

AN UNUSUAL BRONZE AGE SWORD FROM HIGHCLERE, HAMPSHIRE

In early June 1982, Mr David Radwell, head keeper to the Caernarvon Estate, Highclere, discovered a bronze sword whilst using a metal-detector. The object was found beneath the roots of a large tree at a depth of about eighteen inches (45 cm) lying flat with its tip to the south. During efforts to dislodge the brittle bronze it was broken in half and, subsequently, a further break near the tip occurred. During the search no further metalwork was found. Following the discovery the sword was reported to Newbury District Museum to whom it was generously donated by the landowner, the Hon G R O M Herbert (Acc No 1982/64).

The findspot lies *c* 230m east of Clerewood Lodge, immediately adjacent to the north side of the track which passes the triangular village cricket ground, and north of the pavillion at its western tip (NGR SU44466015). The site is situated at *c* 460ft (140m) OD just above a valley whose floor carries a small stream north-westward to the River Enborne, a tributary of the Kennet. The geology comprises a heavy plateau gravel with clay drift above Eocene sand and loam (Bracklesham Beds).

Description (Fig 9)

The bronze sword comprises a long parallel-sided cast blade with integral hilt-plate. Its overall length is 52.8cm and weight 468g. The blade has an angular lozengic section, 0.8cm thick. It bears hollow bevelled edges which terminate before the blade expands to the

weak rounded shoulders at the junction with the hilt-plate. The maximum measurable width of the blade is 2.8cm, although in its uncorroded state it would probably have measured 3.0cm in width. Due to corrosion it is not possible to be certain that the blade did not expand very slightly at its centre. However, if this were the case, it is unlikely that the expansion would have exceeded 0.3cm.

The hilt-plate which comprises the upper 5cm of the object is trapezoidal, expanding to a maximum width of 3.2cm at the shoulders. The hilt-plate tapers towards the thick arched butt. Although the ridge of the blade mid-line continues through the hilt-plate on the obverse, the reverse carries a low midrib which becomes diffuse before the shoulders. The hilt-plate has four irregular rivet-holes forming a rectangular setting. The upper two have created notches in the edge of the hilt-plate, whilst the lower two punctuate it. One small sub-circular rivet, 0.3cm in diameter, survives in a lower rivet hole. One end of the rivet is flush with the obverse of the hilt-plate: the other protrudes less than 0.2cm from the reverse. A light transverse scratch between the shoulders hints at a curving line to the base of the former, presumably organic, hilt.

The object bears a dark green patina. The edges are heavily corroded to a light green colour, whilst the surfaces are marked by heavy dark pocking. The surface has fine scratches which run parallel to the blade except on the hilt-plate where they are

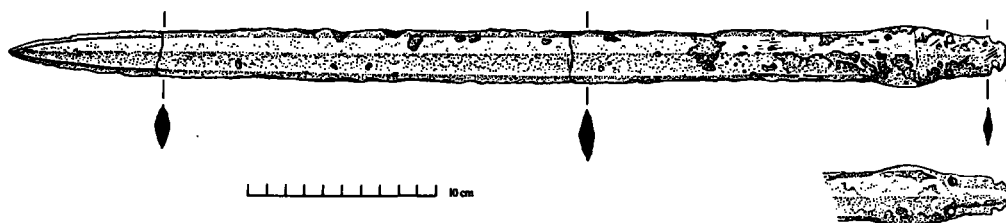


Fig 9. The Highclere Bronze Age sword.

oblique. Large vesicles in the lower break attest to porosity in the casting.

The sword has been conserved at Reading Museum but the metal has not been analysed.

Discussion (Fig 10)

The sword is one of a small group of weapons from Britain which belong to a period of experimentation when the characteristics of Middle Bronze Age rapiers were mixed with those of novel Continental Late Bronze Age slashing swords. This phase of experimentation is an aspect of the Penard industrial phase of the British Bronze Age at c 1100 BC (Burgess 1976, 74, Fig 4.9). The swords of this period have trapezoidal hilt-plates but not the longer flanged hilts of the later true swords.

