

Three New Bronze-Age Weapons

by Francis Pryor

The three weapons described below are all recent chance finds and their dating depends on typology alone. This unfortunately limits their archaeological significance. However, published studies of the distribution of prehistoric metalwork in the Fenland generally underestimate the importance of the Peterborough area and it is hoped that this note may partially redress the balance. Miranda Green's recent (1977) catalogue of the City Museum's collections is another, more important, step in this direction.

The Deposition of Fenland Metalwork

The three weapons considered here are typical examples of the numerous finds of Bronze-Age metalwork from the Fenland and it would be avoiding an interesting, if contentious, issue if we did not consider how these finds came to be deposited in the Fens in the first place. We will, however, only consider stray finds and not hoards, as these pose problems of their own.

Bridget Trump, in her study of Fenland rapiers ((1968), 225), suggested that they may have been discarded during rituals for which men travelled considerable distances to 'cast offerings into the dark pools and sluggish rivers of the Fens to appease spirits they believed to reside there'. More recently, Colin Burgess ((1974), 195) has proposed that the many finds of Bronze-Age metalwork from watery contexts may also be attempts at appeasement, but more specifically associated with the onset of the wetter climate of the first millennium B.C. Rather surprisingly, experimental archaeology has shown that some weapons, particularly metal shields, were too thin to have been used in actual combat and must therefore be seen as ritual or display items (Coles (1973), pl. 16). Some of the very long, elegant later Bronze-Age spearheads are similarly impractical. Finally we should remember that a Bronze-Age water-based religion would accord remarkably well with what we know, from documentary sources, about subsequent Celtic religion, where sacred pools feature prominently.

A more practical explanation is, however, possible. We know that for much of the second millennium B.C. the Fens were quite dry; Fox's distribution map ((1923), map III) shows clearly that Bronze-Age metalwork was spread widely and not confined to river beds or meres. Many of these finds must have been deposited on dry ground. The striking absence of Fenland habitation sites in the Bronze Age is almost certainly the result of a biased sample: contemporary domestic pottery is usually very poorly made and is far less likely to survive the intervening 3000 years than its associated metalwork (which is also far more easily spotted by the archaeologically untrained eye). To make matters worse, most of the upper peats in which such sites should occur have been severely disturbed by intensive agriculture or removed by 'shrinkage' and erosion. If the Fens were grazed in the summer months by herds belonging to communities whose home-base was on the Fen Edge, as recent work at Fengate and other sites suggests, then such temporary camps could hardly be expected to survive until today; there would, however, be no need to invoke long journeys to deposit treasured items in murky Fen meres. The vast majority of the Fen finds are purely utilitarian, particularly the various types of axes, and even the weapons could simply have been lost by accident or in combat (a rapier from Pondersbridge near Whittlesey was actually found sticking into the Fen Clay). Many weapons must have been lost in cattle rustling raids.

In sum, there is evidence to support both arguments. The fault of the ritualist explanation is, first, that it assumes Bronze-Age society and religion were uniform over Britain and, second, that there was a distinction between the sacred and secular sides of life. The drawback of the alternative 'domestic' hypothesis is the lack of hard evidence to support it. The answer to the problem probably lies in compromise: the present writer favours the 'domestic' explanation, but recognises, nonetheless, that a small proportion of the finds (mainly finer pieces) were deposited in the Fens during rituals.

Catalogue

1. Rapier of Burgess (1968) Group II (fig 7, 1). Found in the Central Brick Company's Funtham's Lane pit, Whittlesey, near the King's Dyke (TL 23759688). It was apparently found in a peat layer within the gravels which cap the Oxford Clay in the area. The peat is still exposed near the road bridge over the Dyke. The rapier was sold at Sotheby's to an unknown purchaser and the illustration here is based on a full-scale drawing by the late Mr G. F. Dakin who

