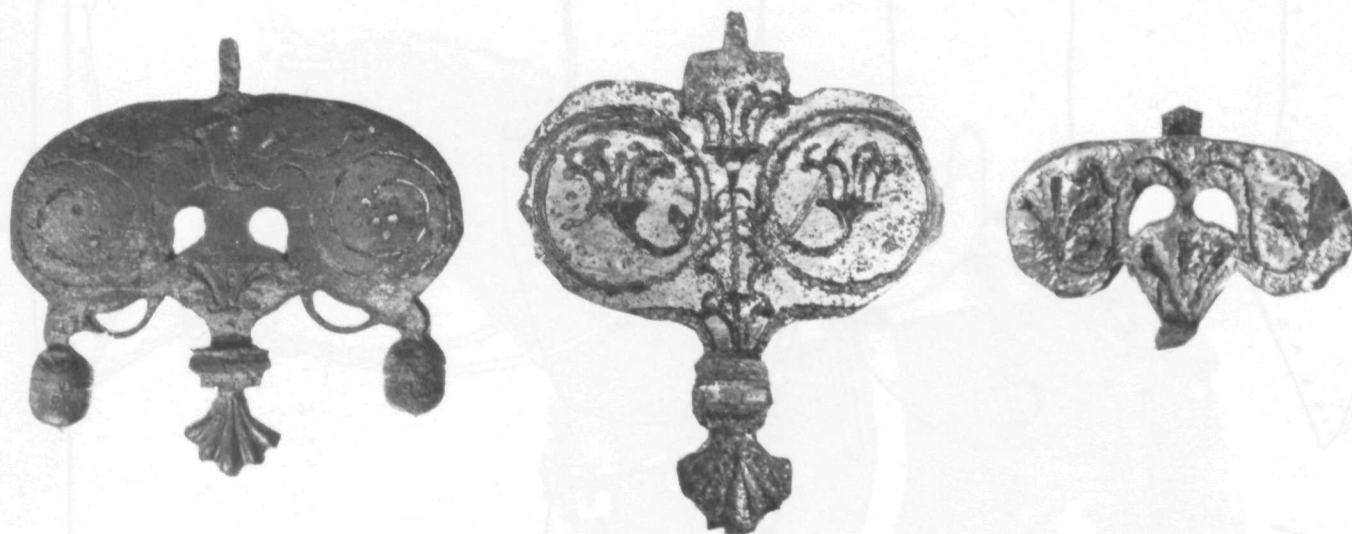


Fig.8: Silvered and nielloed bronze pendants, scale 1:1.

the coming years will clarify the situation as regards the fort occupation.

#### NOTES

1. See WILLEMS, 1990, 23–30; 1991b and the annual reports of the ROB for 1986 onwards.
2. For the description see KLUMBACH, 1974, 64 and Taf.49. The mask is also discussed in KALEE, 1989, in conjunction with several new helmets from Vechten. Kalkriese: FRANZIUS, 1991.
3. YPEY, 1966, 197; GARBSCH, 1978, 16; FRANZIUS, 1991.
4. See GARBSCH, 1978, 3 and 35–7. An example of the use of face helmets occurs in the *Taktika* of Flavius Arrianus, which was written in A.D.136.
5. For a summary see GARBSCH, 1978.
6. KOHLERT, 1978, type 1.
7. For details, see YPEY, 1966, 189–96.
8. KLUMBACH, 1974, 62–3. See also BRAAT, 1939.
9. KOHLERT, 1978, type 5. For details see YPEY, 1966, 187–9.
10. KOHLERT, 1978, 20–1.
11. See note 1.
12. GARBSCH, 1978, 62, nr.O-1. See also KROPATSCH-ECK, 1909, 351, nr.12 and Taf.39.2. This specimen is not listed in Klumbach's (1974) catalogue.
13. See WILLEMS, 1990, 25 (with illustrations).
14. This is only a random selection of some of the more important objects which have passed through the ROB

conservation department. The vast majority of finds still await treatment.

15. See BROUWER, 1982. An overview is given by BISHOP, 1988, 96–8.
16. For a typology and discussion see BISHOP, 1988, 91–2 and 127–8.
17. For the reconstruction see GROENMAN-VAN WAATERINGE, 1967, 114–20; BISHOP, 1988, 113; CONNOLLY & VAN DRIEL-MURRAY, 1991; JUNKELMANN, 1992, 34ff.
18. ASSKAMP, 1987. For a general treatment see TAYLOR, 1975.
19. See BISHOP, 1988; PALAGYI, 1989; SCHWINDEN, 1987; and JUNKELMANN, 1992, espec. 24–34, contra TAYLOR, 1975; GROENMAN-VAN WAATERINGE, 1979; and ASSKAMP, 1987. Lawson (nee Taylor) corrected her earlier statement (TAYLOR, 1975) in LAWSON, 1978, 143.
20. Following BISHOP, 1988 and the depiction in the round from Trier discussed by SCHWINDEN, 1987.
21. WILLEMS, 1991a.

