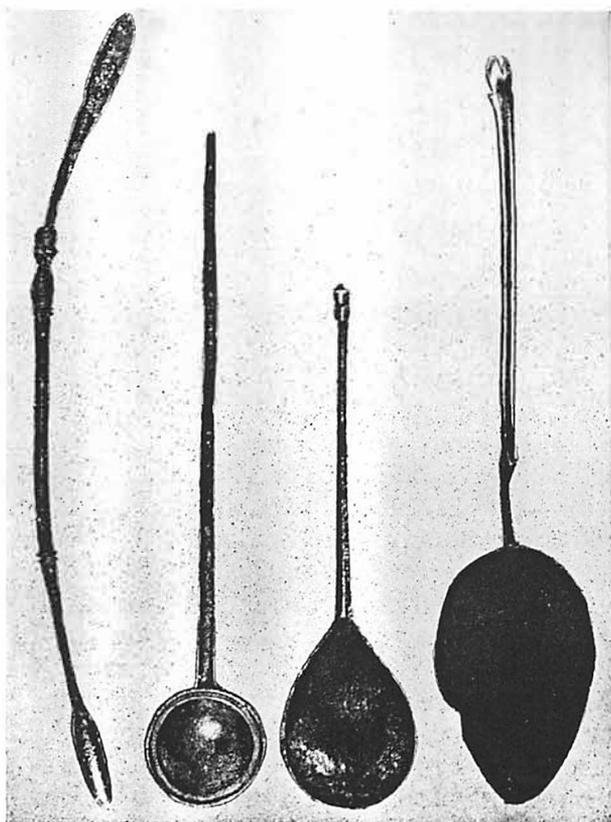


# OLD BASE-METAL SPOONS

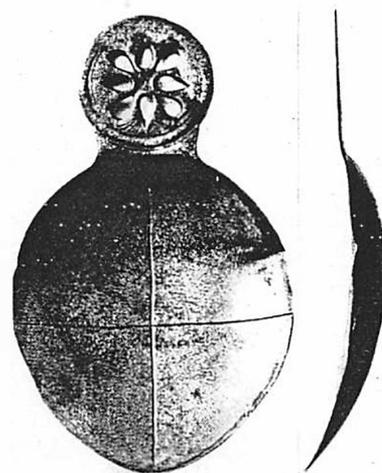
By NORMAN GASK

RECENT dispersals of several famous collections call attention anew to the attraction, for many, of base-metal spoons. Some of these have pedigrees reaching back thousands of years B.C., as far indeed as civilization itself. One of the earliest specimens in my collection is of bronze,  $6\frac{1}{8}$  in. long, knopped with a delicately and beautifully wrought goat's foot (No. *ia*). The stem is slender and rounded, the bowl extremely thin and leaf-shaped, strengthened on the back by a 'rat-tail,' an 'elbow' connecting bowl and stem. Two not dissimilar spoons of silver in the British Museum were discovered at Cyzicus, but in the Naples Museum there is a silver one of similar design which was dug up at Pompeii. Thus this pattern was apparently common to both Greece and Italy.

A new history of Britain could be written round the stems and spoon-selves of base-metal spoons. One of the most mysterious types of all is that spoon-shaped bronze, a new example of which is among the recent acquisitions of the British Museum.



