

AN IRON AGE SCABBARD CHAPE FROM LISS, HAMPSHIRE: A NORTHERN ARTEFACT FROM A SOUTHERN FIND-SPOT

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ABSTRACT

In 2018 an Iron Age scabbard chape was reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, having been discovered during metal-detecting on cultivated land in the parish of Liss, east Hampshire. Although the object is an isolated find, and no other components of the scabbard were discovered, it is a significant discovery. This is because it represents the most southerly evidence for a group of scabbards which are overwhelmingly distributed between the rivers Forth and Humber. This short account provides details of the object and comments on its regional and national significance.

INTRODUCTION AND FIND-SPOT

A chape is a metal fitting located at the end of a scabbard which secures the terminal of the scabbard from opening. Chapes can be extremely useful for archaeologists as they often lend themselves to distinct typologies. This is particularly the case for the European Iron Age, with numerous examples of temporarily and geographically specific chape types known. Britain is no exception to this, and the scabbards and swords of Iron Age Britain have been extensively studied (cf. Stead 2006). In 2018 a chape was reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) and was assigned the identification number HAMP-B4AF1F (Fig. 1). The exact find-spot has been withheld from publication on account of restrictions imposed by the PAS, but lies west of the village of Liss, between the villages of Hawkley and Flexcombe. Today the find-spot is located in a lowland area of cultivation.

Recent excavations suggest that the area

immediately to the east of the find-spot was occupied from the 1st century AD, if not the 1st century BC; the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age. Several pits or post-holes dating to this period were discovered, producing 574 Iron Age ceramic sherds and a loom weight. Though no structures could be discerned from these features, the material is typical of rural settlements elsewhere in Iron Age Hampshire and southern Britain in general. This occupation appears to have continued without interruption until the 3rd century AD, at which point a Roman villa was constructed to the east of the find-spot (Liss Archaeology Group 2016, 62). It cannot be said if the presence of Iron Age habitation at Liss relates to the deposition of the chape, merely that the area was inhabited at the likely time the chape entered the archaeological record. No additional finds of Iron Age date are listed by the PAS, and thus the chape remains the only metal artefact from the area which dates to this period.

Unlike in other parts of the country where fragmentary and complete examples of scabbards and swords are overwhelmingly associated with particular context types (such as burials or hoards), in Wessex they have been recovered from a variety of contexts. These include isolated finds, burials, and settlements ranging in size from farmsteads to hill-forts. This variable pattern is observable at a reduced scale when considering Hampshire and the Isle of Wight alone, with a range of contexts producing fragmentary or complete swords and scabbards. Hampshire and the Isle of Wight are notable in Wessex, as these counties have produced a comparative abundance of burials containing swords which may originally have



Fig. 1 The Liss chape (re-drawn from original by Helen Chittock, AOC Archaeology Group)

been in organic scabbards (Collis 1968, 1973; Stead 1969; Leivers & Gibson 2011). In lieu of additional finds, however, it seems very unlikely that the chape originated from a burial, and based on present evidence it appears the Liss chape is an isolated find.

THE ARTEFACT

The chape is copper alloy of unknown composition. Broadly triangular in form, the central area is perforated by a teardrop-shaped opening. The mouth of the chape is framed on each side by two horn-shaped appendages with incised lines. The base consists of a bifurcate, solid terminal, which splays outwards into a pair of pronounced lips, thereby creating a V-shaped gap in between. The casting is somewhat uneven, and one side of the terminal has been damaged. The chape has a maximum width of 11.1mm, whilst the body of the chape has a thickness of 7.2mm. The inside measurement is 3.5mm, which

accords with dimensions for sword blades associated with these chape types (see below) (Stead 2006, table 52). It measures 36.9mm in length, 26.3mm at its widest point, 13.2mm at its narrowest point (above the solid terminal) and weighs 18.59g.

