

## DECORATED DAGGER SCABBARDS FOUND IN BRITAIN

Graham Webster

The discovery in recent years of ten finely decorated dagger scabbards, mainly on legionary fortresses, has prompted the idea that it may be possible to isolate patterns peculiar to each legion or at least examine the varieties of style. The standard issue of daggers had a plain scabbard, as seen in the hoard from Künzing.<sup>1</sup> It is reasonably clear that individual soldiers added decorations to their armour<sup>2</sup> and that there was never any concept of uniformity, except generally in the type of armour and equipment peculiar to each unit, or type of unit.

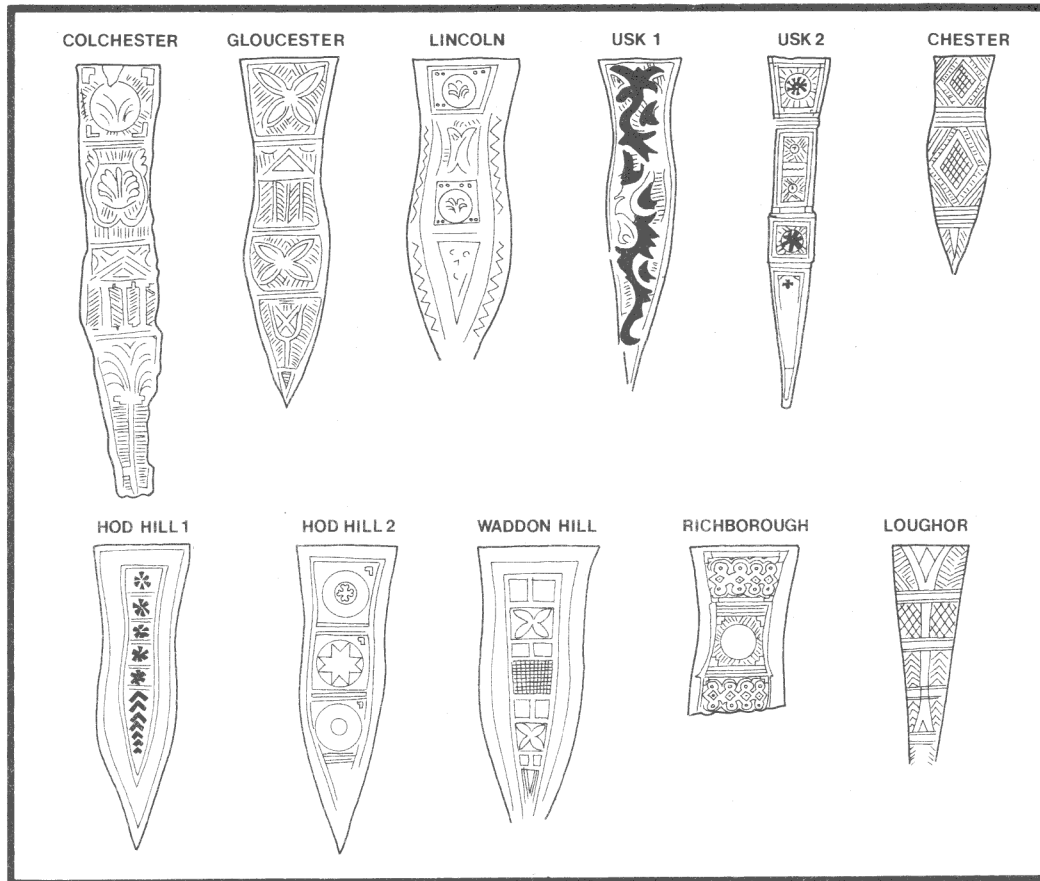
The ten British finds are:

Site	Number	Legion
Colchester	1	<u>Legio XX</u> <sup>3</sup>
Gloucester	1	<u>Legio II Aug</u> <sup>4</sup>
Lincoln	1	<u>Legio IX</u> or possibly <u>II Aug</u> <sup>5</sup>
Usk	2	<u>Legio XX</u> <sup>6</sup>
Chester	1	<u>Legio II Ad</u> or possibly <u>XX</u> <sup>7</sup>
Hod Hill	2	<u>Legio II Aug</u> <sup>8</sup>
Waddon Hill	1	<u>Legio II Aug</u> <sup>9</sup>
Richborough	1	any invasion legion <sup>10</sup>
Loughor	1	possibly <u>Legio II Aug</u> <sup>11</sup>

There are four examples which may be associated with II Aug and possibly another two with XX. In the auxiliary forts at Hod Hill and Waddon Hill, it has been established that legionaries were present.<sup>12</sup> Finds from the other frontiers listed with those from Britain by Dr Günter Ulbert<sup>13</sup> appear to demonstrate that there are very few sites not associated with legionaries.

On examining the decoration as a whole one is aware that some examples are very much finer in the detail work than most of the others. Two published by J. Ypey from Utrecht and Leeuwen<sup>14</sup> are quite outstanding, whereas some of these from Britain are much poorer in quality, two in particular from Chester and Loughor. There could be several reasons for these differences. The scabbards are very difficult to clean and need much time and patience, as a result some rather sketchy designs may be due to the lack of detailed attention. Or it could be argued that the quality deteriorated with time and that the fine pieces may be pre-Claudian and those from Chester and Loughor of Flavian date.

But while there may be some substance in these points, the main factor was probably the amount soldiers were prepared to pay for their scabbards. Centurions would, one imagines require theirs to be superior to those of any miles and as they served until incapacitated by age or illness, their daggers would survive for a much longer period.



**Fig. 1:** Sketches of the British dagger scabbards (not to scale).

#### THE DECORATIVE SCHEMES ANALYSED

The shape of the scabbard determined the basis of the main decorative scheme which was to divide the triangular shape into square and rectangular panels with a long pointed one at the base. Usk 1 however, provides a notable exception to this rule with a free style floral scroll occupying the full length of the panel, and this at present remains unique and so beyond comparison. It could well have been the work of a Celtic craftsman and it is reminiscent of the scroll pattern on the Cerrig-y-Druidian bowl.<sup>15</sup> All the other patterns are highly formalised and, one might argue, the very antithesis of the Celtic style, yet a bronze from a hoard found at Comachio in the territory of the Lingones has precisely this panelled form with

diamond shapes,<sup>16</sup> a common feature on the scabbards. Of the British examples, Chester and Loughor are purely geometric and their crude simplicity could be indicative of a later date than the remainder. There is a direct link between Colchester and Gloucester, as both have the temple facade motif which also appears at Vindonissa<sup>17</sup> and Velsen.<sup>18</sup> Colchester has elaborate floral sprays and a tree at the base, while Gloucester has a formalised floral quatrefoil which is also on Waddon Hill. The two Hod Hill examples are quite different, one is a simple pattern of rosettes and chevrons, but the other is a much finer piece - sadly much of the detail has been lost. The same applies to Lincoln but the cleaning and conservation work is not yet complete. It could be a very sophisticated pattern analogous to those from Utrecht<sup>19</sup> and Leeuwen.<sup>20</sup> The fragment from Richborough shows this scabbard to be a finely worked piece and it is most unfortunate that the details of the roundel have been lost.

It will be seen that the variety in design and execution of the British examples is considerable, but there are no discernible relationships between those of the same legion. The conclusion can only be that 1) the earlier pieces tend to be richer in design and workmanship than those of a later period, 2) the main differences are most probably due to the amount a soldier or centurion was prepared to pay a craftsman for the work.

