

‘The Spearhead of the Pennon ...’: a Bronze Age spearhead carried into the Battle of Flodden?

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ABSTRACT

In 1999, the late Professor Charles Thomas donated a Middle Bronze Age spearhead to the National Museum collection. This spearhead came with a label indicating that it was part of the pennant taken into the Battle of Flodden by Robert Chisholme in 1513. This paper investigates the likelihood that such a claimed association could have any basis in truth, as well as briefly contributing some thoughts on the discovery of already ancient objects in the past.

INTRODUCTION

At the close of his Rhind Lecture series in 1999, the late Professor Charles Thomas generously gifted the Society with a bound volume of *The Scots Chronicle* for the Library, while the National Museum collection was presented with a fine example of a Middle Bronze Age spearhead (Illus 1).

Although bought at auction and with no known provenance, the spearhead came with a fascinating story attached, for rolled up inside the socket of the weapon there was a paper label (Illus 2) with the following inscription, hand-written in ink:

The Spearhead of the Pennon carried By
Robert Chisholme of that Ilk Roxburghshire
in the Battle of Flodden
in which he was slain

At the time, one of the authors (TGC) contributed a note on this artefact to the Society’s newsletter, in which he took a sceptical standpoint regarding the supposed association of a Bronze Age weapon with a historical event some three millennia later (Cowie 2000a, 2000b); however, a subsequent rejoinder raised the interesting possibility that this prehistoric artefact might at least have had a long association with the Chisholme family (Munro 2000).

In revisiting this intriguing object, our aim with this paper is to examine the supposed family association of the spearhead in detail in order to critically assess the possibility that a Bronze Age spearhead may have been carried into the Battle of Flodden. We shall consider in turn the spearhead itself and the circumstances of its acquisition and the discovery of the paper label by Professor Thomas, before considering relevant aspects of the Chisholme family history. Finally, we shall consider this discovery in light of other examples of already ancient objects discovered and curated in the past, since such finds have a bearing on the questions of reuse and reinterpretation of ancient artefacts discovered in the historic past.

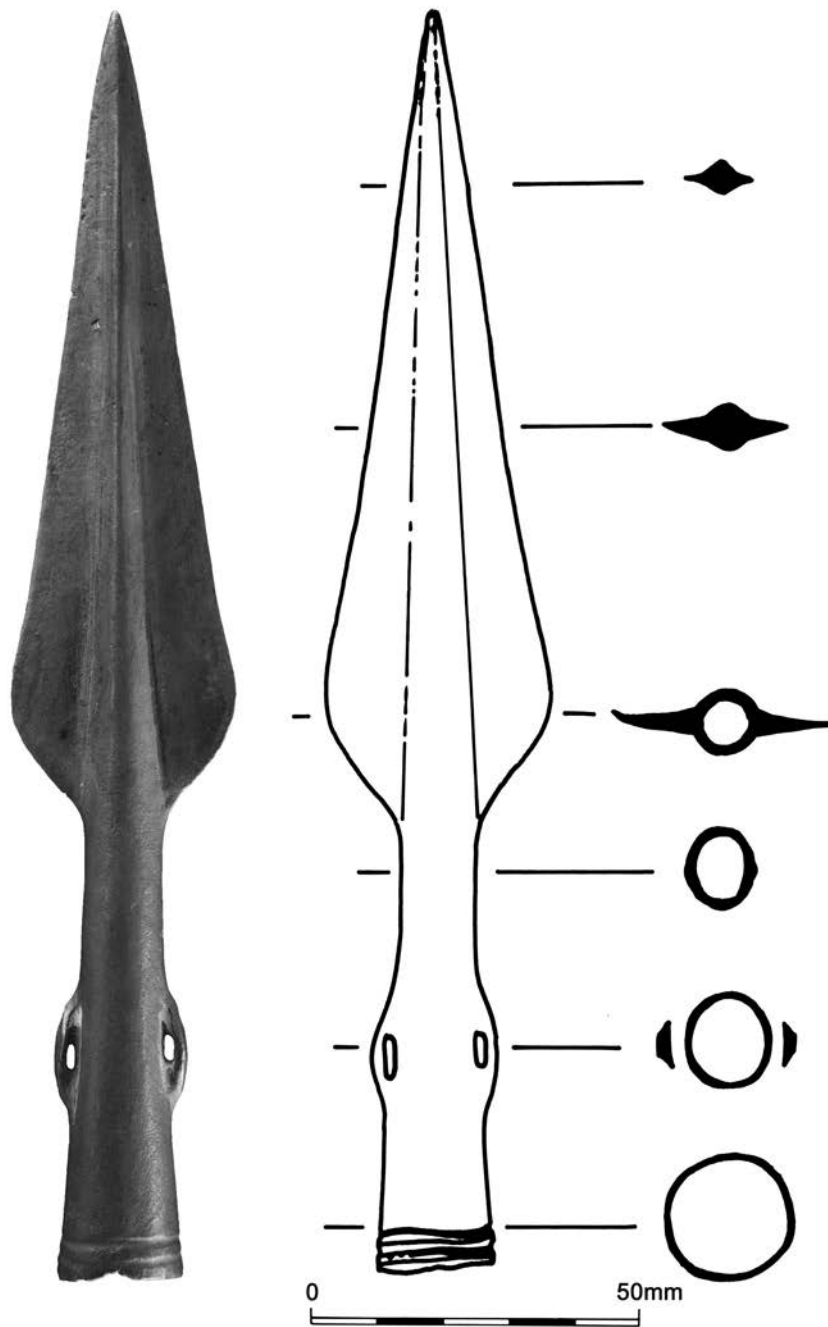
Although ‘Chisholme’ may alternatively be spelled ‘Chisholm’ (eg Robson 1998), the former spelling has been adopted throughout this article so as to maintain consistency with the hand-written label.

