

Arbeia Society Notes

No. 3: Bronze Age metalwork from the River Wear

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Three Bronze Age bladed weapons, or just possibly four, have been found in the River Wear near Claxheugh. The current location of three is known:

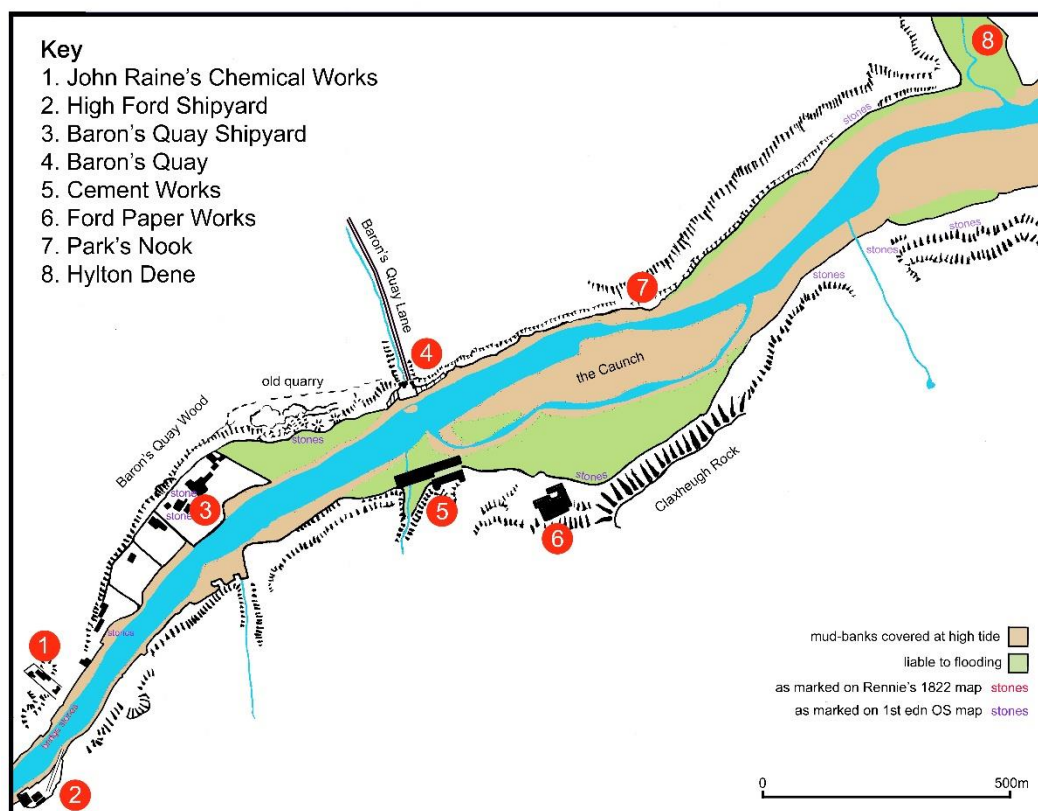


Fig. 1 Stretch of the River Wear near Hylton, combining features from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maps, showing some of the places mentioned in the text. At this period the area between the village of North Hylton (near no. 1) and Hylton Dene (no. 8) was all part of Hylton township. The village of South Hylton is near no. 2 (and mainly off this map), while most of the land south of the river was part of Ford township (including nos 5 and 6); nowadays Ford is considered to be part of South Hylton. A finds-spot of 'Hylton' can therefore cover a large area. While the size and position of the mud banks would be different during the Bronze Age there would still be some present.

(a) A sword, said to have been found in 1830, was apparently donated to Sunderland Museum in 1928, although this is not recorded in the accession register. This is still in Sunderland Museum (no. 1 below)

(b) In 1885 a sword was dredged from the river and was in the possession of H. H. Wake (no. 2). This is possibly in Sunderland Museum.

(c) A rapier found slightly before 1893 (no. 4 below) was on display in Sunderland Museum; it belonged to Canon Greenwell and in 1908 it was donated to the British Museum.

(d) In c.1910 a sword was found by M. H. Wake, the son of H. H. Wake. This was donated to Sunderland Museum in 1952, but is likely to be the same as (b) above.

