

SHORTER CONTRIBUTIONS

A LATE BRONZE AGE SWORD FROM BRANDON

by Edward A. Martin

A bronze sword (Fig. 42) was found in 1979 by Messrs A. Brown and R. Morley of Lakenheath, with the aid of a metal-detector, on the Suffolk bank of the Little Ouse River (TL 7487; S.A.U. BRD 033), about four yards from the water and only a few inches deep. Through the generosity of the land owner, Mr P. Wilson of Frederick Hiam Ltd., the sword is to be donated to Moyses Hall Museum in Bury St Edmunds.

The blade of the sword is bent at an angle of 38 degrees and the top half of the hilt has been broken off. The damage, however, does not appear to be recent. The surviving length of the sword is 57.5 cm, the blade being 52 cm long. Five rivets survive in position, four on the shoulders and one on the hilt. The edges of the hilt are slightly flanged and there were originally at least three rivets in a central slight depression.

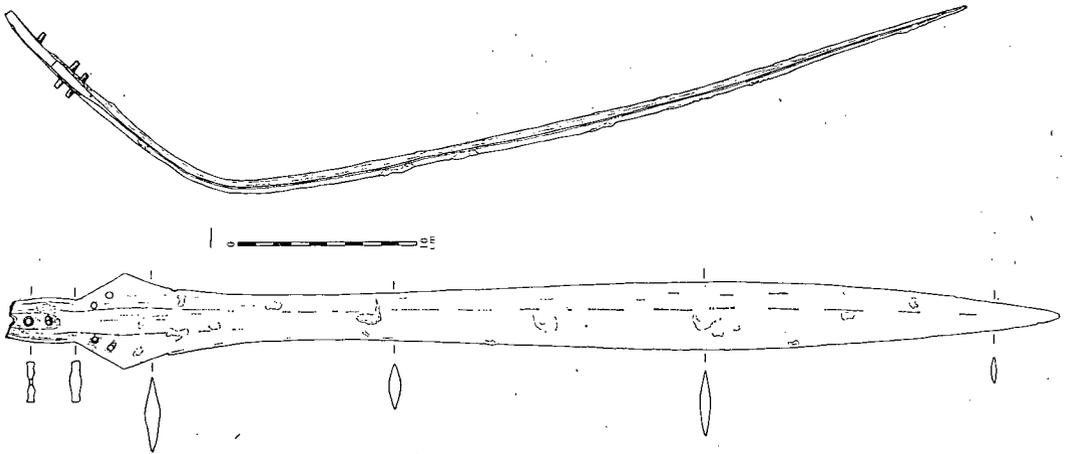


FIG. 42—Bronze Age sword from Brandon.

The sword is of the *Ewart Park* type (Group V) (Burgess 1968), though perhaps showing some influence from the Hallstatt C *Gündlingen* swords (Cowen 1967) in the very slender outline and the relatively small rivets on the hilt. In view of this a date in the 7th century B.C. would be most likely for this sword.

In view of the proximity of this find to the Little Ouse, and its high position in the soil, there is a high probability that it was dredged unseen from the river and dumped on the bank during some cleaning of the channel. Find spots near or in rivers are very common for swords of this period (Cowen 1967) and, in fact, more have been found in rivers or other wet spots than on dry land. This has led to speculation that the swords were perhaps votive offerings to some water spirit or deity, a reaction perhaps to a worsening climate (Burgess 1974, 209). Environmental evidence supports the theory of a gradual climatic deterioration from about the mid-late second millennium B.C. and covering the first half of the first millennium B.C. (Evans 1975, 147).

This tendency towards water find-spots has been noted as early as the Middle Bronze Age (? at the beginning of the climatic deterioration) in connection with the distribution of

bronze rapiers in the Fenland (Trump 1968), and continues through the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age. The deposit of Iron Age metalwork from the former lake at Llyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey is of interest because several of the objects from there appear to have been deliberately rendered unserviceable before being consigned to the water (Fox 1946).

In Northern Europe this custom seems to have continued into the Roman Iron Age, for at Illerup in Denmark excavation has revealed a deposit of military equipment, dating from c. 400 A.D., which had been burnt and deliberately bent and dented before being deposited in a bog (Andersen, 1951). In this case the deposition was probably made to appease a war god. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the late 1st or early 2nd century A.D. (*Annals* XIII, 57), records that two German tribes at war with each other 'had vowed their enemies to Mars and Mercury. This vow implied the sacrifice of the entire beaten side with their horses and all their possessions.' A more graphic description is given by the 5th-century A.D. historian Paul Orosius (*History of the World*, V, 16) concerning the actions of the Cimbri (a North European tribe) following their victory over the Romans in 105 B.C.:

In accordance with a strange and unusual vow, they set about destroying everything they had taken. Clothing was cut to pieces and cast away, gold and silver was thrown into the river, the breastplates of the men were hacked to pieces, the trappings of the horses were broken up, the horses themselves drowned in whirlpools, and men with nooses around their necks were hanged from trees. Thus there was no booty for the victors and no mercy for the vanquished.

The broken and bent sword from Brandon may therefore have been deliberately rendered useless and deposited in or near the Little Ouse as a votive offering to some water or war deity.

References

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