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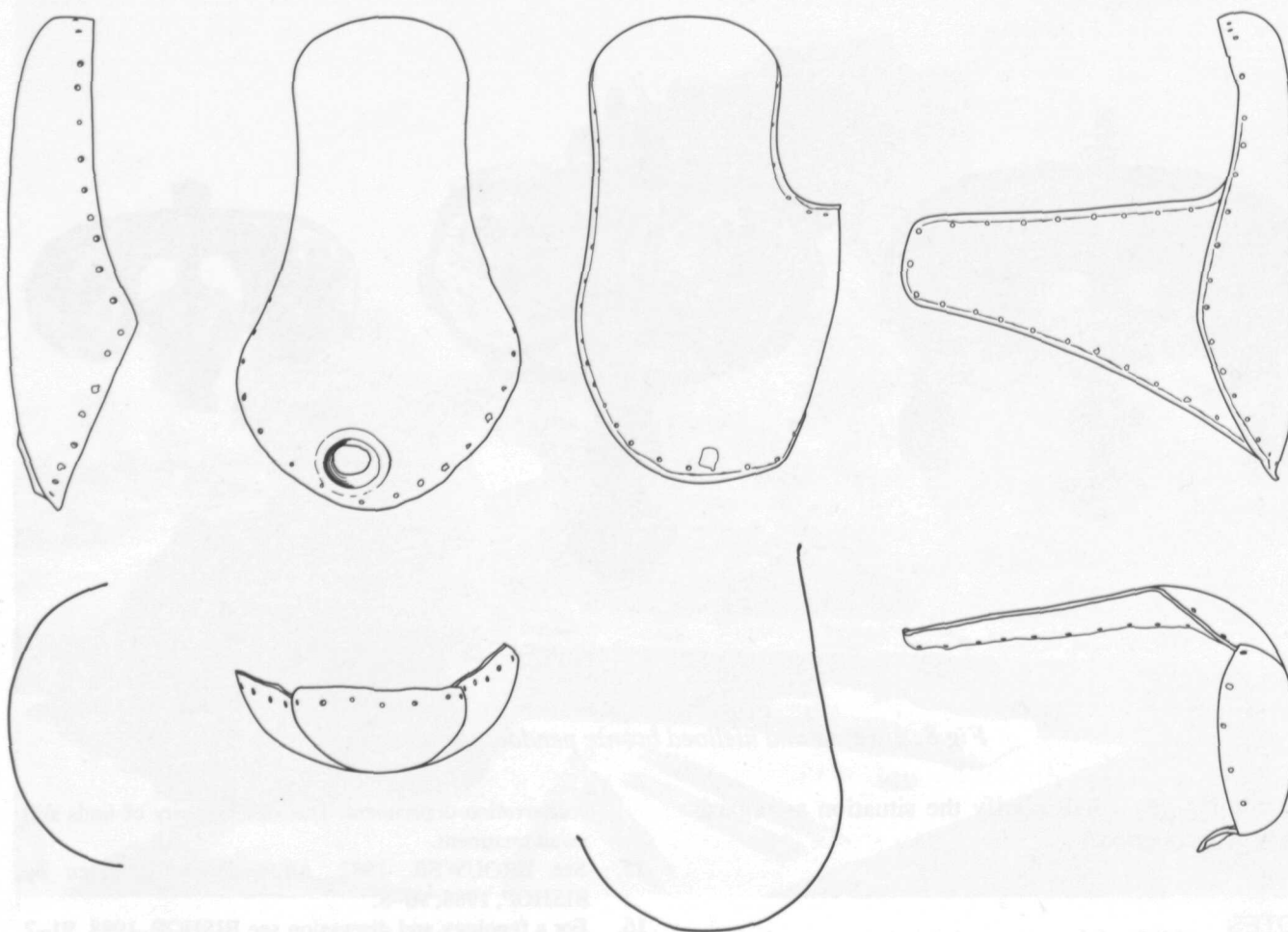
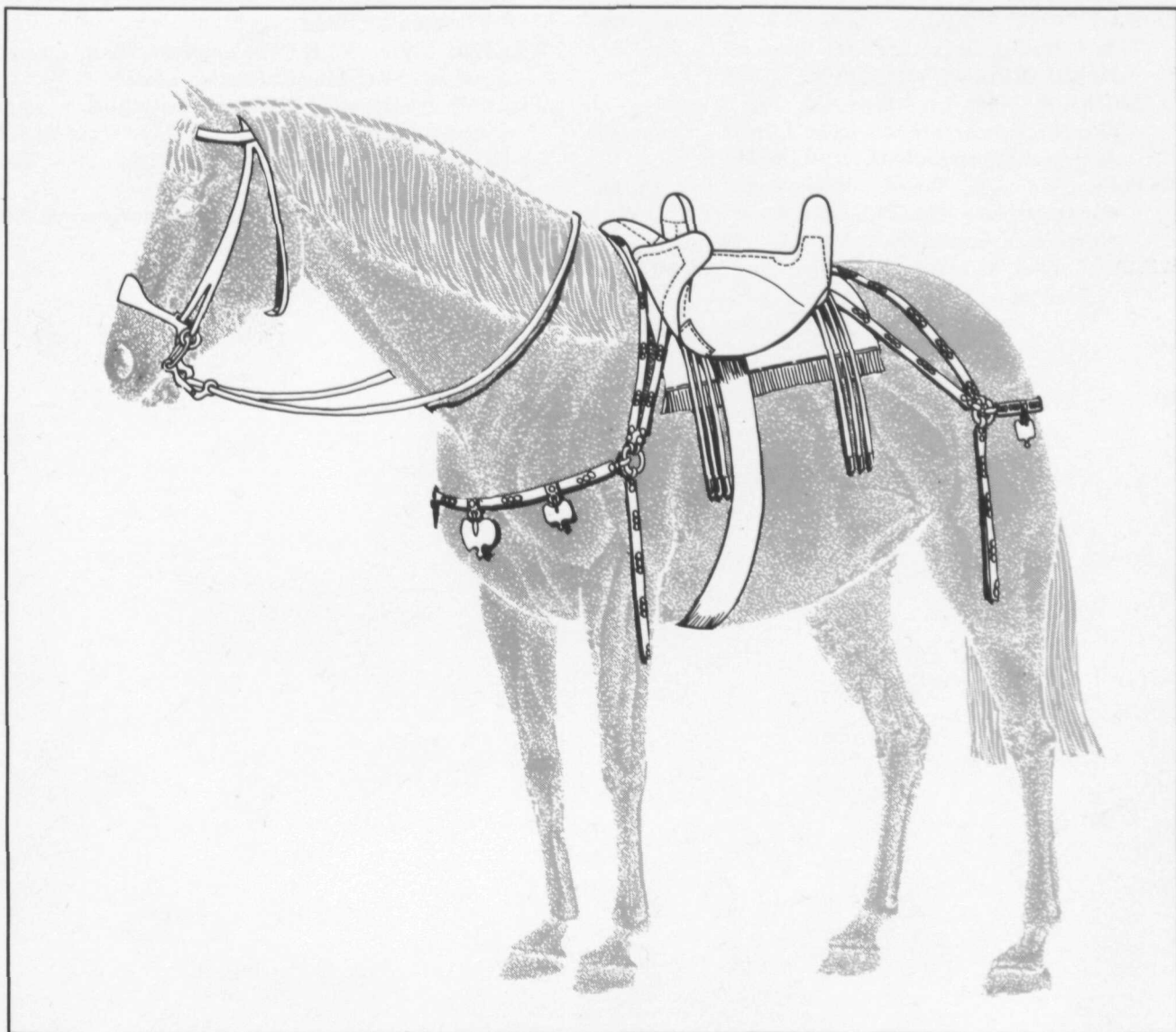


