

## A ROMAN COUNTERFEITERS' DEN \*

### PART I

White Woman's Hole, near Leighton, Mendip Hills, Somerset

By

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NGR. ST 704444. O.S. 6 in. to 1 mile 74SW.

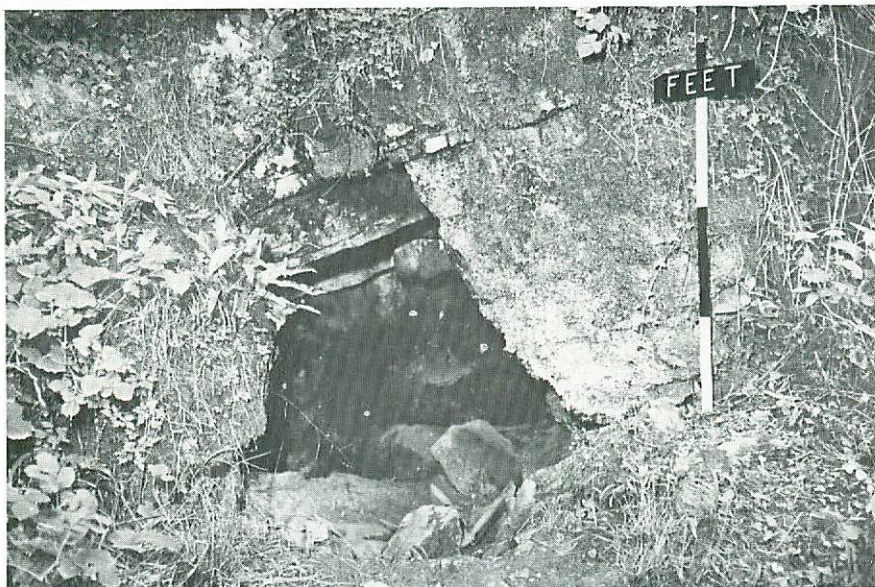
[*Note:* JHB contributes the account of the excavations, the pottery and discussion. GCB describes the miscellaneous finds and provides a detailed account of the forgeries from this site and from another at Draethen, Glam. Eds.]

### SUMMARY

White Woman's Hole is a cave some 18 m long, which, during excavation, revealed late Romano-British coin counterfeiting material and Romano-British pottery in disturbed stratification. A sherd of Iron Age pottery, Medieval and later pottery were also found.

### INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

White Woman's Hole is situated in Asham Wood, which is in a long valley cutting across eastern Mendip between Cranmore and Chantry. This area is generally known as the Frome Gap. The entrance to the site lies in the northern side of the valley and is some 9 m below



Pl. 3. Entrance to White Woman's Hole.

*Photograph J. H. Barrett.*

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the valley lip. The geography of the area has been described by Curtis (in Barrett, 1966, p. 11) and a description of the area and the cave was given by Stanton (1951).

The writer first heard of White Woman's Hole when excavating Tom Tivey's Hole (TTH) in the same valley. Also, the site was described in Mr. G. Todd's (TTH) field note book. In the 1950s a local man, Mr. D. Mitchell, had excavated a trial hole some 5 m from the entrance and had given the finds, which included crude blackish pottery, to the late Dr. L. S. Palmer, the Curator of Wells Museum. The present Curator, Dr. F. S. Wallis, kindly carried out a search for this pottery but was unable to find the material.

The cave revealed evidence of counterfeiting in the Constantinian period, comprising some 200 coins, fragments of coins, droplets of bronze and sections of cast rod. This is described and discussed in the text by Mr. G. C. Boon.

I would like to thank the following for general help. Mrs. B. J. Barrett, Mr. D. Dawson, Mr. L. V. Grinsell, Mr. J. Hancock, Mr. D. Mitchell, Mr. S. Wilmot and Mr. C. J. Crees (Leighton Farm); Mr. G. C. Boon for his report on the miscellaneous finds and the counterfeiting material and Dr. I. F. Smith and Mr. P. A. Rahtz for their comments on the pottery.