A number of features of the Highclere sword can be found in the Rosnoën swords of northern France which are thought to have developed from rapiers in response to the West Alpine hilt-plate swords of Reinecke D: the blade is long, thin and parallel-sided. Its proportions (length: breadth c 16:1) fall comfortably within the range of this class (Needham 1982, Fig 4). The weak shoulders, ricasso and slight hilt midrib are further characteristics of the Rosnoën group. The lozengic blade section is, however, atypical of the

Rosnoën swords which are usually of flat lenticular section. The angular axial ridge throughout the blade is more reminiscent of the British Ballintober class. The Ballintober group is generally thought to have arisen as a modification of British Rosnoën swords (Burgess 1968, 15, Lambeth group) in response to the first flange-hilted swords of Hallstatt A2 from Central Europe (O'Connor 1980, 113). The Ballintober swords have adopted the leaf-shaped blade of the flange-hilted Erbenheim and Hemigkofen swords and are, hence, not rapier shaped like the Rosnoën swords. The hilt-plate of the Ballintober class is rectangular or trapezoidal in common with the Rosnoën swords. If the Ballintober class resulted from a fusion of Rosnoën (hilt) and Erbenheim or Hemigkofen (blade) attributes, the Highclere sword could well represent a formative stage in the development where a basically Rosnoën sword had adopted the lozengic blade section but not the leaf-shape of the Hallstatt sword. At this stage the shoulders are slightly expanded but do not form the sharp angular outline necessary to accommodate the broad blade of the more developed Ballintober weapons. Such a proposal presents another permutation of the attributes portrayed by Burgess (1968, 15-16)

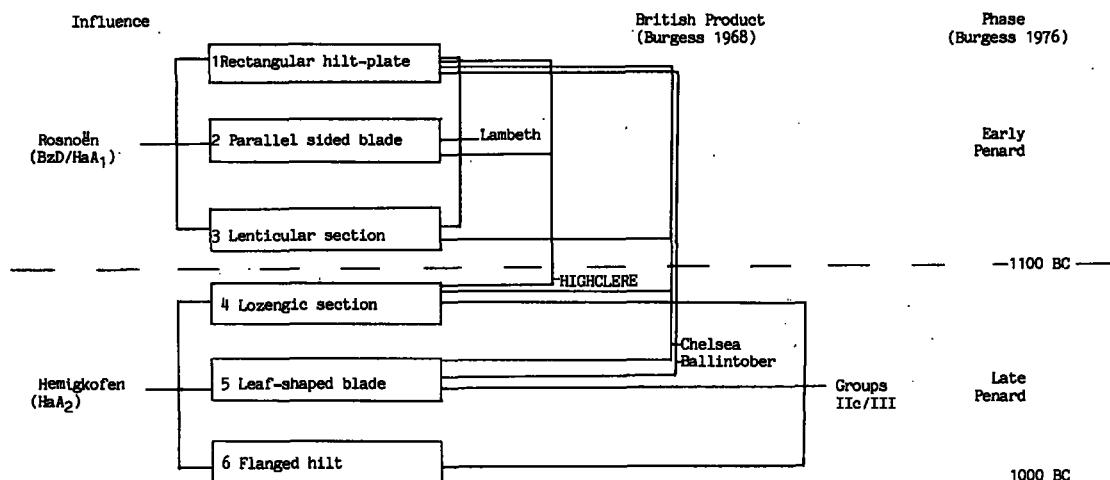


Fig 10. Diagram illustrating the position of the Highclere sword within the Penard phase of the British Bronze Age.

in the development of his Lambeth-Chelsea-Ballintober series (Fig 10). Such a proposal would be chronologically acceptable at the start of the later Penard phase (Burgess 1976) when the first Hallstatt A2 imports challenged the established Reinecke D (Ha A1) inspired swords.

Stuart Needham (1982) has recently united a wide range of other contemporary experimental swords into the Ambleside/Bardouville group and further suggests an alternative origin for the Ballintober type in this group. The variety of swords in the group includes broken weapons with solid hilts from Cumberland and the region of Bardouville (Needham 1982, Figs 3A and 5.12). In the writer's opinion, Needham is correct in assessing the solid hilted examples with those in which only the hilt-plate survives. Both examples quoted above have lozengic sections and, although broken, appear to be relatively narrow and were, perhaps more rapier-like than sword-like. Both hilts have two imitation rivets more akin to late (Group IV) rapiers than the majority of early swords suggesting development from the former. Indeed, the upper part of the Cumberland blade appears to taper like a rapier. The Bardouville region blade is very similar to the Highclere blade and may be closer to it than to the Ambleside/Bardouville group which most commonly have lentoid sections. O'Connor (1980, 113) regards the Bardouville region sword as a British export.