The finds-spot of only two of the three or four weapons is known with any level of confidence, but both come from a relatively short section of the River Wear; one from a wide part with large areas of exposed mud banks and one from a stretch slightly down-stream (Fig. 1, the area round the Caunch, and between the Caunch and the mouth of Hylton Dene). The vague locations given mean the two weapons could have been found over 500m apart, but equally may have come from a similar spot, somewhere near Park's Nook. There was perhaps a particular area with a long-lived ritual significance. There was a slight promontory at Park's Nook (now partially removed after the river improvements), looking across to the dramatic cliffs of Claxheugh Rock, with mudbanks and narrow branches of the river in-between (Fig. 1).

Abbreviations

HER = Historic Environment Records

OS = Ordnance Survey

PAS = Portable Antiquities Scheme

1. Sword



HER: 387

OS: OS archaeology card no. NZ 35 NE, no. 1

Description:

Finds-spot: (1) 'dredged from the River Wear at Hylton, near Sunderland' (old Museum case label from after 1954)

(2) 'from the Wear at Ford' (Whitcomb 1968, 301)

Found: (1) 1830 (old case label)

Location: Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens , acc. no. TWCMS : F2629 (previously TWCMS : H7011), donated in 1928

Discussion: The only information about the discovery of this sword comes from an old museum case label, dating to after 1954 (as it mentions an examination by experts that we know from surviving paperwork happened in that year: this examination was clearly the result of the donation of part of another Bronze Age sword in 1952). The label reads: 'Bronze sword: dredged from the River Wear at Hylton, near Sunderland in 1830. This sword has been examined by Professors Ian Richmond, of Durham University, and Stuart Piggott, of the University of Edinburgh, and at the British Museum. These authorities concur in ascribing it to the Middle Bronze Age (in Britain, about 1,500 – 1,000 B. C.). On presentation, there was an inaccurate modern restoration of the handle, the greater part of which has been removed on the advice of the British Museum. Presented by the late Mr James Wilson, Sunderland, 1928.' James Wilson, a local businessman and councillor who died in or before 1947, had donated numerous items to the Museum over the years. In 1928 he had also donated a complete seventeenth-century skillet (acc. no. TWCMS : E3218), also dredged from the river in 1830, but the Museum accession register for 1928 does not include an entry for either the sword or the skillet. The OS card for the skillet records that in 1952 the curator of the Museum, Mr J. Wilson (not the same J. Wilson), 'did not indicate the exact provenance of the finds but suggested that it was dredged from the River Wear somewhere in Sunderland'; the sword was not recorded on an OS card in 1952.

The museum label says the sword was found at Hylton, while Whitcomb says it was found more specifically at Ford (see Fig. 1). She is the first to suggest that two swords (this, and no. 3 below) were found at Ford, but there is no evidence to support this. The OS Archaeology card for the swords, written in 1977, follows Whitcomb and has a single entry for both the 1830 and the 1910 swords at the same location. The exact finds-spot for this sword is therefore unknown.

The sword was either missing much of its hilt when found, or suffered damage after its recovery, since at some point long before 1954 it had pieces of brass added to the damaged tang to create a new, complete, hilt (Clogg 1998, 4). The exact form this hilt took is unknown, but from the surviving section it was imaginative rather than accurate, and in 1954, after the examination of the sword by the scholars and the British Museum laboratory mentioned on the label, it was decided to cut away the top part of the modern hilt, leaving just the short section of modified tang seen today.

Catalogues: (1) Miket 1984, 62-3, no. 14; fig. 20, no. 14

- (2) Wilburton unclassified: Colquhoun and Burgess 1988, 53, no. 236; pl. 38, no. 236 (they mistakenly give this a 1910 date of discovery, rather than 1830)
- (3) Wilburton type alloy: Clogg 1998, 8
- Dating: (1) Late Bronze Age
(2) 1000 – 900 BC (P.A.S.)
(3) 1140 – 1020 BC (Poyer 2015, 312, no. WE27)
- Reference: (1) Information from the museum case label
(2) Whitcomb, N., 1968 'Two prehistoric dugout canoes from the River Wear at Hylton, near Sunderland, County Durham', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4 ser. **46**, 297-301
(3) Miket, R., 1984 *The Prehistory of Tyne and Wear*, Wooler
(4) Colquhoun, I. and Burgess, C., 1988 *The Swords of Britain*, Munich
(5) Clogg, P., 1998 'The examination and analysis of two Bronze Age swords from Sunderland Museum', University of Durham, Archaeo-Analytic report **3198**
(6) Poyer, A. 2015 *The Topographic Settings of Bronze Age Metalwork Deposits in North East England*, University of Sheffield Phd thesis