## WHITE WOMANS HOLE (CAVE SITE)

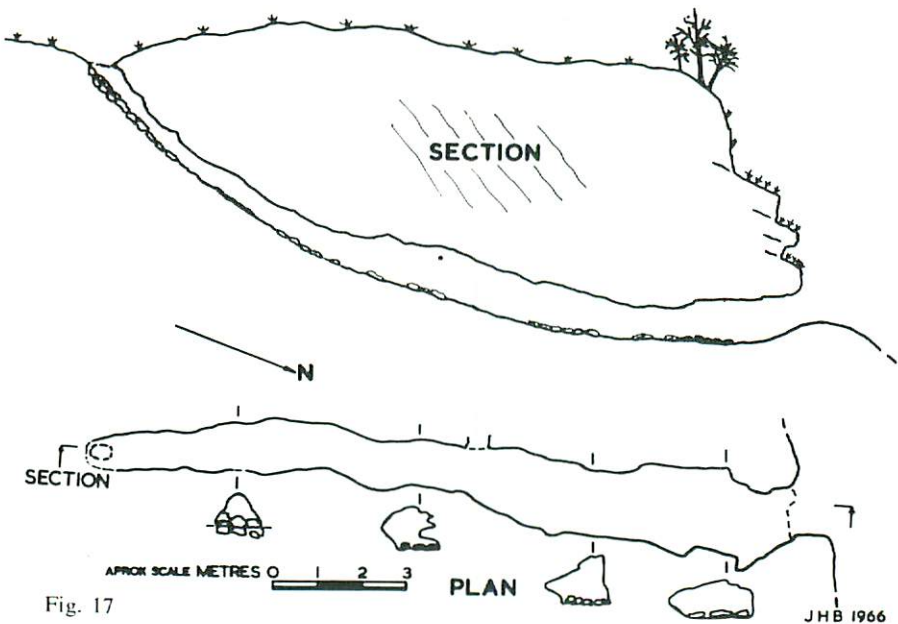
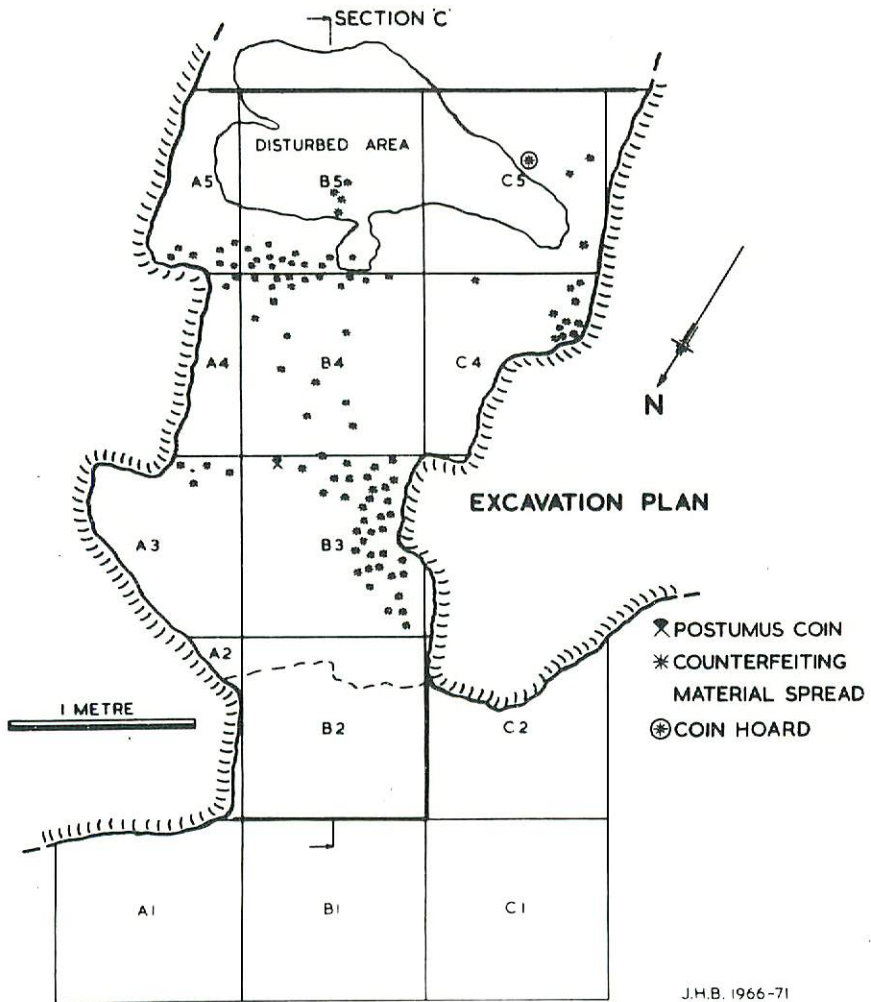


