The Lexden Tumulus

A re-appraisal of an Iron Age burial from Colchester, Essex

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BAR British Series 156
1986
50. **Bronze drop-handle.** Maximum width 68mm. At one time this drop-handle had acorn-shaped terminals and central ribbed decoration, with fluting along the main part of the handle. It is now very badly corroded and in three pieces.

This is a drop-handle of typical Roman type similar to those found in pre-or early Conquest contexts in many parts of Britain (e.g., Camulodunum, Hawkes and Hull 1947, pl. C, 3; Hod Hill, Brailsford 1962, 36, pl. XI). Although probably made abroad and imported, these handles are also found in other Welwyn graves, usually associated with bronze casket mountings (e.g., Hertford Heath, Holmes and Frend 1959; Harpenden, Bagshawe 1928; Stanfordbury, Dryden 1845; Mount Bures, Smith 1852). They are generally interpreted as handles for wooden boxes or "caskets", or for wooden or bronze vessels (Welwyn Garden City, Stead 1967).

LT 22, Zero 88ft (27 m), about 13ft (4 m) deep. "A bronze handle with silver mounts and part of thin wood casket". (Archive 7).

51 and 52. Reconstructions of two very corroded silver objects associated with the casket handle and a label "a silver buckle". The silver has almost totally corroded, although where no. 52 has broken a silver core can still be seen. 52 seems to have been ribbed as a form of decoration. Both objects had silver pins through their looped ends; a reconstruction drawing (Fig. 29) suggests how they may have attached the drop-handle to the casket. Two extra silver pins are illustrated, and were stored with the "buckle". L. (no. 51) 29mm; (no. 52) 28mm; LT 22.

53-55. **Three silver bars.** L. (no. 53) 67.5mm; (no. 54) 65mm; (no. 55) 45mm. Laver believed that "these bars appear to have formed part of the decoration of the casket". The bars (of which no. 53 is illustrated, Fig. 29), show a slight grooving on one side, and also a slight curve.

LT 22.

**THE CHAIN MAIL**

One of the most interesting finds from the Tumulus was the deposit of iron chain mail. Pieces of mail were scattered throughout
the grave from Site 5 to 37, not just on the floor of the grave, but also scattered within the fill. If the mail originally formed a complete suit, as seems likely from the fittings (nos. 57-64), it must have been divided into pieces prior to burial (Laver suggested it had been cut, 1927, 248) and scattered around the deposit. Some of the pieces were folded before burial (Laver 1927, plate LIV 2) and this can still be clearly seen.

The iron links of the mail rusted and corroded soon after burial, so much so that the iron is no longer magnetic, and most of the chain mail is now a homogeneous mass of iron oxide. Very few of the individual rings can be distinguished and the structure is therefore difficult to reconstruct; Fig. 30, no. 56 is a composite drawing of three pieces of chain mail showing the close-knit interlocking structure. No. 56 is an attempt to show the way in which the rings were joined together, each ring linking with four other rings. A recently excavated example of iron chain mail comes from a rich burial at Ballock (Burleigh 1982; 1983); links of this mail have clearly been cut and the pieces of mail buried in a pit with objects from the pyre.

A sample of the Lexden chain mail was examined by Professor E.M. Jope, and was compared with a fragment of mail from Woodeaton, Oxon. (Jope 1956). Generally, iron mail of the period was composed of rows of riveted links of round-section wire, interwoven with rows of solid rings punched from sheet iron and therefore with a squarish section. A standard link size was 7 - 7.5mm diameter. On examining the Lexden mail, Jope realised that here were alternate rows of links riveted with iron pins "with the usual slight swelling at the junction". Where they could be seen, the intermediate rows showed a square section, as in the mail from Woodeaton (1956, 106). The latter also incorporated some bronze links, possibly as decoration.

Archaeological examples of chain mail are not common, but, where they occur, they exhibit a standard structure and link size. Examples come from both Iron Age and Roman contexts in Britain.
Fig. 39: Chain mail and fittings (nos. 56-59). Actual size.
(e.g., Maiden Castle: Wheeler 1943, 284; Stanwick: MacGregor 1962, 28; Carlingwark Lock, Kirkcudbright: Piggott 1952; and Woodeaton: Jope 1956, 106-7). On the continent, chain mail dates back at least to the third century B.C. (e.g., from the Çimesti burial) and appears to have originated among the Celtic tribes (Ritchie 1968). The Roman army seems to have adopted mail for its own protection, but by the Conquest loricà segmentata (flat iron plates) became more common among the troops, presumably because mail was more time-consuming to make (e.g., examples of loricà segmentata from Newstead: Curle 111).