THE SPEARHEAD

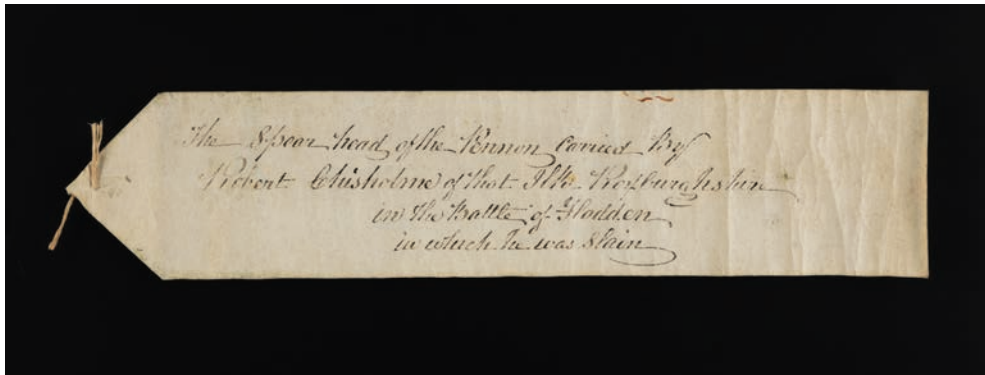
The spearhead (NMS X.DG 117) is a side-looped type, characteristic of the Middle Bronze Age and broadly dating to the Taunton-Penard metalworking phases (c 1400–1150 BC) (following Needham et al 1997: 84–90). In Davis’

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ILLUS 1 The Chisholme spearhead (photo: Neil McLean; drawing: Alan Braby © National Museums Scotland)



ILLUS 2 The label found inside the socket of the spearhead (photo: Neil McLean © National Museums Scotland)

(2012) recent typological scheme, it can be considered a ‘Developed side-looped’ spearhead, falling within his Type 6B which is defined by a ‘flame-shaped’ blade and side-loops which are lozenge-shaped in profile. The spearhead has been cleaned since discovery, leaving a bronze-coloured patina and removing any traces of prehistoric manufacture or use; however, it appears to have been a good casting with no obvious defects. The spearhead is 190mm long and 34mm wide at the widest part of the blade. The socket is circular with an external diameter of 18.5mm, and the overall weight is 85g. The form and dimensions are entirely in keeping with a Middle Bronze Age spearhead and there is no reason to suspect its authenticity as an ancient object.

