

A HOARD OF LATE IRON AGE METALWORK FROM THE NEW FOREST

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ABSTRACT

This is the first publication of the 'Minstead hoard': a small assemblage of Late Iron Age copper alloy metalwork recovered from the New Forest in the 1950s. The hoard includes a complete set of five chariot terrets, plus three strap unions, all of good quality and condition. This short paper discusses in turn each of the various artefacts that make up the hoard, and suggests a likely date range. Possible reasons for the hoard's deposition are also considered.

In 1954 or 1955, a hoard of Iron Age metalwork was discovered in the western reaches of the parish of Minstead, New Forest, by a local man digging out a rabbit burrow. The hoard comprised five terrets, three strap unions and an unidentified piece of copper alloy. The location was SU 2228 0909, just north of the A31 road. On the southern side of the road lies Bratley Inclosure, the site of Iron Age coin finds in the 1970s.

The hoard was brought to the attention of Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum in 1989 and was displayed at the Museum of the Iron Age in Andover between 1990 and 2005, but was then returned to the finder's family. It is published here for the first time. As the artefacts are now held privately, I have not been able to study them first-hand: this article is based on photographs and drawings in the archives of the Hampshire Cultural Trust.

The terrets

Terrets are pieces of chariot equipment commonly used in Late Iron Age and Roman Britain. Sets of five (or occasionally four) of these ring-like artefacts were secured along the yoke, and the reins were fed through them

between the bridle bits and the driver's hands. This arrangement prevented the reins from becoming tangled. Each set typically consisted of four smaller terrets, through which the reins passed, and a single larger terret fixed centrally on the yoke, perhaps to hold the straps that secured the yoke to the pole (Macdonald 2007, 8). The Minstead hoard of five copper alloy terrets – two pairs, one pair larger than the other, and a single example that is larger still – is a complete set. All five appear to be of good quality and graceful design.

The five terrets, although of three different sizes, are all in a closely similar style. They are of simple type, each with a circular-sectioned ring of even thickness, and with grooved collar-form terminals that slant towards the centre of the ring. The four smaller terrets are completely undecorated (Figs 2 & 3), but the larger example (Fig. 1) has a double-rib moulding running the length of its spine, which finishes in a loop just above each terminal. The larger terret also possesses an unusual split attachment bar: horizontal and flat, its two halves form an elongated oval cavity in the middle of the bar. A comparable but more complex example can be found on a lipped terret from Hod Hill, Dorset, now held in the British Museum (registration no. 1892,0901.488; Spratling 1972, no. 37), which has a figure-of-eight attachment bar formed by two flat, ovular loops.

This feature is not shared with the four smaller terrets, all of which have vertical attachment bars. Without precise measurements it cannot be established whether each pair consists of two terrets of exactly the same size, which would therefore be likely to have been cast from the same mould, but within each pair the terrets appear close to identical.