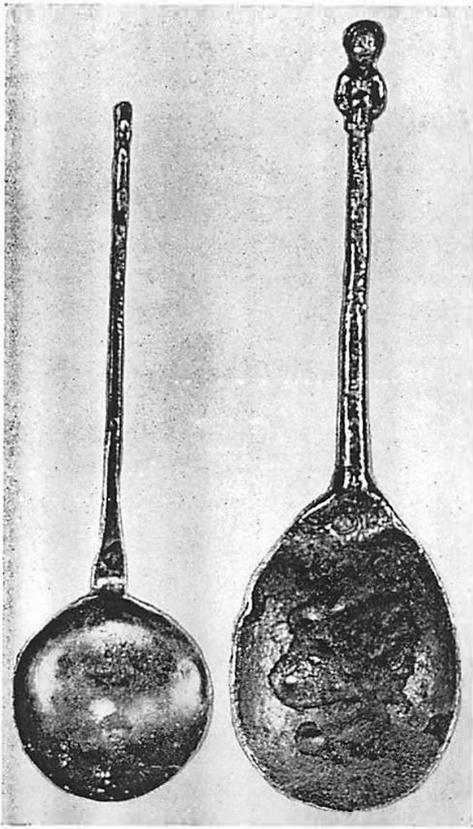
No. 1.—*a*, BRONZE *LIGULA*, III-IV CENT. : *b*, BRONZE, II CENT. : *c*, LATTEN 'ACORN,' XIV CENTURY : *d*, BRONZE, GRAEKO-ROMAN



No. II.—TWO VIEWS OF A BRONZE SPOON FIRST CENTURY B.C. : BRITISH MUSEUM

It recalls the Museum's ancient Egyptian spoon of carved ivory, the handle formed of the head of Athor or Isis. This bronze was ploughed up at Andover, Hants, and dates probably from the First Century B.C. By the courtesy of the Museum I am able to illustrate it (No. *ii*). The example, which has a rosette handle, is 4.6 in., with a maximum breadth of 2.8 in., and weighs just over  $1\frac{1}{4}$  oz. avdp., the crossed lines extending the whole length. This cruciform design is generally found in one of a pair, the other having a small round hole near one of the side edges but plain otherwise. Apparently this is about the ninth specimen found in England, five having been discovered in Ireland, four in Wales and two in Scotland. The burial of these bronzes with the dead in three instances, indicates some sort of religious or ceremonial significance, but what this is remains for the present a mystery.

Concerning base-metal spoons for domestic use it may be stated that they follow closely the designs and shapes of their richer silver cousins. They differ, however, in two essentials: *1st*, they bear makers' marks only, sometimes none, and thus the dates can only



No. III.—*a*. LATTEN 'FINIAL': FOURTEENTH CENTURY  
*b*. PEWTER 'MAIDENHEAD': FIFTEENTH CENTURY

be approximated, and *2nd*, the vast majority seen in public and private collections and in the dealers' shops have been dug up in London, and bear unmistakable evidence of their long underground sleep. Flung on the dust-heap with changing fashions in olden times, cast into plague-pits for fear of contamination during London's periodic visitations of the Pestilence; forming part of the *débris*, afterwards built upon, of the Great Fire of 1666, slipped inadvertently beneath the flooring of rooms and cupboards, dropped into the Thames by sailors in passing ships or by careless housewives living in the residences which lined old London Bridge, almost all have been found during London building excavations and demolitions or fished from

the mud of Thames River. Kings, princes, nobles and the wealthy might have their silver spoons, but the base-metal ones were made for the personal use of the majority of the population. The centuries of undisturbed sleep of these humble spoon-relics beneath the soil or the water have preserved them for collectors.

My earliest London specimen to which a definite period can be assigned, is an unpretentious excavated bronze example, 5 in. long, with a circular rat-tailed bowl and a bodkin-like spike handle. It dates from about the Second Century A.D.—possibly from the time of Christ—during the Roman occupation of Britain. Similar spoons have been excavated in Angel Court and Tooley Street. It is probably an egg-spoon, the spike being used to perforate or break the shell before the egg was eaten in order, according to Pliny, to ward off evil consequences. The spike was also employed to open shell-fish and extract the edible part (No. *ib*).

Another relic of the Roman Empire in London is a bronze *LIGULA*, 6 in. long, with a narrow bowl shaped like a leaf-bud and faceted at the back, with a graceful ornamental baluster handle. It is knopped with an olive. It was used by the belle of Roman times for extracting cosmetics and unguents from the narrow-necked glass bottles of the period (No. *ia*). This olive-top on bronze *SPATULAE* was also employed, on occasion, by the Roman doctor for probing wounds or depressing the tongue during a throat-examination. It dates from the Third or Fourth Century A.D. Other bronze spoons of the period in my collection have either pear or banjo-shaped bowls. One is knopped by a finely modelled representation of a spindle-whorl, with a snake's-head at the junction of stem and bowl.