Although the place of manufacture of the Highclere sword is not known the geographical position of the find is well placed to accept influences from both northern France and Central Europe via the Thames Valley. Rosnoën swords are found throughout northern France, but are scarce in Britain where they are only known from the lower Thames and Sussex (O'Connor 1980, 808, map 32). Evidence for their importation is provided by the probable shipwreck site at Dover (Coombes, 1975). The Ballintober type, as well as the first British flange-hilted swords (Burgess' Groups IIc and III), have broad distributions in southern Britain and in

Ireland but also show marked concentrations in the Lower Thames (Burgess 1968, Figs 6 and 7). The similarity in these distributions supports the idea of the development of the Rosnoën sword into the Ballintober sword in the Thames Valley under the influence of imported Erbenheim and Hemigkofen swords (pace Needham 1982, 28) as these imports are almost exclusively restricted to the Lower Thames (Cowen 1951, map A; Brown 1982, 33). The Ambleside/Bardouville group demonstrates a separate distribution in Britain north-west of the Fens. Only in the Seine Basin do the distributions of Rosnoën and Ambleside/Bardouville swords overlap (Needham 1982, Fig 7). As mentioned above, the few known Rosnoën swords in Britain are from the Thames at London or from Sussex (Needham 1980, 43). Ballintober swords have frequently been found in the Thames, three from Oxfordshire, whilst other examples are known from Bath and Glastonbury in Somerset (Rowlands 1976, 427). The Highclere find-spot is, therefore, isolated from those of related weapons but falls within the same general zone. Subsequent trade or exchange resulted in the export of British swords to Northern France (Verron 1973, Fig 44.2; O'Connor 1980, map 33).

Although the Thames Valley area is by no means certain as the place of manufacture of the Highclere sword, exports of Ballintober swords from here to Ireland may have been pre-empted by a sword which forms the closest parallel to the Highclere weapon: a somewhat smaller weapon, now damaged, was found at Strabane, Co Tyrone, in 1879 possibly associated with fragments of gold (Eogan 1965, No 12; 1984, No 33).

The deposition of swords in watery places is frequently thought to be of ritual significance. The burial of the Highclere sword in an elevated, relatively dry, site clearly cannot be interpreted in the same way, although circumstances of deposition of this isolated find must remain conjectural.

The above discussion demonstrates the difficulty of separating individual characteristics from hybrid forms and of trying to

establish the origin of each in a period of experimentation before an accepted combination of traits had become formalised in a standardised type. However, we may conclude that the Highclere sword presents a unique amalgam of characteristics taken from

other contemporary but short-lived types. The near contemporaneity of Rosnoën swords and Ballintober swords is demonstrated in the Penard (Langrove, Gower) Hoard which contains examples of both classes (Crawford and Wheeler 1920, 137–8, Fig 3).

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A LETTER FROM SOUTHAMPTON, SEPTEMBER 1779

The following letter, now in the Norfolk Record Office (NRO, MC 28/27, 465 X 9) was written from Southampton in early September 1779. Its author, Messenger Monsey (Anon 1789; Ketton-Cremer 1944), was at the time visiting Hampshire on holiday with his daughter, and in it gives a brief account of his excursions to his friend William Wiggett Bulwer of Heydon Hall in Norfolk. In 1779, Monsey was an old man of seventy-six who had led a full and interesting life. He had been educated at Pembroke College, Cambridge,

and had subsequently studied medicine in Norwich. In the 1720s, he began his practice in London, and through the patronage of the Earl of Godolphin he was appointed Physician to the Chelsea Hospital, the post which he held until his death. He became, in the 1730s, medical adviser to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole; and soon other leading politicians were availing themselves of his services. In addition to these illustrious acquaintances, he moved in the literary circles of the capital, acquiring the reputation of a wit