The original find circumstances of this spearhead are unknown; however, a location in southern Scotland is plausible. Deferring for a moment the question of the possible veracity of the family tradition, if the spearhead was supposedly carried into Flodden in 1513, then it follows that the spearhead was found elsewhere prior to this event rather than at Flodden itself; if anything, this notion is strengthened by the notable absence of Bronze Age evidence during the recent excavations, fieldwalking and metal-detecting at the Flodden battlefields (Northern Counties Archaeological Services 2016). On the other hand, the Chisholme family – to whom it supposedly belonged – held lands in the historic county of Roxburghshire from at least

the 13th century (Robson 1998: 79). Even if this spearhead’s link with Flodden simply represents much later fanciful family tradition, it is therefore more likely that it signifies a discovery on the Chisholme family estates. We can therefore tentatively suggest that the spearhead was originally recovered from the Scottish Borders. Thirteen contemporary forms of looped spearheads dating to the Taunton-Penard phases are now known from this region (see Coles 1964; Davis 2012) and thus the Chisholme spearhead is in keeping with the known range of Middle Bronze Age spearhead types from the region.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ACQUISITION OF THE SPEARHEAD AND THE PAPER LABEL

The spearhead had been purchased by Professor Thomas in 1959 or 1960 at Wallis & Wallis, an auctioneer’s house in Lewes, Sussex, which primarily deals with armouries. It was described as a ‘brass javelin point’ and according to the auctioneers it had come from a house in Eastbourne, Sussex, being cleared by an elderly widow, possibly of Scottish origin. Upon acquiring the object, Professor Thomas discovered the paper label rolled up inside the socket of the weapon. This is the sum of what is known about the provenance of the bronze spearhead (Cowie 2000a).

Although it is clearly at best a secondary source, the label itself warrants some consideration. Some time after its purchase, it was suggested to Professor Thomas that the handwriting might be that of Walter Scott, comparison being invited with, for example, the writing on his rather idiosyncratic labels at Abbotsford. Moreover, it is recorded that in May 1819, Scott entertained a Mr Chisholm who was then a Tory candidate for Selkirk burgh (Lockhart 1837: 268f), and reference is also made to Hugh Chisholm in Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* (Scott 1836: 372). Partly on this basis and partly because of Scott's literary and historical interest in Flodden, Charles Thomas mooted the plausible and superficially attractive suggestion that Scott might have acquired the spearhead for his own collection. Although the handwriting is of later 18th- or early 19th-century date, following enquiries with Dr Iain Brown of the National Library of Scotland in 1999 (by TGC), it can be confirmed that the label was not written by Sir Walter Scott. Nor was any hint of a Scott/Chisholme connection found in the course of subsequent research on Scott's archaeological collection (Cheape et al 2003). In short, however attractive the suggestion, no link can be positively demonstrated between Scott and the spearhead.

THE CHISHOLME FAMILY CONNECTION

A further important line of enquiry is offered by the Chisholme family connection proclaimed on the paper label. The history of the Chisholme name and family has been explored elsewhere (Mackenzie 1891; Vernon 1902; Robson 1998), but it is worthwhile reiterating some key points here. The origins of the Chisholme family can be traced back to a Papal Bull in 1254 (Robson 1998: 79; Vernon 1902: 4) and the name 'Chisholme' derives from the lands that were occupied, which probably lay in Roxburghshire (Robson 1998: 79). Robson has established that the Chisholme lands, and by extension their estate, lay south of the Borthwick Water valley, falling within the present day parish of Hawick (ibid); family members from this area are typically known

as Chisholme of that Ilk (ibid) or the Border Chisholmes (Mackenzie 1891: 172ff). During the 17th century, the Chisholme family lost the estate of their namesake, though later acquired an estate in the area of the Stirches near Hawick (Vernon 1902: 6–7), again in Roxburghshire. The family line thus had a long-standing position in the Borders over several hundred years. The male lineage ended with the death of John James Scott-Chisholme in the Second Boer War in 1899 (Vernon 1902). It was this that prompted J J Vernon (1902) to offer a detailed account of the history of the Chisholme of that Ilk and of the Stirches as part of a memorial piece published in the *Transactions of the Hawick Archaeological Society*. As Munro (2000) has admitted, Vernon offers no indication of the source of this history but where facts can be checked they appear correct and Vernon would have no doubt benefited from correspondence with Scott-Chisholme's mother and two sisters who were alive at the time of writing. Of crucial significance to the present paper is that Vernon reports:

Robert and John Chisholme, accompanied their overlord, Sir William Douglas of Drumlanrig, to Flodden Field in 1513. Robert, the eldest son, died with Drumlanrig fighting beside the king, but John, the second son, survived *and brought back the family pennon, the lance-head of which is still in the possession of the present representatives of the family* [our emphasis] (Vernon 1902: 5).