Fig. 17

The cave entrance was small (Pl. 3, Figs. 17, 18) but the cave itself expanded into a larger dry passage which, before the excavation commenced in 1965, was strewn with numerous animal bones (sheep, fox and rabbit), on the surface and in the soil; the cave appeared to have been a natural animal den or lair. Stratification was greatly disturbed by previous excavation and animals (Fig. 19) and this accounts for pottery of the 11th and 17th-18th Century being found below the coining material. Excavation within the cave was undertaken down to the decomposed bedrock in grids B3-B5, C4, C5, all grids were in the daylight zone. This area was fairly flat but rose rapidly to a small exit (Fig. 17) some 18 m from the entrance.

### WHITE WOMANS HOLE



J.H.B. 1966-71

Fig. 18

Excavation of B2 to B5 grids revealed numerous animal bones mixed with a large amount of stone débris. In several areas further disturbance was again evident, as instanced by a fragment of 18th Century clay pipe bowl which rested on the lowest level of fallen limestone roof slabs and below medieval pottery. The counterfeiting material and pottery was found in association with 16th-17th Century pottery sherds and, at a higher level, a sherd of Glastonbury Ware was found together with a bone needle. The counterfeiting material (coins, flans and rods) (Fig. 18) was concentrated in grids B3 and B4-5. A conglomeration or hoard of some 70 coins and flans was found in grid C5 30 cm below the surface (Fig. 18).

Casual digging at various times and animal disturbance would account for the partial reverse stratigraphy encountered at the site.

There was no indication during the present excavation to suggest an earlier occupation before the 'Glastonbury' period, but the entrance platform has not yet been fully excavated.