The distinctive flanged lips of the chape allow it to be identified as an example of Stead's (2006) Type h group. Type h chapes are components of Type Y scabbards, which in turn belong to his Group F swords and their constituent components. In contrast to swords and scabbards from southern Britain and the continent, Type F swords (and the related earlier Group E swords and scabbards) were worn on the back, not at the waist. This can be seen in by the fact that the suspension loops are positioned in the mid-section of the scabbard, rather than near the mouth of the scabbard. Such an arrangement would have made drawing the sword from the waist impractical, as the scabbard would have sat too far forward of the waist to make it easy to remove and replace the weapon.

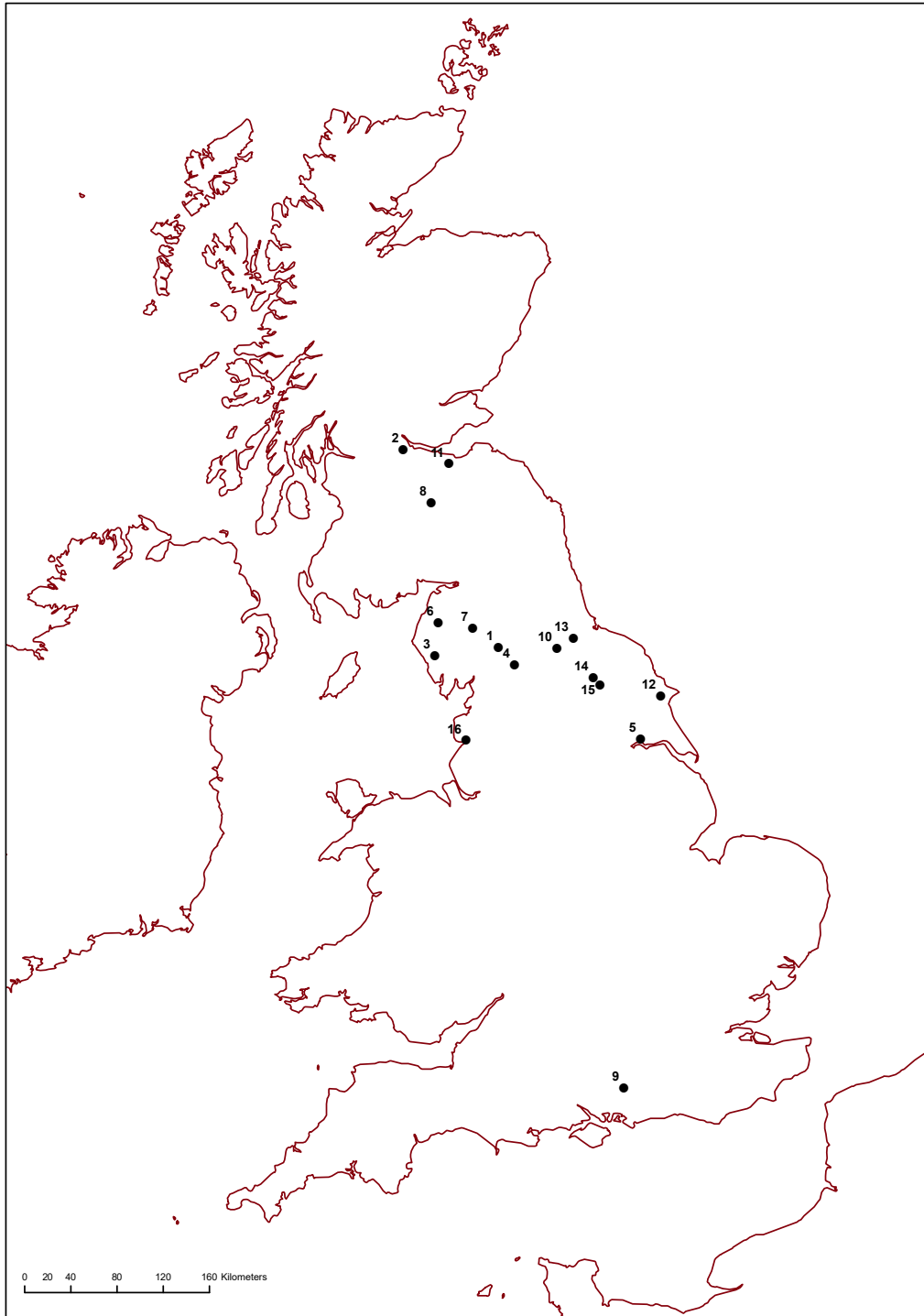


Fig. 2 Distribution of Type F swords and constituent components

Further confirmation that these scabbards were worn on the back come from the 3rd to 2nd century BC Arras culture graves of East Yorkshire, where swords were recovered positioned along the spines of the deceased, and a series of 1st century BC chalk figurines from the same area, which depict stylised warriors with back-mounted scabbards (Stead 1988; 1991). It appears this approach to wearing scabbards was also practised in Ireland at around the same time. Although attempts to reconstruct how scabbards were worn in Ireland are frustrated by the fact the majority were deconstructed prior to deposition; one example from Lisnacrogher, Co. Antrim, possesses the perforations where the suspension loop would have been attached (Raftery 1984, 74, fig. 48.1). Like the central and northern British examples, these holes are in the mid-section of the scabbard. It is possible that back-mounting scabbards and swords was also practised to a limited degree in southern Britain, as suggested by the location of the belt hooks in the graves from Owslebury, Hampshire (1st century BC), and Whitcombe, Dorset (1st century AD) (Collis 1973, 170).

When Stead published his extensive survey of swords and scabbards from the British Iron Age, type F swords and their components were restricted to the region of Britain between the river Forth and the river Humber. The number of examples which were known at the time of Stead's study (n=16) has been little augmented (Table 1). Nevertheless, this includes a complete sword and scabbard from Copeland, West Cumbria (LANCUM-D10482). An additional potential example of a type h chape discovered outside of the Forth-Humber region is known from Talgarth, Powys (PAS ID NMGW-E6F3B0). The Talgarth