It is a far cry from the Roman Occupation to the Middle Ages, but relatively few base-metal, or, for that matter, few silver, spoons have survived that can be definitely assigned to the intervening centuries. It is probable that spoons of bone, shell, wood or similar material were used and have long since perished. In the Fourteenth Century appeared a latten spoon with an almost circular bowl and a longish handle flat near the bowl but gradually tapering to the finial.

These spoons are often marked on the upper surface of the handle near the bowl with a fleur-de-lys, or other symbol. There are half-a-dozen specimens in Guildhall Museum, three of them dug up, in company with pewter 'acorn-heads' and 'diamond-points,' in Finsbury Circus and Finsbury Pavement, both part of the ancient marsh of Moorfields. The mark on the example of this type, here illustrated, is *I Crowned* (No. *iii a*). This type bears a marked resemblance to the

## OLD BASE-METAL SPOONS

French silver spoons of about the date 1330.

Later in the same century appeared the famous latten cone- and finial-topped spoons with the pear-shaped bowls that were to continue in latten, pewter and silver, for 250 years, and having also the diamond-section or four-sided stems. One of this elegant type, but surmounted by, instead of a fir-cone, a Gothic acorn, the earliest of all the 'acorn-knops,' is figured in No. *ic*. This type is sometimes lightly punched on the back of the bowl with a bird, flower, orb-and-dove, or other symbol. All three types, which have been excavated in London, were possibly imported from the Continent, like the seven gold and eight silver spoons bearing on their stems the mark of Paris entered in 1300 in the wardrobe accounts of Edward I.

'Latten,' of course, is derived from the old French word 'LATON,' a mediaeval mixed metal made of copper and zinc and not practically distinguishable from brass. Shakespeare, who is said to have been godfather to one of Ben Jonson's children, on being asked at the christening why he seemed so preoccupied replied, according to Hone's *Everyday Book*: 'Ben, I have been considering a great while what should be the fittest gift for me to bestow upon my godchild and I have resolved it at last.' 'I prithee what?' said Ben. 'I' faith, Ben,' Shakespeare is said to have replied, 'I'll give him a dozen good latten spoons and thou shalt translate them.'\*

About the year 1400 appear the first of the famous types of medi-

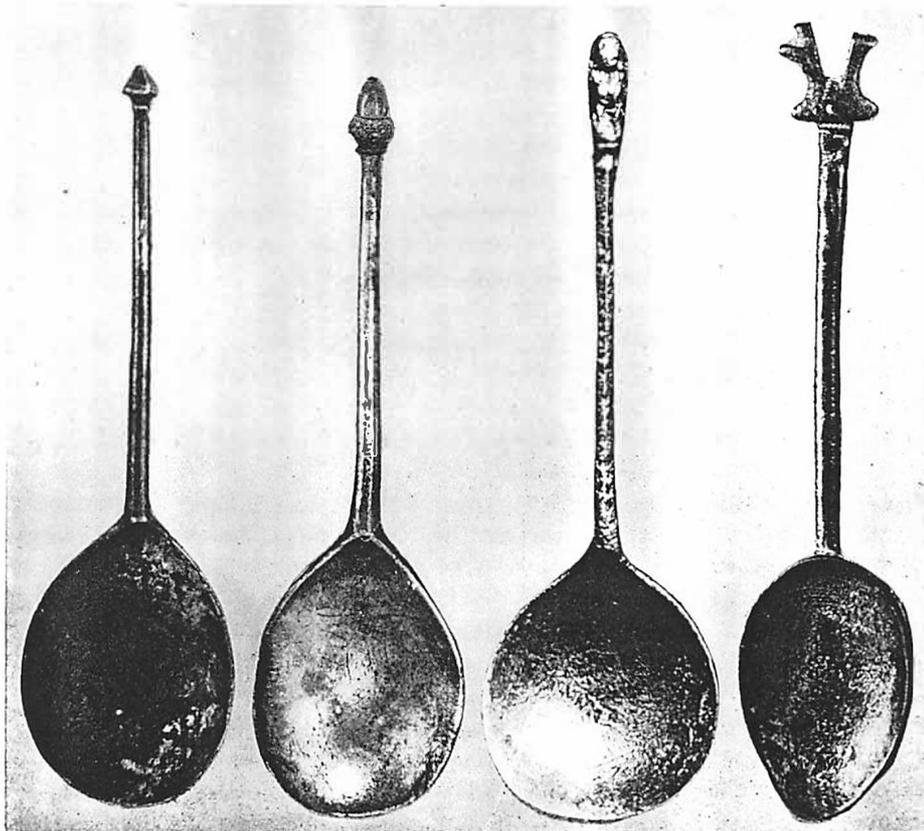
\* *I.e.* 'transmute' them to gold: a pleasant jest at Jonson's play *The Alchemist*.