Aside from the larger terret's unusual

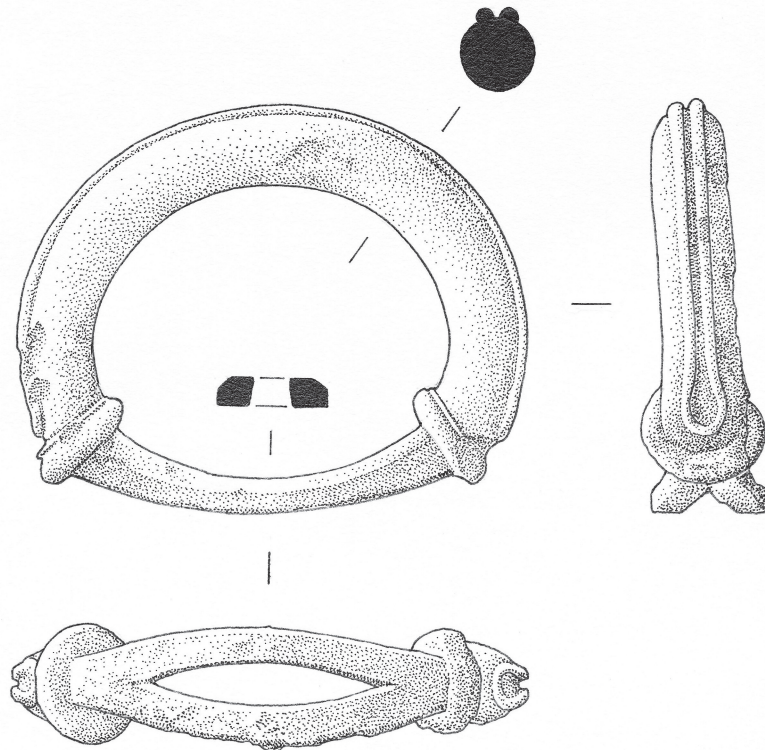


Fig 1 The largest terret from the Minstead hoard

attachment bar, these five terrets are fairly typical for the Late Iron Age period in Britain. Similar examples are known from Glastonbury (Spratling 1972, no. 6) and Cadbury Castle (*ibid.*, no. 18) in Somerset and from Middlebie, Dumfriesshire (MacGregor 1976, no. 55), but they are found all over Britain. Apart from *in situ* chariot burials however, it is rare to find a complete set of terrets. Occasional complete sets have been found as part of larger hoards, such as the Polden Hills hoard from Somerset (Brailsford 1975) and the Stanwick (Melsonby) hoard from North Yorkshire (MacGregor 1962; Fitts *et al.* 1999), but terrets are far more commonly discovered alone as stray finds.

When the Minstead hoard was first found, all of the items were corroded into a single lump. At some point in the 1980s, while still in private hands, conservation work was carried out on the artefacts but the identity of the conservator and the nature of the conservation are not known.

Nonetheless, they reached Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum in good condition, and all five of the terrets are whole.

It is not clear from the surviving images whether the terrets have evidence of wear. It cannot, then, be said with certainty whether they were ever used before they were deposited; but their overall good condition and the difficulty of identifying obvious wear facets from the photographs and drawings suggest that, if they were used, it was to a limited extent.

The strap unions

Strap unions or strap junctions, as the name suggests, were used in Late Iron Age Britain instead of buckles to hold together two straps or ends of a strap. They are often found in association with chariot equipment, and were sometimes used to fasten the straps that passed across the chest of each horse in a driving pair,