example is unique on account of its anthropoid decoration. Although it possesses the splaying terminals of a type h chape, ongoing examination of the find at the National Museum of Wales suggests it represents an unrelated, potentially unknown, chape type (Adam Gwilt pers. comm.). The Liss chape therefore represents the only certain example of a type h scabbard component known from southern Britain (Fig. 2).

DISCUSSION

Swords and scabbards are some of the most widespread artefact types in the European Iron Age, with archaeological evidence attesting to the exchange of certain types across wide areas. During the Hallstatt Iron Age (c. 800–475 BC), continental types were certainly imported to Britain, and it is argued that some types found on the continent, such as the Gündlingen, actually originated in Britain (Milcent 2004, 77). It is almost without doubt that some of the La Tène type swords from Britain are continental imports. Re-examination of 19th century finds has also shown that southern British La Tène swords were exported to the continent; two late 1st century BC-early 1st century AD examples are known from Allerey and Pouilly-sur-Saône, Côte-d'Or (Guillaumet & Eugène 2009, 244–6). Further discoveries or re-examination of existing finds may increase the number of southern British types known from the continent. At present, no central or northern scabbard or sword types are known from the continent, and before the discovery of the Liss chape, evidence for these types was likewise unknown in southern Britain. The distribution of southern and central/northern types which Stead (2006, fig. 1) observed may, with further discoveries, prove to be less mutually exclusive than has hitherto been considered.

How the Liss chape arrived in Hampshire is a matter of pure speculation. It may have come as a single component, or it may have formed part of a complete (or near complete) scabbard. The evidence strongly indicates that it was a northern import. Hampshire was certainly a recipient of central British items during this period. A particularly fine pair of late 1st to early 2nd century AD dragonesque brooches, a type with its origins in central Britain, were excavated at Winchester in the 1970s, and are now housed in the Andover museum (Object number: WINCM:VR72 S7312). Elsewhere in southern Britain items were imported from even further north, such as the snake-shaped bracelets from a 1st century AD cremation burial at Snailwell, Cambridgeshire, and PAS recorded find from Charsfield, Suffolk; now recognised as imports from north-east Scotland (Hunter 2019, 95, tab.

