

# Iron-Age Metalwork from Orton Meadows

by Ian Stead

A most interesting collection of iron objects of La-Tène Iron-Age date (c. 400 B.C. – A.D. 43) has been recovered from old beds of the River Nene (TL 165969) in the course of gravel extraction between 1980 and 1982. By a stroke of good fortune Donald Mackreth's team was excavating a barrow on the site, so the objects were instantly recognised, collected and conserved. But for this archaeological presence they would probably have been lost, and indeed it is quite conceivable that other objects have been lost because constant archaeological surveillance was impractical. The collection now comprises seven complete currency bars (and two fragments), three swords, a spearhead, a latchlifter and a 'ladle' – all in excellent condition. The next instalment is eagerly awaited.

Two of the swords are typical La-Tène I weapons, the blades of which are not very long (532 and 538mm) and taper in the final third to a long sharp point. One has only the top of its scabbard surviving, but the other was in a complete iron scabbard (fig. 2d) from which it has now been removed. This second sword is remarkable because its blade has been 'laddered' – punched or hammered to produce close-set horizontal lines for the full length of the blade. Such ornament is extremely rare, occurring twice in Switzerland, twice in France, and once elsewhere in England (Walthamstow). Its scabbard is even more unusual. The open chape-end is an Early La-Tène form hitherto found only once in England (Standlake). The top of the chape is bridged front and back (the typical La-Tène chape is bridged on the back and clamped on the front) – a particularly early feature; and the decoration down both sides of the front scabbard-plate recalls that on Late Hallstatt dagger-sheaths in England and France. This piece is as early as any La-Tène sword and scabbard in Britain, and it suggests that British armourers produced the long sword no later than their continental colleagues.

The third sword from Orton Meadows is very different. Its blade is narrow and long (855mm) – almost the longest La-Tène sword from Britain – and it has parallel sides and a rounded tip. This is a typical La-Tène III slashing sword, as opposed to the La-Tène I sword which was designed for thrusting as well as cutting. It had been in a wooden scabbard, but only a little of that survived. The construction of the blade seems particularly interesting, and it has been sectioned for study in the British Museum Research Laboratory.

The fourth weapon, an iron spearhead (fig. 2b) has a badly chipped blade and at first sight it seems to be of little interest. But close study has shown some engraved decoration – a line parallel with the median ridge and some arcs adjoining – which appears to make it unique in England.

The seven complete currency bars are important partly because of their excellent condition, which allows them to be accurately measured and weighed (fig. 2e). They range from 660 to 735mm long (average 701mm) and vary considerably in weight: five of them are between 577 and 633g, but one is 525g and another only 460g. This, the lightest bar, is also the longest (it is slightly thinner than the others). The currency bars are also important because substantial pieces of wooden 'handles' have survived in their sockets: three have been identified as possibly hazel and a fourth could have been cherry or blackthorn. Currency bars are frequently found in hoards – and at least four of the Orton Meadows pieces had clearly been close together. If it had not been for a reference by Caesar, such objects would be regarded as ingots, like their continental counterparts, and indeed there is no reason why they should not have served both as ingots and currency. They may seem incredibly cumbersome, but primitive currency took many forms and the British bars are no more strange than the long iron spits used by the Spartans or the heavy iron bars used in West Africa until recent times.

Of the remaining objects the latchlifter (it was probably used for drawing a bolt) is a standard Iron-Age type particularly common from La-Tène III oppida (fig. 2c). It is noteworthy because of its superb condition. But the 'ladle', also in excellent condition, is much more unusual (fig. 2a). It is a large and very fine piece of ironwork – 625mm long, with the bowl some 185.8mm in diameter. The end of the handle turns and terminates in a flat foot which seems designed to enable the whole piece to rest comfortably on a level surface. In form it rather recalls the bronze pans of Aylesford type, which belong to wine services – bearing in mind the very long handle it could perhaps have been used for mulling wine. The Orton Meadows ladle is not unique, but it might well be the largest and best-preserved example from Celtic Europe.