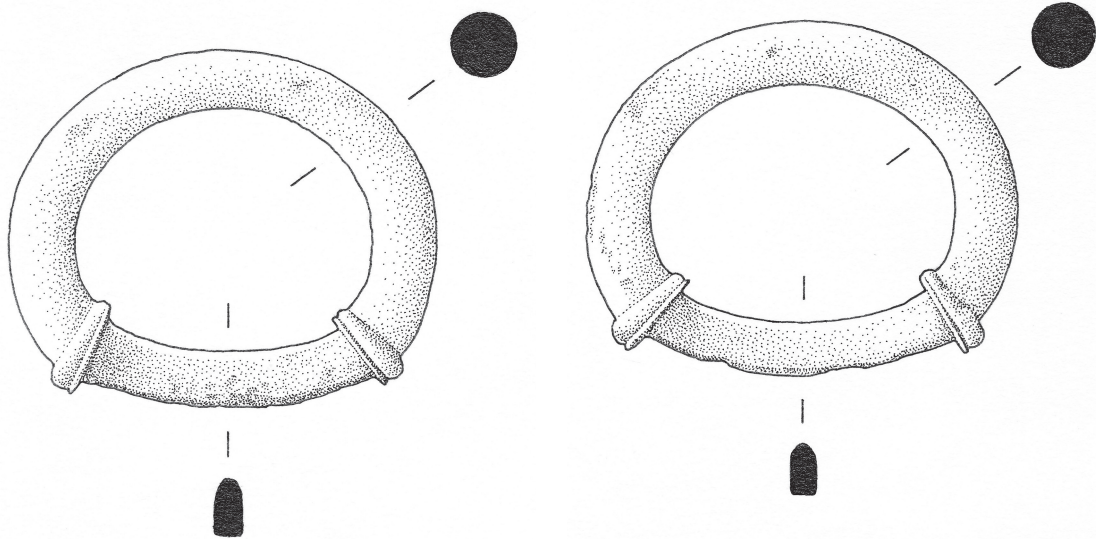


Fig 2 The two medium-sized terrets from the Minstead hoard

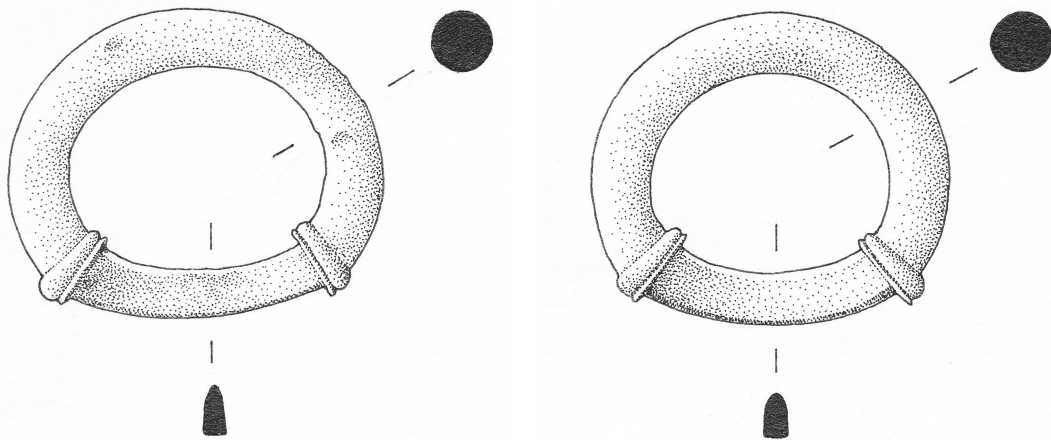


Fig 3 The two smallest terrets from the Minstead hoard

but they are also thought to have been worn by humans as belt-fasteners.

The function of the three found in the Minstead hoard is not certain. Their association with the terrets might imply that they were used in chariotry, but following Morna MacGregor's (1976, 32) typology of strap unions, they are all of 'simple' type: a type normally considered to be worn by humans rather than

horses. Mansel Spratling (1972, 107) states that strap unions in chariotry contexts tend to occur in pairs, one for each horse; the three non-matching examples in the Minstead hoard do not tie in with this pattern. Nor do they seem to be part of a matching set with the terrets, which may lend weight to the possibility that they are three individual belt fasteners.

The largest of the strap unions (Fig. 4)

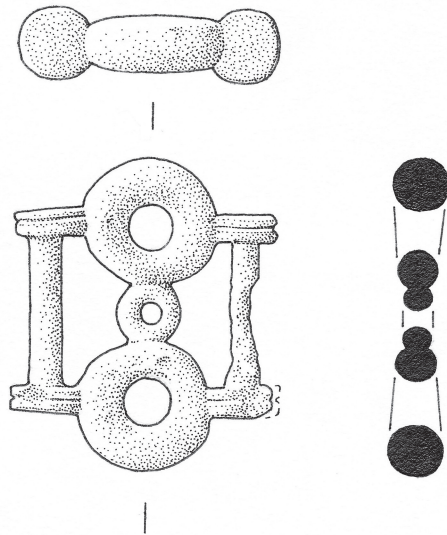


Fig 4 The largest strap union from the Minstead hoard

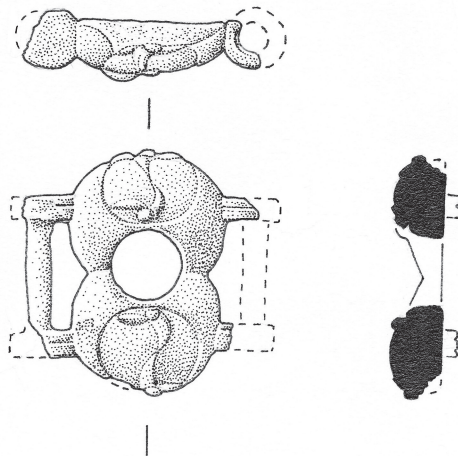


Fig 6 The smallest strap union from the Minstead hoard

consists of two rings linked by a smaller central ring, and flanked by two rectangular strap bars. One of these bars shows considerably more wear than the other. The item is plain and undecorated, as is the second strap union: simpler still in form, this consists of two slightly overlapping rings without a central link, forming a figure-of-eight shape (Fig. 5).