Attachments, such as buckles and hinges, were standard and unvarying, and the fittings from Lexden (nos. 57 - 59) could be paralleled on any early military site in Britain (Webster 1979, 126), hinges and buckles being common to both mail and loricà segmentata. Under the mail suit would be worn a leather garment; possibly the fragmentary leather clothing from Lexden (below, Chapter 4) was for this purpose.

Pieces of chain mail were found in the following contexts:

LT3, 5 and 6: not recognised until later in the excavation.

LT36: Zero 72 - 74 ft (22 - 22.7 m), floor level about 12ft 6in (3.8 m) deep. "Many fragments of iron which is unmistakably of chain mail detached rings from which occurred in plenty in the siftings after washing". (Archive 38).

LT 37: Zero 74 - 78ft (22.7 - 24 m), about 12ft 6in (3.8 m) deep. "Notice folded iron (which may perhaps be chain armour?)". (Archive 18).

LT 38: Zero 78 - 81ft (24 - 25 m); about 12ft 6in (3.8 m) deep, floor level.

LT 39: Zero 81 - 84ft (25 - 25.9 m), about 12ft 6in (3.8 m) deep, floor level.

57. Bronze Buckle. L. 3⁴/₄mm. Buckle with the pins on either side still joining the buckle to the upper semi-circular plate. This is decorated with hatching round the edge. On the lower side is a round bronze plate, quite off centre, probably a stud with which the buckle was fixed. The buckle is in a corroded condition, though active bronze disease has been halted.
Opening hours: Open 1 Jun-mid Sept Wed, Thurs, Fri, Sat & Sun 10-1, 2-5
Admission: Under review
Facilities and services: Partial access for disabled visitors; parking; guided tours/lectures
Governing body: Shetland Islands Council
Staff: As for Shetland Museum, Lerwick
Branch of: Shetland Museum, Lerwick

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Registered museum
Collection: Shetland’s main museum, covering all aspects of over 5,000 years of island life. Main display themes are social and folk life, textiles, agriculture, maritime and archaeology. Shetland Museum also holds exhibitions of local contemporary art.
Opening hours: Open Mon-Wed, Fri 10-7, Tues, Thurs, Sat 10-5
Admission: Free
Facilities and services: Full access for disabled visitors; toilets for disabled visitors; lecture theatre; parking; shops/pubs point; education service; outreach programme; guided tours/lectures
Attendance: 43,000
Governing body: Shetland Islands Council
Staff: Curator Tommy Watt FSA Scot, Assistant Curator Iain Tait, Museum Assistant Victoria Gowers
Responsible for: Shetland Castle House Museum, Dunrossness
Board of Gremista, Lerwick

Letterkenny

Donegal County Museum
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Collection: Artefacts from prehistory to the present day representing the history of Donegal.
Opening hours: Open Mon-Fri 10-4.30, Sat 1-4.30 closed for lunch 12.30-1.30; closed Sun
Admission: Free
Facilities and services: Parking, access for disabled visitors, bilingual guides and signage (Irish and English)
Governing body: Donegal County Council
Staff: Curator Judy McCarthy; Research Assistant Caroline Carr; Museum Assistant Maryn Whyte

Lewes

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Registered museum
Collection: Henry VIII gave his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, this timber-framed house as part of her divorce settlement. Exhibits include ironwork and tapestries.
Opening hours: Open daily (except Mon in Jan & 24-26 Dec) Tue 10-5.30, Sun, Mon & BH 11.5.30; castle closes at dusk in winter, last admission 30 mins before closing
Admission: Charge £4.20, child £2.10; student/senior £3.70, family (2+4) £11.40 family (1-4) £8.30
Facilities and services: Shop/sales point; guided tours/lectures; audiovisual show; education service; lectures; hands-on activities; street parking, access for disabled visitors
Attendance: 24,594
Governing body: Sussex Past
Staff: Manager Jill Allan; Curator Emma O’Connor; Education Officer Deborah Spears; Research Officer Gabor Thomas; Administration Assistant Alison Lawrence, Custodians John Bleach, Jill Rees, James Thatcher, David Eady, Anne Evans