## NOTES

1. SCHÖNBERGER & HERMANN, 1971, Abb.12.
2. In the civil war of A.D.69 legionaries are said to have donated to Vitellius their belts and silver ornaments on their armour (Tacitus Hist i,57).
3. CRUMMY, 1981, 134-5 and Fig.154.
4. HASSALL & RHODES, 1974, 79 and Pl.VIc.
5. Information kindly supplied by M.J. Jones, Director of the Lincoln Archaeological Trust.
6. MANNING, 1976, 152-3 and Fig.260 and information kindly supplied by Dr W.H. Manning.
7. Grosvenor Museum Newsletter, June 1983, 3 No.2.
8. BRAILSFORD, 1962, 5 and Pls.III and IV; RICHMOND, 1968, 137-8 and Pl.40.
9. WEBSTER, 1960a, 104 and Pl.3; Id. 1960b, 92 No.217 and Pl.XII.
10. BUSHE-FOX, 1949, 123-4 No.74 and Pl.XXXIII.
11. Popular Archaeology, 4 No.6 (Dec. 1982) 7.
12. RICHMOND, 1968, 121-3; WEBSTER, 1981, 55-6.
13. ULBERT, 1970, 16-19.
14. YPEY, 1961, 347-62.
15. GRIMES, 1939, Fig.38 and 197, No.461.
16. Illustrated by JACOBSTHAL, 1969, No.401k and the pattern No.214, Pl.268.
17. Jahresbericht der Gesellschaft Pro Vindonissa 1962 Abb.4, and 5.
18. SCHIMMER, 1979, 109-16.
19. Fn.14, Abb.5 F, p.351.
20. Ibid. Abb.12.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BRAILSFORD, 1962: J.W. Brailsford, Hod Hill I; Antiquities from Hod Hill in the Durden Collection, (London 1962)
- BUSHE-FOX, 1949: J.P. Bushe-Fox, Fourth Report on the Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent, (Rep. Res. Comm. Antiqs. No.16) (Oxford 1949)
- CRUMMY, 1981: N. Crummy, The Roman Small Finds from Excavations in Colchester 1971-9, (Colchester Archaeological Report 2) (Colchester 1981)
- GRIMES, 1939: W.F. Grimes, Guide to the Collection Illustrating the Prehistory of Wales (Cardiff 1939)
- HASSALL & RHODES, 1974: M. Hassall and J. Rhodes, Excavations at the new Market Hall, Gloucester, 1966-7, Bristol and Glos Archaeol Soc Trans 93, 1974, 15-100
- JACOBSTHAL, 1969: P. Jacobsthal, Early Celtic Art (Oxford 1969)
- MANNING, 1976: W.H. Manning, Blacksmithing, in STRONG & BROWN, (1976), 143-53
- RICHMOND, 1968: I.A. Richmond, Hod Hill II; Excavations Carried Out Between 1951 and 1958 (London 1968)
- SCHIMMER, 1979: E.L. Schimmer, De romeinse waterputten te Velsen, Westerheem 28, 1979, 109-16
- SCHÖNBERGER & HERMANN, 1971: H. Schönberger and F.R. Herrmann, Das Römerkastell Künzing - Quintana, Jahresbericht der bayerischen Bodendenkmalpflege 8/9, 1967/8 (1971), 60-85
- STRONG & BROWN, 1976: D. Strong and D. Brown (eds.), Roman Crafts (London 1976)
- ULBERT, 1970: G. Ulbert, Das römische Donau-Kastell Ribtissen Teil 1, Urkunden zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte aus Südwürttemberg - Hohenzollern Heft 4, (Stuttgart 1970)
- WEBSTER, 1960a: G. Webster, The discovery of a Roman fort at Waddon Hill, Stoke Abbot, 1959, Proc Dorset Nat Hist and Archaeol Soc 82, 1960, 88-108
- WEBSTER, 1960b: G. Webster, The Roman military advance under Ostorius Scapula, Arch. J. 105, 1958 (1960), 49-98
- WEBSTER, 1981: G. Webster, Final report on the excavations of the

Roman fort at Waddon Hill, Stoke Abbott, 1963-69, Proc Dorset Nat Hist and Archaeol Soc 101, 1981, 51-90

YPEY, 1961: J. Ypey, Drei römische Dolche mit tauschierten Scheiden aus niederländischen Sammlungen, Berichten van Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek 10/11, 1960-1, 347-62