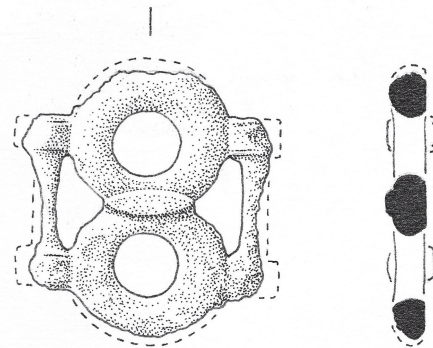


Fig 5 The medium-sized, figure-of-eight-shaped strap union from the Minstead hoard

Both of the flanking rectangular strap bars are worn, although this item is damaged all around its outside edges.

In the smallest strap union (Fig. 6), the two rings do not overlap: instead each ring takes the form of a crescent rather than a full circle, and the points of the two crescents meet to create a single hollow circle in the centre of the piece. These rings were also originally flanked by two rectangular strap bars, but one has broken off and the other is damaged. The two rings of this strap union have broader faces than those of the other two examples, and each face is embellished with an elongated trilobate moulding in relief within a circular recess.

The two smaller strap unions are both typical for Late Iron Age Britain. The figure-of-eight shape is echoed in examples from Meare, Somerset (Spratling 1972., no. 198) and Ringstead, Norfolk (*ibid.*, no. 200), while the conjoined crescents of Minstead's smallest strap union can be seen in examples from Hunsbury, Northamptonshire (*ibid.*, no. 192) and Old Sarum, Wiltshire (*ibid.*, no. 199). A more complex version of the trilobate moulding is found on a strap union from a cremation burial in Letchworth, Hertfordshire (*ibid.*, no. 195). I am not aware of a direct parallel to the largest example from Minstead, with the two rings linked by a central smaller ring, but in a comparable example from Bury Wood Camp, Wiltshire (displayed in the Wiltshire Heritage Museum, Devizes), a central ring links two crescents.

The three strap unions are all in broadly good condition, although they show more superficial damage than the terrets. In particular, the strap bars of all three strap unions are notably worn. This may suggest that they were subjected to heavier use than the terrets before deposition, or it may be that as relatively delicate items the strap unions were simply more vulnerable to damage after being placed in the ground.

The piece of copper alloy

The hoard also contains a small piece of copper alloy that has never been identified (Fig. 7). Approximately the same length as the smallest of the strap unions, it is flat and in roughly the shape of a comma. It seems most likely to be scrap metal.

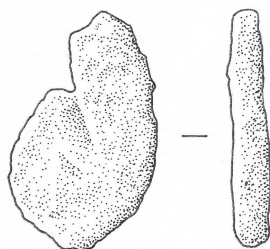


Fig 7 The unidentified piece of copper alloy from the Minstead hoard

THE AGE OF THE HOARD

On file at the Hampshire Cultural Trust is a letter dated 30 November 1989, from the assistant curator at Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum to the finder of the Minstead Hoard. It records that the hoard was taken to the British Museum and shown to Ian Stead, who dated it to the 2nd or 1st centuries BC, on the grounds that strap unions are found in contexts that date from between the 3rd century BC and the early 1st century AD.

I see no reason to disagree with this conclusion. Terrets of simple form, such as those from Minstead, are found in contexts dating from between the 3rd century BC and the mid-2nd

century AD, but most are pre-Conquest. Rings of even, rather than tapering, thickness are often an indicator of Iron Age date. As noted by Stead, strap unions comparable to those from Minstead tend to be found in Late Iron Age contexts. The trilobate moulding that decorates the smallest of the strap unions is similar to the mouldings found on 'Mill Plain' type terrets such as those from Bury Hill, Danebury (Cunliffe & Poole 2000, 47, fig. 2.29), which come from a context with a calibrated date range from the 4th to the 2nd centuries BC, based on recent radiocarbon testing (Garrow *et al.* 2009, 113–14).