Some of the Orton Meadows objects – e.g. the currency bars – were deposited together on one occasion, but most found their way into the river over a period of 400 years or so. Some may have been chance losses, others are more likely to have been deliberate deposits, but together they put the Nene firmly on the list of rivers producing fine Iron-Age metalwork. For the moment, the Nene ranks some way behind the rivers Witham and Thames – but its collection is still growing!

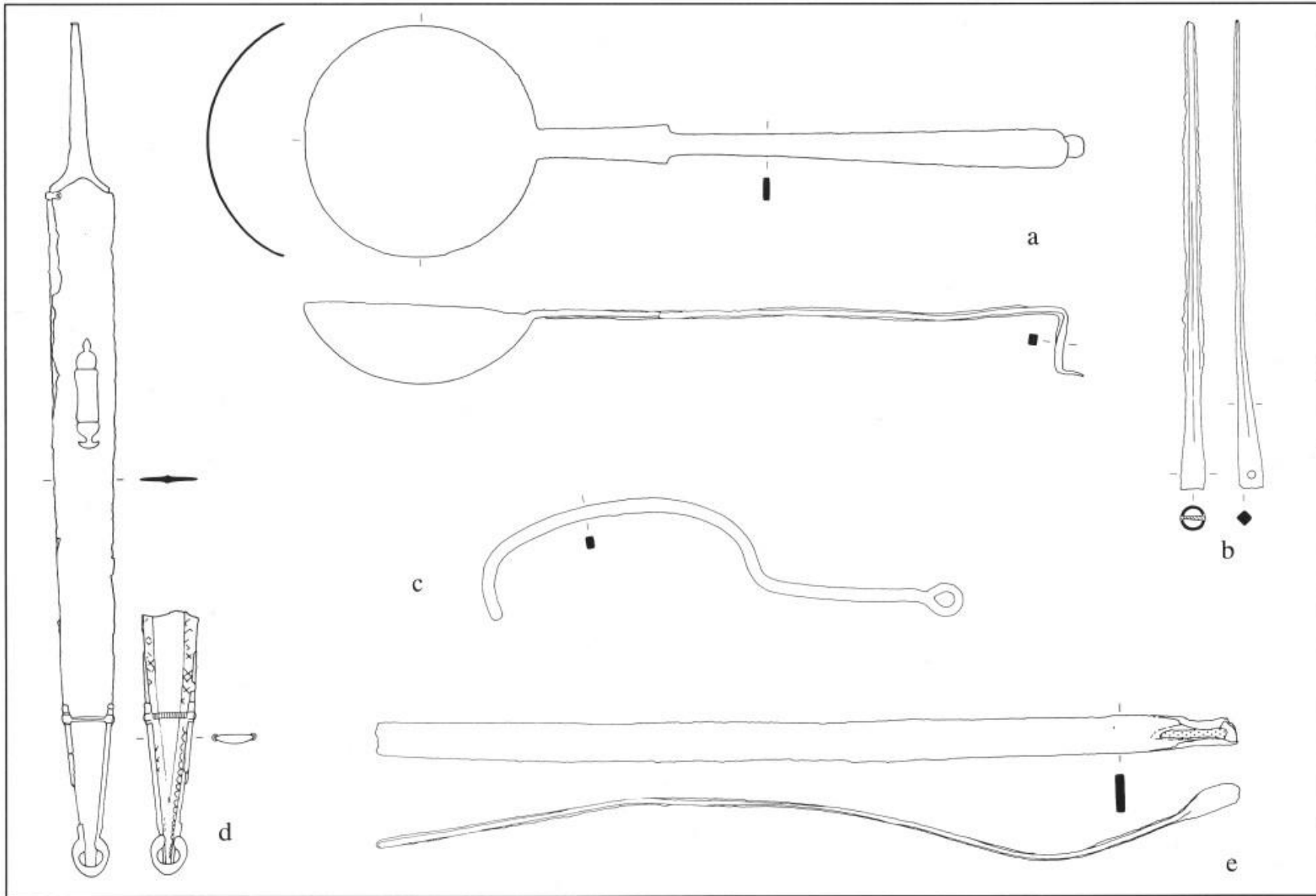


Fig 2 Iron-Age metalwork from Orton Meadows