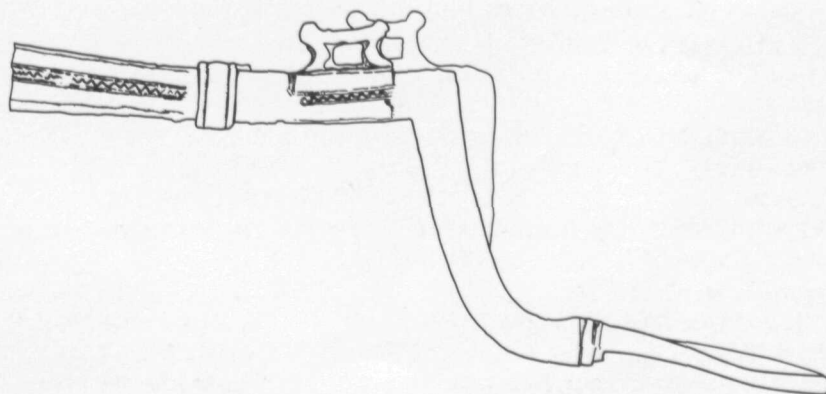
Fig.9: Bronze saddle horns, scale 1:3.

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**Fig.10:** *Reconstruction of a Tiberio-Claudian horse harness (after BISHOP, 1988).*



**Fig.11:** *Decorated bronze hackamore, scale 1:2.*

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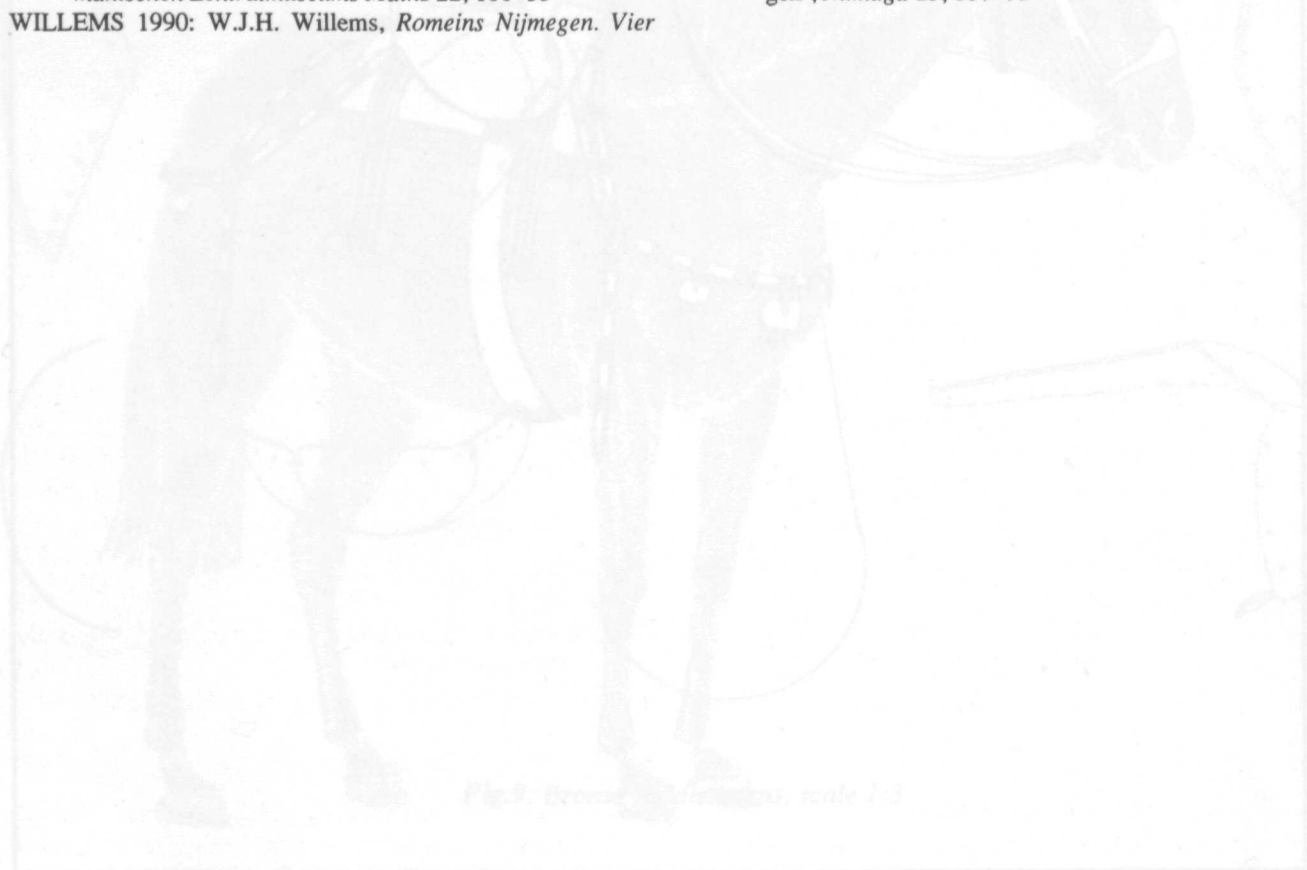


Fig. 9: Bronze harness, scale 1:3

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