Table 1 Type F swords and constituent components from Britain

<i>Findspot</i>	<i>Map No.</i>	<i>Stead no. (PAS ID)</i>	<i>Sword Type</i>	<i>Scabbard type</i>	<i>Hilt Type</i>	<i>Chape Type</i>	<i>Suspension loop Type</i>	<i>Nature of Find</i>
Asby Sear, Cumbria	1	203	F	Y	viii	j	6	Single deposit, with suspension fittings
Camelon, Central	2	213	F	?	?	?	?	Crouched inhumation burial
Copeland, West Cumbria	3	(LANCUM-D10482)	F	Y	ix	h	6	Awaiting publication
Cotterdale, North Yorkshire	4	204	F	Y	viii	j	6	Single find
Ellerker, East Riding	5	(YORYM-6654E6)	F	?	?	j	?	Single find
Embleton, Cumbria	6	205	F	Y	ix	j	6	Single deposit or weapons cache
Flusco, Penrith, Cumbria	7	202	F	?	?	h	?	Fragment, stray find
Glencotho, Borders	8	180	?F	?	?	h	?	Single find (in a mole hill)
Liss, East Hampshire	9	(HAMP-B4AF1F)	?F	?	?	h	?	Stray find
Melsonby, North Yorkshire	10	199	F	Y	vii	h	6	Hoard
Mortonhall, Lothian	11	206	F	Y	vii	j	6	Single find
Rudston, East Riding	12	209	F	?	vii	?	?	Extended inhumation burial
Rudston, East Riding	12	210	F	?	vii	?	?	Extended inhumation burial
Rudston, East Riding	12	211	F	?	vii	?	?	Extended inhumation burial
Rudston, East Riding	12	212	F	?	vii	?	?	Extended inhumation burial
Sadberge, County Durham	13	207	F	Y	vii	?	6	Single find
Sutton Bank, Sutton-under-Whitestonecliff, North Yorkshire	14	201	?	?	?	h	?	Stray find
Thorpe Hall, East Riding	15	214	F	?	ix	?	?	Possible inhumation burial
Warton, Lancashire	16	208	F	Y	ix	?	6	Single deposit under a heap of stones

13). The possibility also exists that the chape may be a local product, inspired by central and northern British prototypes. The practice of emulating southern artefacts in central and northern Britain is attested, particularly for torcs (cf. Lamb 2020; though see also Machling and Williamson 2018, 401). There is no reason to assume this represents a mono-directional movement of ideas and influences.

A possible mechanism for the arrival of the chape in Hampshire is the Roman army. Type viii hilt guards, which form part of Group F swords, were later incorporated into Roman swords from Britain. Several examples of these swords are known from across the island (Stead 2006, 74–6). It seems almost certain that these 1st century AD Roman swords were influenced by indigenous British weapons, as contemporary Roman swords from the continent do not possess this feature (Bishop & Coulston 2006, 86). Although the, admittedly limited, epigraphic evidence for the ethnicity of Roman auxilia in Britain suggests that they were recruited primarily from Belgic Gaul (the modern Hauts-de-France), some were recruited from among British communities (Hunter 2007, 292). In contrast to the legionaries,

auxilia were generally equipped with their own, local equipment, and this could explain how Type viii hilt guards became incorporated into some Roman swords in Britain.

The epigraphic evidence shows that one of the British groups who provided auxilia were the Brigantes of modern-day Lancashire and much of Yorkshire (Hunter 2007, 292); the same regions which used Type F swords at this time. This includes a certain Nectovelius, a Brigantian who served in a Thracian unit along the Antonine wall in the 2nd century AD (ibid.). Although entirely conjectural, it is not outside the realms of possibility that the Liss chape attests to a northern auxiliary soldier who, seeking a change from life on the northern frontier, chose to take leave in the south, losing part of his scabbard in the process.

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