

# From the Museum

by Martin Howe

Several items of Roman military equipment are to be found in the City Museum's collections. Among them a sword (acquisition number 28/65) found at Funtham's Lane, Whittlesey (TL 238968) and a belt-mount (acquisition number 42/1977(i)) from the riverside near Longthorpe are of particular interest.

The sword (fig 14) was uncovered during excavations at the claypits of the Central Brick Company in 1965. It was buried at a depth of 8-10 feet below the modern ground surface, beneath layers containing pottery of second to fourth-century date (*Journal of Roman Studies* LVI, 1966, 209). The over-all length of the sword is 72 cm, of which the blade takes up 60 cm and the tang 12 cm. The end of the tang was hammered over to help secure the now vanished pommel.

The blade is thin in section, lacking the marked mid-rib which is a feature of the *gladius*, the sword of the Roman legionary. Moreover, the blade length of the Funtham's Lane sword exceeds that of the *gladius* by a considerable amount; for the blade length of the latter varies from 44 cm to 49 cm (Breeze *et al.* (1976), 83). There is a marked difference in shape between the Funtham's Lane sword and the two main patterns of *gladius*. Both have straight-sided points which turn in from the blades at a sharp angle, well demonstrated by James Turner's reconstructions based on evidence from Hod Hill and other sites (Simkins, Youens (1974), 21). The whole design of the *gladius* is intended to produce a short stabbing sword with a strong reinforcing mid-rib meant for use at close quarters. However, the Funtham's Lane weapon is long, with a thin section which would carry a fine cutting edge better suited to a slashing stroke. It thus closely resembles the so-called *spatha* used by Roman auxiliary cavalry.

Sword blades found in pits dating to the first century at the fort at Newstead in Scotland (Curle (1911), pl. XXIV, fig IV) bear a close resemblance to the Funtham's Lane example, both in length (their average blade size is 63 cm) and in their lack of a mid-rib. The Newstead weapons have been attributed to the auxiliary cavalry in garrison there. Roman cavalry have been attested in the Peterborough region by finds of equipment from the excavations at the Longthorpe fortress (*Britannia*