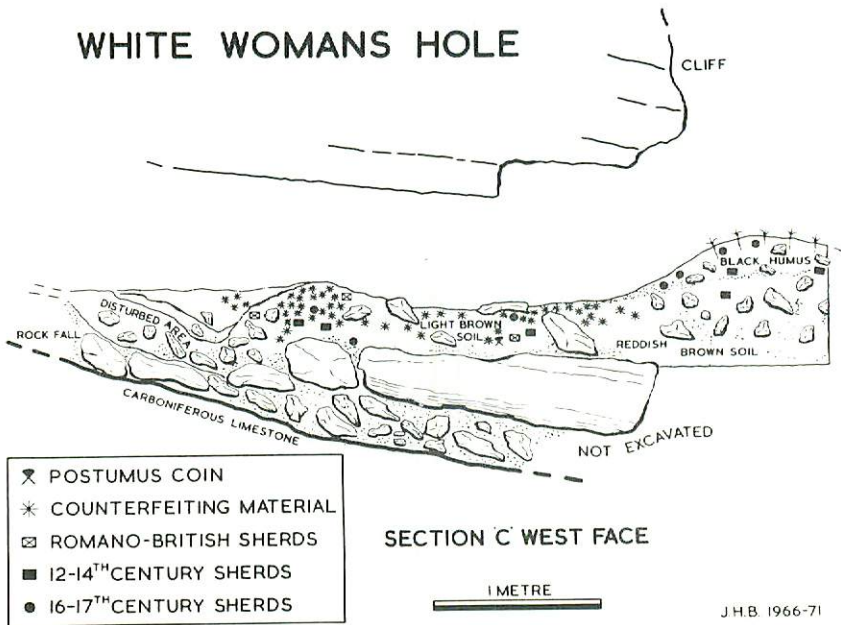


Fig. 19

*The Pottery*

## Figs. 20 and 21. Nos. 1-12

Nos. 1-2 are isolated unstratified sherds. The Romano-British pottery. Nos. 3-6, possibly represents some four vessels. Nos. 7-8 are 13th-14th century and are probably of local origin. Nos. 9-10, cooking pots, are similar to 11th-12th century material from Cheddar, (fabric CC) and are also paralleled from Tom Tivey's Hole. Other body sherds of coarse grey paste with rather creamy surfaces were found and are similar to material from TTH and several North Somerset sites including Butcombe and Pagans Hill (Barrett, 1966). No. 11 is of 13th-14th century date, probably with an origin in central Somerset similar to material from Glastonbury and Beckery. No. 12 can be dated to the 16th-17th century by the fabric and glazing.