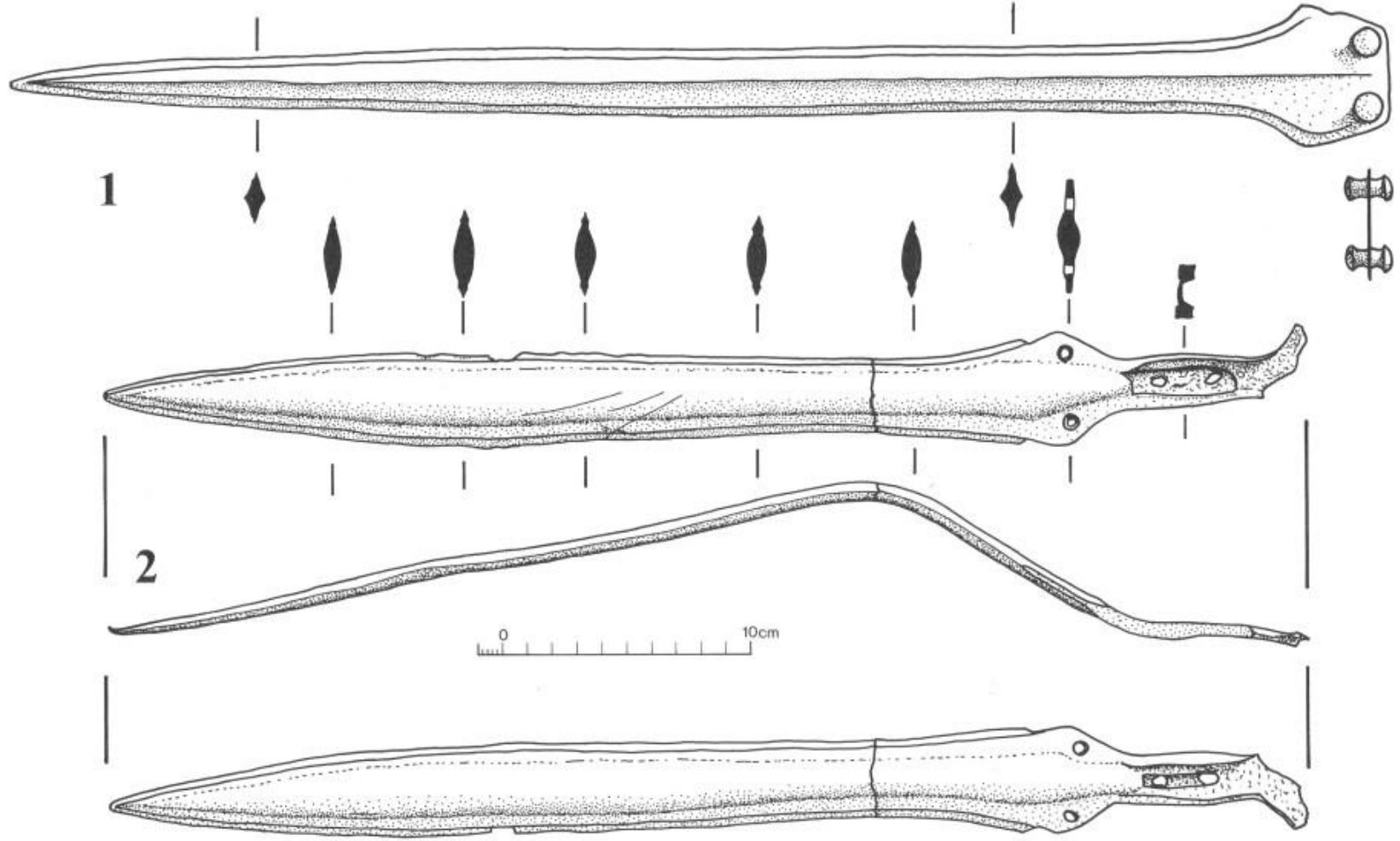


Fig 7 The Bronze-Age rapier (no. 1) and sword (no. 2) from Whittlesey

recorded that its condition was excellent when last seen in the late sixties. This exceptionally fine rapier is approximately 55.7 cm long.

2. Late Bronze-Age leaf-shaped sword of 'native' (i.e. British) Ewart Park type (fig 7, 2). It was found close to the rapier and the possibility of association (although typologically improbable) cannot be ruled out. Both finds were made in August 1969. This sword is in the care of Mr Haslam, onetime Site Engineer at the Funtham's Lane pit, who recalls that the damage — the sword is bent and broken — took place during discovery. It should also be noted here that another leaf-shaped sword was discovered in January 1964 just 1750 yards ENE of that described above. It was broken at the hilt and had paired rivet-holes in both shoulders; it was just under 20 inches long (Peterborough Museum Record Cards).
3. Dirk of Burgess (1968) Group II (fig 8). Found on the 'landward' side of the River Nene bank at Alwalton. It is in need of conservation, but encrustations on its surface show that it had been dredged from the river. It is 16 cm long and was reported to the City Museum by its discoverer in the Summer of 1977.

Bibliography

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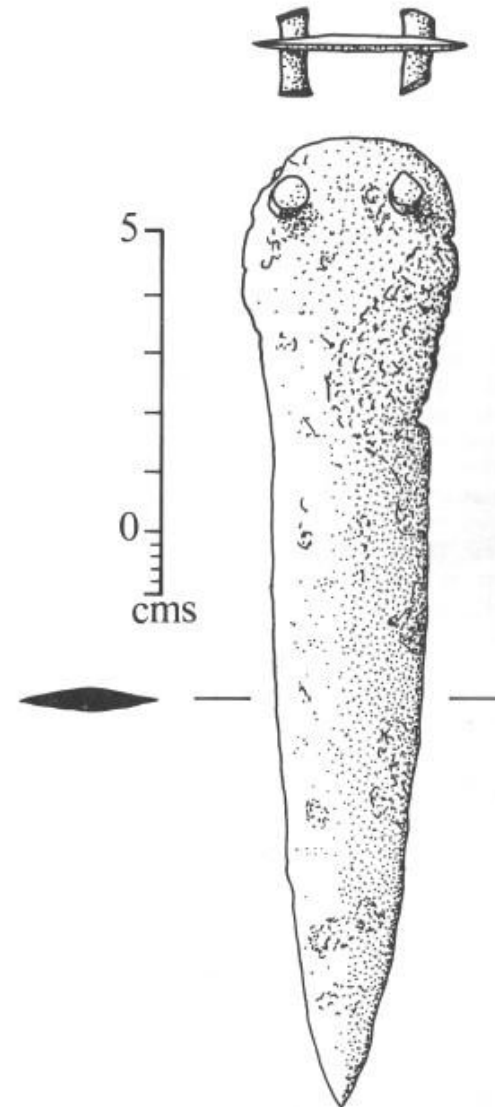


Fig 8 The Bronze-Age dirk from Alwalton