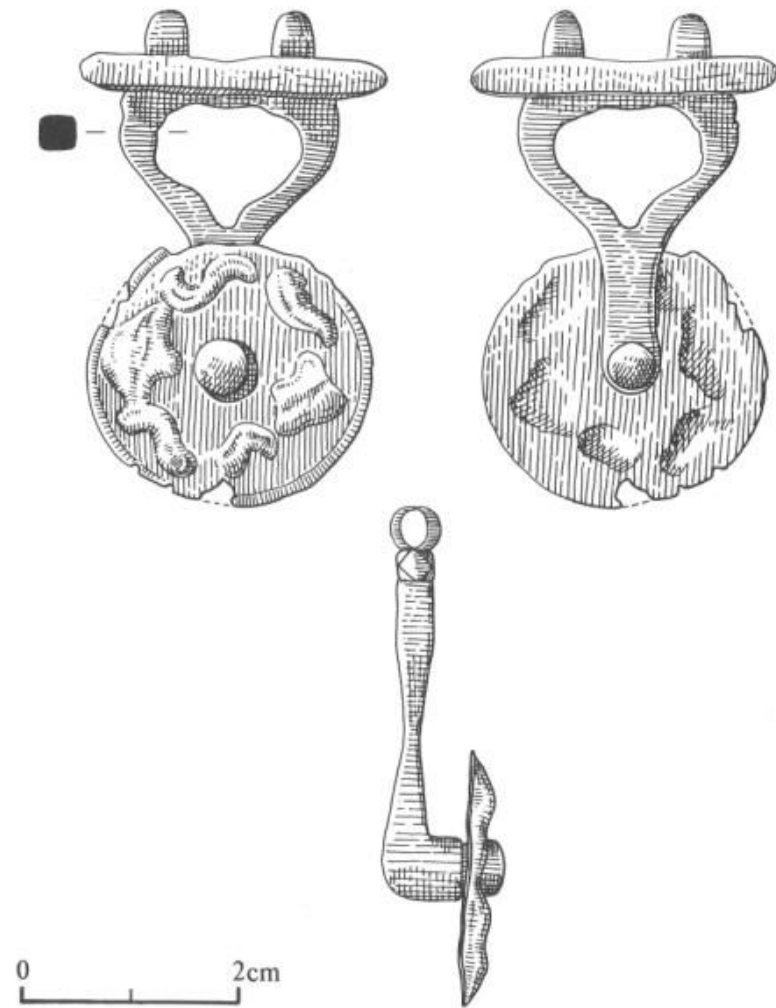
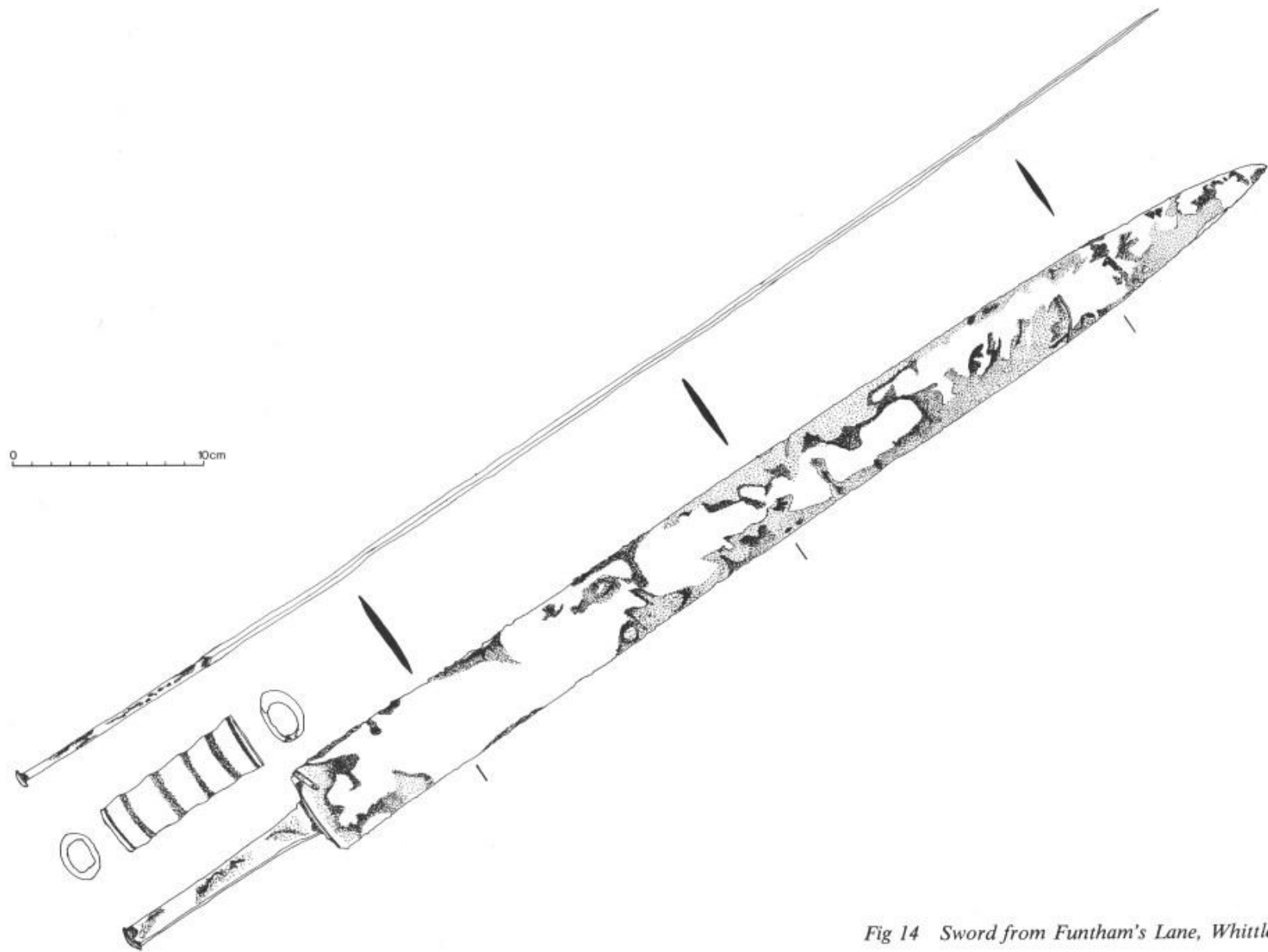


Fig 13 Legionary belt-mount from the riverside at Longthorpe



*Fig 14 Sword from Funtham's Lane, Whittlesey*

V, 1974, fig 40). It seems reasonable to suggest that the sword from Funtham's Lane, is, in fact, a *spatha*.

The date of the sword is rather harder to determine as it was found during mechanical clay extraction; but the form of the blade and the bone grip found with it confirm a Roman origin and, on the strength of the Newstead examples, a late first-century date for the sword would be appropriate.

The belt-mount of bronze was a chance find made in October 1977. It consists of two parts (fig 13), a disc decorated with repoussé ornament, and an openwork bracket which is provided with a hinge-like fitting to attach the mount to a strap. The mount originally formed part of the suspension for a legionary's side-arms and traces of the original leather-work were found when the object was undergoing conservation. The repoussé decoration on the now-loose disc, although heavily corroded, would appear originally to have represented swimming dolphins, a popular decorative motif on Roman objects of all periods. The proximity of the find to the site of the Longthorpe fortress and its similarity to mounts from Hod Hill and London (Simkins, Youens (1974), 20 and 23; Brailsford (1962), fig 4, A98) makes a date of circa A.D. 50 most likely for this object.

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