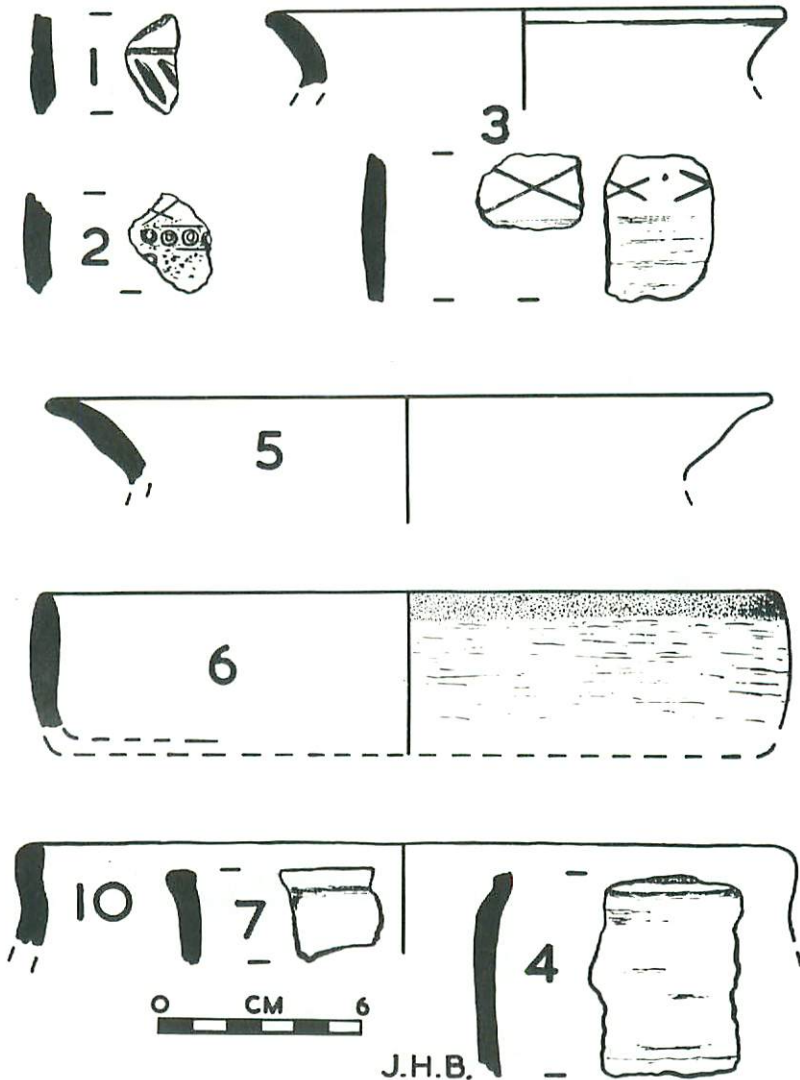


Fig. 20

*Prehistoric*

1. Small fragment of hand-made pottery, considerably abraded, with reddish surfaces and grey core; contains particles of shell up to 3 mm, but is otherwise of fairly even fine texture and relatively hard. Dr. Isobel F. Smith reported that "the surviving ornament on the exterior consists of part of a horizontal groove and two deep oblique impressions above (or below) it, may suggest that this is a piece of Late Neolithic Rinyo-Clacton or Grooved Ware. On the other hand, neither the fabric nor the technique of decoration is completely characteristic of this tradition."

2. Body fragment, dark brown paste with calcite grits, blackish appearance, incised ring and dot decoration. This Iron Age fragment could doubtless be paralleled among the Glastonbury/Meare lake villages material.

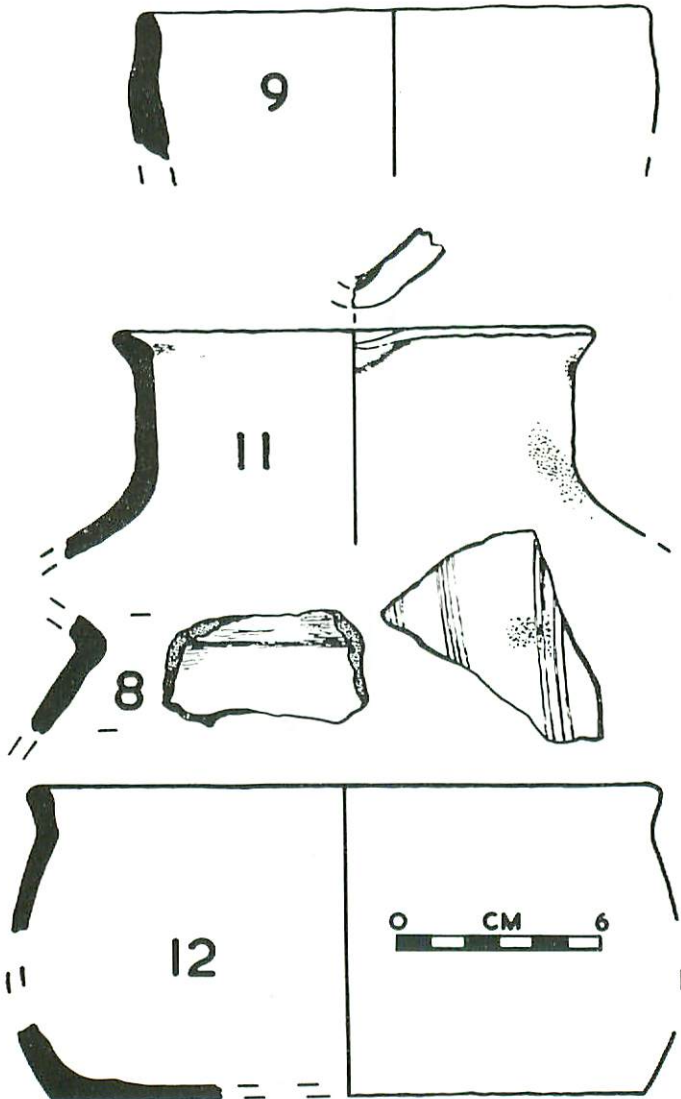


Fig. 21

J.H.B.

*Romano-British*

3. Rim and body sherds of cooking pot with overhanging rim, dark brown paste with grits, wheel made black-burnished, with oblique lattice incised decoration. 3rd-4th century.

4. Body sherd, dark brown paste with grits, wheel made, black burnished, uncertain form. 3rd-4th century.

5. Rim sherd of cooking pot with overhanging rim, similar paste and date to No. 6.

6. Profile of dish, coarse dark grey paste, black burnished ware. This type of dish was quite common in the 3rd-4th century.