All of the above evidence points to a Late Iron Age date for the manufacture of the items in the hoard. It is possible that they could date from as early as the 3rd century BC, but they are unlikely to be later than the 1st century BC. The good condition of the artefacts and lack of heavy wear facets on the terrets suggest that they were deposited reasonably soon after manufacture.

INTERPRETING THE HOARD

While some deposits of metalwork in Iron Age Britain have been convincingly interpreted as ritual or votive in nature – such as the large assemblage of metalwork recovered from Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey (Macdonald 2007, ch.7), or the harness equipment deposited in pits at Bury Hill, Hampshire (Cunliffe & Poole 2000, 79–80) – the Minstead hoard does not seem to have any of the hallmarks of ritual deposition. Votive deposits are often found in wet or marshy environments, as at Llyn Cerrig Bach, or as part of a structured pattern of deposition within clearly defined pits, as at Bury Hill. The Minstead assemblage was recovered from a dry land site; although, it must be pointed out, it remains possible that the artefacts could have come from a pit or trench, as no formal excavation has ever been carried out. Artefacts deposited in a ritualistic context during the Iron Age often show signs of deliberate damage, a process sometimes referred to as 'ritual killing'. The Minstead pieces show no evidence of this; although, again, it should be noted that deliberate

damage is not applied to *all* ritually deposited artefacts.

The Minstead hoard may have been buried for safe-keeping, and if so was evidently never recovered. If it is complete, it is a small assemblage compared to those from the Polden Hills or Stanwick. One possible interpretation is that this assemblage represents some or all of the wealth of a single individual or family of moderate means, rich enough to have possessed a simple but good quality set of terrets and a few simple but good quality strap unions. Possession of terrets suggests possession of, or access to, a chariot; other pieces of chariot equipment, such as bridle bits, may have been deposited elsewhere or may even still be in the ground at the site of the find.

Another interpretation is that this is a founder's hoard of material intended to be melted down and re-used. The small piece of apparent scrap metal might support this possibility, as might the inclusion in the hoard of the three non-matching and slightly damaged strap unions, which perhaps had outlived their usefulness. On the other hand, the good condition of the terrets and the completeness of the set counts against the argument – these items seem unlikely to be waste – as does the absence of any of the tools or obvious metal-working debris that we would expect to see in a founder's hoard.

A quantity of Iron Age coins was found in the 1970s at Bratley Inclosure, an enclosed area of mixed woodland in the general area of the findspot. Some of the coins were found by two metal detectorists, working separately, and others during an excavation carried out by the Hampshire County Museums Service, but no excavation report was published. It is evident, though, that this part of the New Forest was the site of some activity during the Iron Age. Investigation of the site might establish whether or not any more material remains in the ground, but is likely to be difficult as the A31 Trunk Road has widened its path to cover the findspot.

Without excavation, interpretation of the nature of the hoard remains limited, but there is no doubt that it is a significant assemblage. As noted above, complete sets of terrets are rare outside chariot burials; where they do occur they are usually part of much larger

assemblages which we can perhaps understand as the wealth of communities or social groups. Part of the interest of the Minstead hoard is that it may represent the wealth of one person or family, which for some reason was never reclaimed.

It is even rarer to find a complete set of terrets that, like these, are of plain, simple form. Excavation of the chariot burials of East Yorkshire has revealed a number of sets of terrets embellished with coral studs (e.g. Brewster 1971; Dent 1985), while the Polden Hills, Stanwick and Westhall (Clarke 1939) hoards all contain terrets decorated with enamel. The extravagance and likely high value of sets like these might well explain their inclusion in burials and hoards. The Polden Hills material does also include a set (or two incomplete sets) of simple, undecorated terrets, although these are inelegant compared to the Minstead examples, and – judging by the style of the other artefacts in the hoard – likely to be of later date.

Ultimately, regardless of whether the Minstead artefacts were owned or used by an individual or a larger community, and regardless of why they were placed in the ground, the good quality and condition of all eight pieces and, in particular, the completeness of the set of terrets, mark out the hoard as a significant find. This modest but striking assemblage makes an important contribution to the story of the Late Iron Age in the New Forest area of Hampshire.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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