aeval pewter spoons, the diamond-point and acorn-knop. The diamond-point in my possession, which when dug up was covered with an iridescent sepia patina due to the action of chemicals in the soil during its long burial, is, curiously enough, the only specimen known bearing a maker's mark. This is a Cross Between *I.B.* surmounted by a crown. It is  $6\frac{1}{4}$  in. long and dates from about 1400 (No. *iva*). Diamond-points are great rarities in any metal.

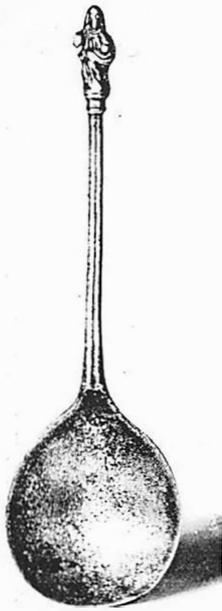
An 'acorn-knop' of the same length and period, with an almost rounded handle, and a small Gothic *S* as the maker's mark is also shown (No. *ivb*). The mark, as is customary in base-metal spoons, is punched in the bowl.

One of the rarest, most interesting and eagerly-sought of the pewter spoons is the 'maidenhead.' The horned-head-dress variety, the life-long quest of collectors, was illustrated in *THE CONNOISSEUR*, December 1933.

I now illustrate a somewhat later fifteenth-century example in my possession. It is  $6\frac{1}{4}$  in.



No. IV.—*a*, A PEWTER 'DIAMOND-POINT,' CIRCA 1400 : *b*, A PEWTER 'ACORN-HEAD,' CIRCA 1400 : *c*, A LATTEN 'LION SEJANT' SPOON, CIRCA 1640 : *d*, A LATTEN 'STAG'S HEAD' SPOON, CIRCA 1670



No. IV.—MASTER-SPOON OF EARLY XVIIITH CENTURY

long, with *R.R.* within a beaded circle as maker's mark, and is still covered with a jet-black patina (No. iii*b*). Pewter maidenheads are considerably scarcer even than examples in silver and are the constant quest of collectors.