*Medieval and Later*

7. Rim sherds of cooking pot, coarse dark grey paste with shell and water worn grits.

8. Part of rim sherd, possibly part of No. 7, similar paste.

9. Rim and body sherd of ?cooking pot, dark grey coarse soapy paste contains calcite grits, broken shell with a micaceous appearance, reddish surfaces.

10. Rim sherd of cooking pot, similar paste and appearance to No. 9.

11. Rim and pouring spout of jug with decorated body sherds. Decoration of combed parallel line. Light grey paste with pebble grits. Exterior surfaces are brick red in colour. Orange buff patchy glaze on exterior.

12. Rim and base sherd of vessel, brick red paste; the sherds have internal glazing.

*Miscellaneous Finds*

(Fig. 22)

1. Iron ring-terminal, 13 mm diam., end recurved in "shepherd's crook" fashion, and edges hammered just above this point to produce a medial groove or furrow. Probably from a loose-ring pin or penannular brooch. A pin without the recurved end appeared at Lagore crannog, where it may date c. A.D. 600: *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.* LIIC (1950-1), 101, fig. 35, no. 731; a better parallel, with recurve, came from Ballinderry crannog no. 1, *ibid.* XLIIC (1935-7), 167, fig. 31, D. This was a loose-ring pin. Of iron penannulars, note Lagore, *loc. cit.* 100, fig. 34, A, C, one with simple knobbed terminals akin to Romano-British types, and one with flattish subrhomboidal terminals of a pattern frequently found—plain, or more commonly simply ornamented—in small bronze brooches of the late and sub-Roman period in western coastal areas. Brooch A has a concavity resembling the furrow present on the White Woman's Hole specimen, but otherwise the comparisons are not exact in this regard. Such grooving is characteristic of penannular pins of Roman date, and a bronze pin from Silchester, G. C. Boon, *Med. Archaeol.* III (1959), 82, B2, pl. 3, is a fairly good comparison for shape, though lightly decorated with edge-nicks and spiral recalling firstly the late Roman bronze razor (with recurved loop) shown in G. C. Boon, *Roman Silchester* (1957), fig. 15.5, and secondly the pin of the large duck-head penannular brooch from Caerwent, shown, e.g. by H. N. Savory, *Dark Age Britain* (ed. D. B. Harden, 1956), pl. Vg. Such a pin will thus be fourth, perhaps late fourth or early fifth, century and the iron specimen under discussion may be of similar date (cf. the Theodosian coin, p.71 no. A8) or somewhat later.

2. Iron point, 17 mm long, solid, slightly rectangular section, as from a nail, but cleanly cut off, or broken off, at some remote date. Not from no. 1 above. Too small to have been the remains of a die for counterfeiting.

3. Bone needle, 45 mm long, formed probably from the distal end of the radial wing-bone of a bird such as a goose or swan (kindly examined by Mr. J. A. Bateman, Keeper of Zoology in the National Museum of Wales, who advances the identification with reserve, though the traces of cancellous tissue and the retention of the natural surface on the outside show that the bone was in any case from a very small creature, and structurally almost certainly is avian). The piercing is somewhat roughly made. Well-matched at Glastonbury: A. Bulleid and H. St. G. Grey, *The Glastonbury Lake Village II* (1917), 411, fig. 147, nos. B361 or B330. Most Roman and later needles of this character are

better-made from thicker, mammalian bones; though of course the object is of too simple a type for a Roman or later date to be entirely excluded.

4. Convex disc of dolerite, 22 mm diam., 6 mm thick, fairly highly polished artificially (the material was kindly identified by Mr. D. Emlyn Evans, Senior Assistant-Keeper of Geology in the National Museum of Wales). This may simply be a counter, used in reckoning; but its dark colour (almost black), and the fact that only one was found, suggest another purpose, namely as a touch-stone for estimating the quality of metals by the streak test, whereby the samples to be assessed are compared with streaks produced by metals of known purity. This method was much used anciently—and indeed in modern times—and within the limits of a visual test can be surprisingly accurate. The specimen takes a streak very readily. Whether it could have been used in any metallurgical operation connected with the counterfeiting (e.g. the cupellation of silver from orthodox coins before the residual base-metal was cast for re-use) is of course pure speculation, but is nevertheless possible. There are some similar '*calculi*' in the City Museum, Bristol, collections, from Charterhouse-upon-Mendip, some of which, according to Mr. David Dawson, Assistant Curator in Archaeology, are fairly well polished.