2. **Sword**

- HER: 388
- OS: OS archaeology card no. NZ 35 NE, no. 19: marked on some OS maps as 'Roman sword'
- Description: 'a Roman sword in a perfect state of preservation ... In composition it seems to be a kind of bronze' (Potts 1890, 59)
- Finds-spot: 'while the Commissioners' dredger was deepening the bed of the river in the higher reaches, between Hylton Dene and Park's Nook'; 'the bucket of the dredger brought up [the sword], from a depth of eighteen feet below the bed of the river ... it was found lying on a bed of gravel' (Potts 1890, 59)
- Found: 1885 (Potts 1890, 59); Mitchell (1919, 4) has 1855, but as he was almost certainly using Potts as his source this is a mistake
- Location: (1) 'now [1890] in the possession of H. H. Wake' (Potts 1890, 59)
- Discussion: As it is made of bronze it was certainly not Roman in date. The River Wear Commission Minute books records that in 1885 the dredging of the Pallion Reach was to be completed (at that point the dredger was at Hylton) and that work on removing the Point at Park's Nook was to begin (Tyne and Wear Archives, accession number 202.1023, meetings of 24 March and 29 December). Henry Hay Wake was the engineer for the River Wear Commission from 1868 – 1907, in charge of the dredging operations to improve the river for shipping. Henry Wake possessed a Bronze Age sword found in 1885 while his son, Mervyn Wake, apparently owned another found in about 1910 (see below, no. 3). As both were in charge of dredging it is possible they both acquired a sword, but it is equally possible there has been some confusion between swords and dates: there is a good possibility that this sword is the same as that donated by Mervyn Wake (see below, no. 3), currently in Sunderland Museum.

Catalogue: Miket 1984, 63, no. 15

References: (1) Potts, T., 1890 *Sunderland: a History of the Town, Port, Trade and Commerce*, Sunderland

(2) Mitchell, W. 1919 *History of Sunderland*, Sunderland

(3) Miket, R., 1984 *The Prehistory of Tyne and Wear*, Wooler

3. Sword



HER: 386

OS: OS archaeology card no. NZ 35 NE, no. 1

Description: 'Bronze Blade of Roman [replaced by 'leaf-shaped Middle Bronze Age'] Dagger, hilt wanting ... 16.5" long, 1¾in wide at widest pt' (Sunderland Museum accession register, acc. no. 64-52)

Finds-spot: 'found in the River Wear, at the Ford, Hylton, near Sunderland' (Sunderland Museum accession register, acc. no. 64-52); this has been assumed to be the place-name 'Ford'

Found: 'about 1910' (Sunderland Museum accession register, acc. no. 64-52)

Location: Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens , acc. no. TWCMS : F2600 (previous nos 64-1952 and TWCMS : H7012)

Discussion: The sword is now in three pieces. The lower part of the blade was donated to the Museum in 1952 and the upper two pieces in 1996. The lower part of the sword was found 'by the late Mr Mervyn H. Wake', and was donated to the Museum on 14 May 1952 by 'Mr D Wawm, OBE ... (Mr Wawm is Brother-in-Law of Mr Wake)' on Mervyn Hay Wake's death in April 1952, according to the entry in the accession register (Sunderland Museum, acc. no. 64-52). Mervyn was the son of Henry Hay Wake (the river engineer who found sword no. 2, above), and he himself was a civil engineer and 'dredging superintendent' on the River Wear.

The upper part of the sword was donated to the museum by Ian Dugdale, the grandson of H. H. Wake. The entry form for the hilt says that the hilt came to Dugdale 'from H. H. Wake' (and therefore not from Dugdale's uncle, Mervyn Wake), which would mean this sword was the one found in 1885. The sword donated in 1952 was also described as 'Roman' in date, as with the 1885 sword, but the details of its finds-spot (further upstream) and its date of discovery are different.

It is unknown when the sword was broken into three pieces. At some point the two halves of the broken blade were held together by a modern tenon placed in a slot cut into the blade and lead tin solder (Clogg 1998, 3, 6), but the handle does not appear to have been repaired at any point. By 1952 the two parts of the blade were again separate, and only the lower part of the blade was given to the museum.