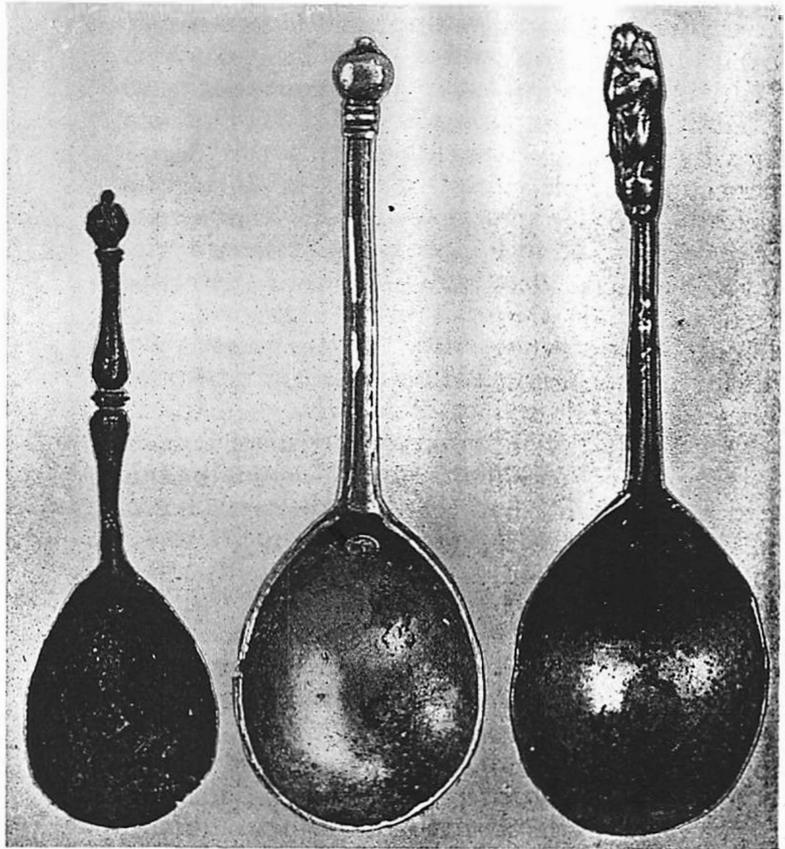
A two-fold rarity is the pewter 'wrythen-knop' shown in No. vi*a*. It is  $6\frac{1}{4}$  in. long, covered in sepia patina, with a graceful fig-shaped bowl and a double ornamental-baluster handle terminating in a perfect spirally fluted or wrythen ball-knop. The maker's mark is *R.M.* within a beaded circle. The date is assigned to *circa* 1500 and the handle reflects the English Renaissance influence of the period. Wrythen-knops in any metal are rarities, but no silver example with this form of stem is known. A pewter wrythen-knop with the same form of stem, however, with the smaller ball above the larger one at the top of the handle completely worn away, was sold in the W. F. Pavyer collection at Sotheby's in March, 1931.

The British Museum's recently acquired rarities in base-metal spoons in the King Edward VII Wing include a pewter 'melon-knop,' which is a variety of the 'wrythen-knop,' engraved in the bowl, in Black Letter, with *O.S.* (? *Oleum Sanctum*), a pewter 'yawl-knop' and a latten 'monk's-head.'

One of the handsomest of all the pewter types is the six-square, or hexagonal, ball-knop.

The example here figured (No. vi*b*) is  $6\frac{5}{8}$  in. long, with *A.B.* within a beaded circle as maker's mark. It also dates from about 1500. Only three of this artistic and well-balanced type are known in silver. A sixteenth-century French latten spoon,  $4\frac{7}{8}$  in., with the Virgin-and-Child as its finial, is figured in No. vi*c*. A latten 'lion sejant,' or 'sitting-lion-knop,' dating from about 1640, is shown in No. iv*c*. Note the curious reversion to the round bowl and diamond-section stem. A latten 'stag's-head,'  $4\frac{7}{8}$  in., of about 1670, similar to one 7 in. long, which was dug up in Tottenham Court Road, is illustrated in No. iv*d*. It is unknown in silver.

I might add that the commonest type of old English base-metal spoon is the 'slipped-in-the-stalk,' which, because of its extreme simplicity, was apparently made in large quantities. Hundreds of these 'slipped-ends,' in pewter and latten, have been excavated.



No. VI.—*a*, PEWTER 'WRYTHEN-KNOP' SPOON OF *CIRCA* 1500; *b*, PEWTER HEXAGONAL 'BALL-KNOP' OF *CIRCA* 1500; *c*, LATTEN 'VIRGIN-AND-CHILD,' XVIIITH CENTURY