This indicates that a spearhead of some description was in the possession of the Scott-Chisholme family in 1902 – presumably the bronze spearhead in view of the dating of the inscription on the label. A further implication of this reference is that it is clear that a lance-head of some description had been afforded a certain reverence as a family heirloom. Indeed, the two brothers who fought at Flodden are depicted in full military regalia as the supporters of the family arms (Illus 3) (Vernon 1902: 5): the knight on the right is holding a standard tipped with a lance-head, though it is clearly not the same spearhead as that acquired by the National Museum of Scotland. However, a stone relief of the same arms depicts a spearhead more similar in form to the Bronze Age artefact (Illus 4); this



ILLUS 3 The coat of arms of the Scott-Chisholmes of the Stirches, granted to the family in 1853 (image by kind permission of the Court of the Lord Lyon)

relief was removed from the Chisholme estate in the Stirches and is currently held at Hawick Museum.

Such generic depictions do not of course prove that the Bronze Age spearhead is the same as that on the family crest which, it should be emphasised, only dates from 1853 when the family name became Scott-Chisholme (Greenshields-Leadbetter 1923: 72–3; Dr Margaret Collin pers comm). The Chisholme family arms prior to this do not depict the knights (Greenshields-Leadbetter *ibid*). Nonetheless, the degree to which the inscription can be corroborated, however tenuously, becomes intriguing.

There has been some debate about whether a Robert Chisholme existed at the time of the Battle of Flodden (Cowie 2000a, 2000b) and certainly there is some confusion when studying the published family histories (cf Mackenzie 1891; Robson 1998). This, it appears, is because several Chisholmes went by the name Robert or John at the time and in quick succession, whilst others went unnamed in most histories. Illustration 5 summarises the information known for the period between 1436 and 1538 as presented by Mackenzie (1891: 187). Mackenzie notes only one specific date within this timeframe (1526), and charts the line of succession, leaving most family