### DISCUSSION

The cave may have been occupied in Constantinian times—indeed perhaps in the later third century—for a short period by persons engaged in the manufacture of forged coins. The deposit reflecting this possibility is at present unparalleled in Mendip caves, though a similar (much smaller) group of material, without the Constantinian element, has been found in an abandoned Roman mine at Draethen (Glam.), and is discussed by Mr. G. C. Boon below (p. 74). The isolation of White Woman's Hole made it highly suitable for illicit activities, but so far the excavation has not revealed slag, dies, moulds or crucibles. Alternatively, therefore, the counterfeiters may merely have concealed their material in the cave, possibly in the pottery vessels which were found.

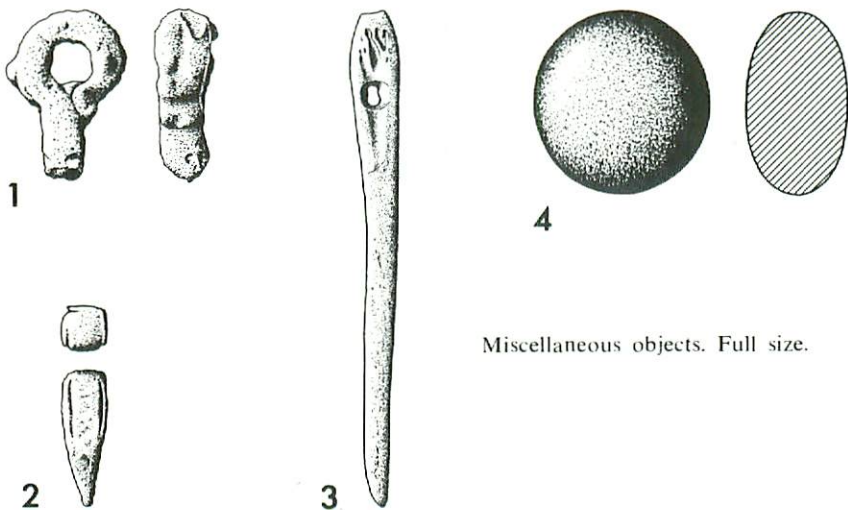


Fig. 22



The evidence for frequentation at other times is obscure. Sherd 1 is conceivably the product of a visit in Late Neolithic times. Sherd 2 is Iron Age of Glastonbury Lake Village type and together with the needle would seem to indicate one or more visits during 1st C. B.C. or later. Subsequent Roman occupation is represented by the coin *Fel temp repartio* copy of c. 355-60 and there is the Theodosian coin. The iron pin (Fig. 22,1) may take the frequentation into the Dark Ages. The Medieval and later pottery suggests casual occupation similar to that in TTH. Since the cave faces northwest and would have been exposed to the weather, it was scarcely attractive as a permanent home.

The molluscan remains were similar to those of TTH, indicating damp conditions in limestone scrub vegetation similar to that of today.

Excavation will continue after the publication of this report. Most of the finds have been given to Bristol City Museum by Mr. Crees, but some duplicate counterfeiting materials will be given to the Society's Museum.

#### REFERENCES

- |                |      |  |
|----------------|------|--|
| BARRETT, J. H. | 1966 | Tom Tivey's Hole Rock Shelter, near Leighton, Somerset. <i>Proc. Univ. Bristol Spelaeol. Soc.</i> <b>11</b> (1), 9-24. |
| STANTON, W. I. | 1951 | Two Caves in Eastern Mendip. <i>Wessex Cave Club Circular.</i> <b>2</b> (27).  |