Catalogues: (1) Ewart Park type: Miket 1984, 62, no. 13; fig. 20, no. 13
 (2) Ewart Park type Northern unclassified: Colquhoun and Burgess 1988, 99, no. 569: pl. 84, no. 569 (they did not see the hilt donated in 1996). They mistakenly give this sword the date of discovery of 1830 instead of 1910.

Dating: (1) Late Bronze Age
 (2) 950 – 800 BC (P.A.S.)
 (3) 1020 – 800 BC (Poyer 2015, 312, no. WE29)

References: (1) Sunderland Museum Accession Register for 1952
 (2) Miket, R., 1984 *The Prehistory of Tyne and Wear*, Wooler
 (3) Colquhoun, I. and Burgess, C., 1988 *The Swords of Britain*, Munich
 (4) Clogg, P., 1998 'The examination and analysis of two Bronze Age swords from Sunderland Museum', University of Durham, Archaeo-Analytic report **3198**
 (5) Poyer, A. 2015 *The Topographic Settings of Bronze Age Metalwork Deposits in North East England*, University of Sheffield Phd thesis

4. Rapier



A facsimile of the rapier (Sunderland Museum, acc. no. TWCMS : H7003)

HER: 389

Description: (1) 'a fine bronze rapier blade of Ancient British manufacture' (Blair 1893, 207)
 (2) 'A rapier-blade' (Page 1905, 207, plate opp. 206)

Finds-spot: (1) 'dug out of the sand by the side of the river at Claxheugh' (Blair 1893, 207)
 (2) 'River Wear, North Shore, at Claxheugh' (Page 1905, 207)

Found: 'a short time ago', written in November 1893 (Blair 1893, 207)

- Location: 'This has been added to the valuable collection of Canon Greenwell' (Blair 1893, 207); it is now in the British Museum (accession no. WG.2077, acquired in 1908)
- Discussion: Rev. William Greenwell of Durham Cathedral was an antiquarian who carried out excavations of his own but also bought a huge number of antiquities from auctions, dealers and from fellow collectors.
- Catalogues: (1) Group I: Trump 1962, 96, no. 67
 (2) Group IV dirk (blade with flat or flattish mid-section): Burgess 1968, 5, no. 8; fig. 2, no. 8
 (3) Miket 1984, 62, no. 12; fig. 20, no. 12
 (4) Burgess and Gerloff 1981, 76, no. 592; pl. 77, no. 592
- Dating; (1) P.A.S.: 1400 – 1150 BC
- References: (1) Blair, R., 1893 'Notes on archaeology in provincial museums: XXXI. Sunderland Free Library and Museum', *The Antiquary* **28**, 207-9
 (2) Page, W. 1905 *Victoria County Histories: A History of Durham, Vol. 1*, London
 (2) Trump, B., 1962 'The origin and development of British middle Bronze Age rapiers', *Proceedings of the prehistoric Society* **28**, 80-102
 (4) Burgess, C., 1968 'Bronze Age dirks and rapiers as illustrated by examples from Durham and Northumberland', *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland*, new series, 1, 3-23
 (5) Burgess, C. and Gerloff, S., 1981 *The Dirks and Rapiers of Great Britain and Ireland*, Munich
 (6) Miket, R., 1984 *The Prehistory of Tyne and Wear*, Wooler

5. Socketed axe

- HER: 375
- Description: 'socketed axe' (Page 1905, 207)
- Finds-spot: 'Sunderland, Hilton [sic] (in river)' (Page 1905, 207)
- Found: pre 1905
- Location: unknown
- Discussion: Page (1905) is the only reference for this object, but does not say where he obtained this information (other than mentioning three local people who had given him information about some of the objects in his list: Page 1905, 206, fn 3). From the different way he described the finds-spot of two items supposedly found in the same part of the river it is clear that the information came from two different sources: the axe-head is described as coming from 'Sunderland, Hilton (in river)', while the rapier (found near Hylton) came from the 'River Wear ... above Sunderland' (Page 1905, 207). The section 'Hilton (in river)' was perhaps added in error to the finds-spot of 'Sunderland' for the axe, and this entry actually refers to the socketed bronze axe (HER 58) found before 1725 at Wearmouth (now part of Sunderland), which is not otherwise mentioned in this list.
- References: Page, W. 1905 *Victoria County Histories: a History of Durham, Vol. 1*, London