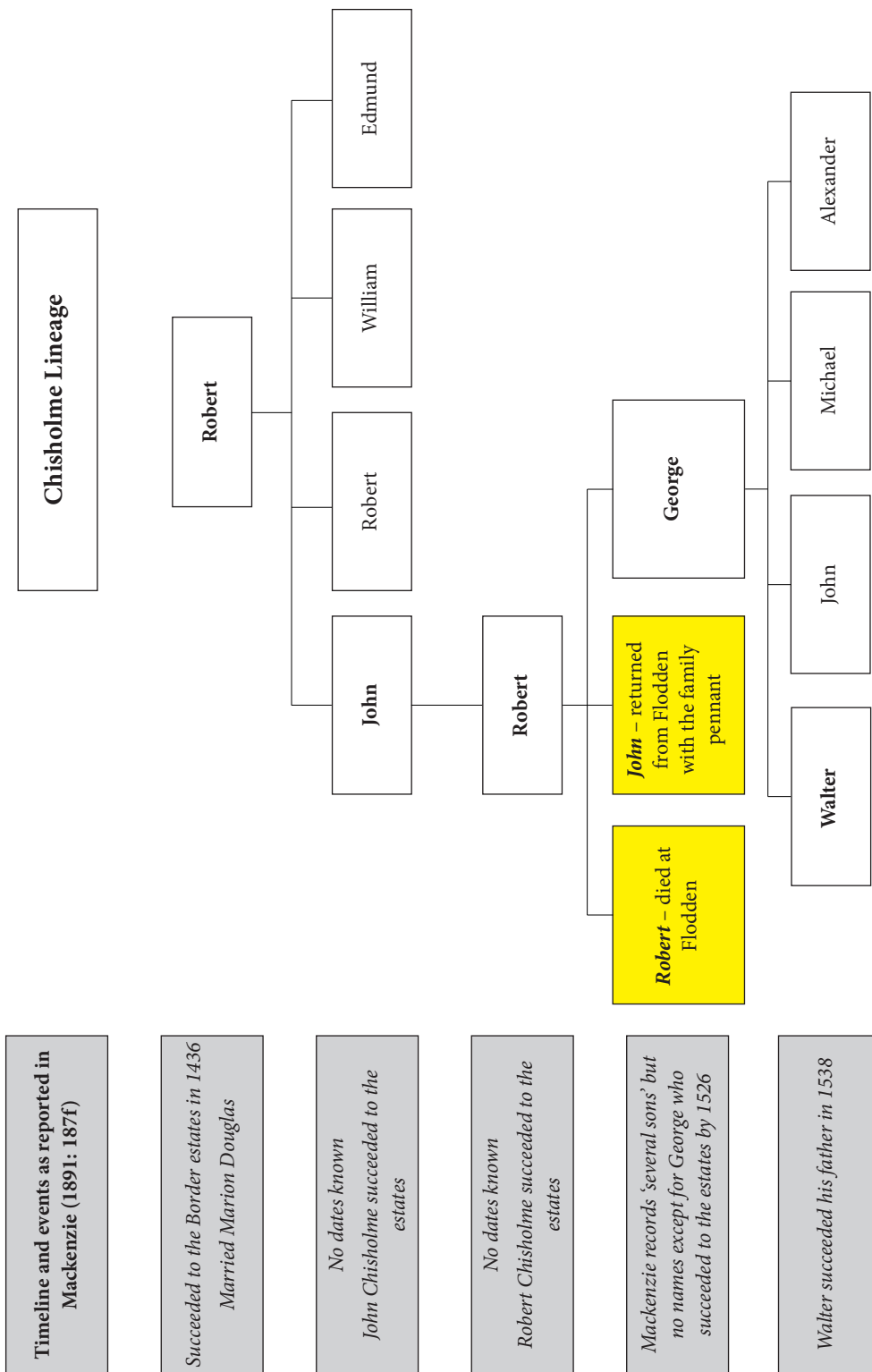


ILLUS 4 Armorial panel depicting the family crest of the Scott-Chisholmes of Stirches (photo: M G Knight, courtesy of Hawick Museum)

members unnamed. This is particularly important as the Robert Chisholme under inspection here never succeeded his father (another Robert Chisholme) and thus was never recorded in Mackenzie's history; instead, the estates passed to George, who was reported to be the Chisholme of that Ilk by 1526 (Vernon 1902: 5). George is noted as one of 'several sons, all of whom apparently predeceased their father' (Mackenzie 1891: 187). These unnamed sons could therefore represent the Robert and John Chisholme who are said to have fought at Flodden, as reported by Vernon (1902: 5) (highlighted in yellow in Illus 5). The loose chronology known for this period suggests it is entirely plausible that Robert and John Chisholme existed and fought in the Battle of Flodden.

If, then, one supposes the spearhead described by Vernon in 1902 and the spearhead acquired by Professor Thomas in the mid-20th century are one and the same, the question remains how the spearhead associated with a long-established

Roxburghshire family ended up in a salesroom in Sussex. Once again, family history may provide some clues. Following his death in 1899, John James Scott-Chisholme was survived by the following female members of the family line: Margaret (his mother), Elizabeth and Christina Madeleine (his sisters). In 1881, Margaret and Elizabeth are recorded on the census as living in Hove, Sussex, with Christina Anderson Scott-Chisholme, sister-in-law to Margaret, and they are described as living on their own means (Dr Margaret Collin pers comm). In 1891 they were living in Folkestone, Kent, whilst in 1901, two years after the death of her brother, Elizabeth was living in Bognor, Sussex, once again described as living on her own means. Margaret Scott-Chisholme died in 1900, whilst Christina Madeleine died in 1932 and Elizabeth Scott-Chisholme died in Bath, Somerset, in 1937 (*Hawick Express* 1938). The location of the spearhead is unclear during this time, with the only reference that it still survived within the



ILLUS 5 The lineage of the Chisholme family during the 15th and 16th centuries as recorded by MacKenzie (1891: 187) with additions from Vernon (1902) to show the hypothetical position of the two brothers who fought at Flodden (highlighted in yellow). Those who inherited the estate are highlighted in bold.

family being that made by Vernon in 1902. Collin (2012: 21) has suggested that Elizabeth may have had need to pass on or sell the spearhead while in Sussex. If one returns to the auctioneer's comments made to Professor Thomas, in which the spearhead is said to have come from a house clearance of an elderly Scottish widow, it could be speculated that the widow was an acquaintance of Elizabeth Scott-Chisholme at some stage.

Illustration 6 summarises the known and hypothetical trajectories of the spearhead presented thus far. Although much remains speculative, it seems evident that by the late 18th/early 19th century the spearhead was a Chisholme family possession, that the anonymous author of the inscription on the label around that time must have had some awareness of the history of the Chisholme family, and that it subsequently became a treasured family possession. The key issue is whether its association with the family can really be traced back to the 16th century or whether this is a later concoction as a result of antiquarian speculation during the Enlightenment period.

THE OCCURRENCE OF ANCIENT OBJECTS IN LATER PERIODS

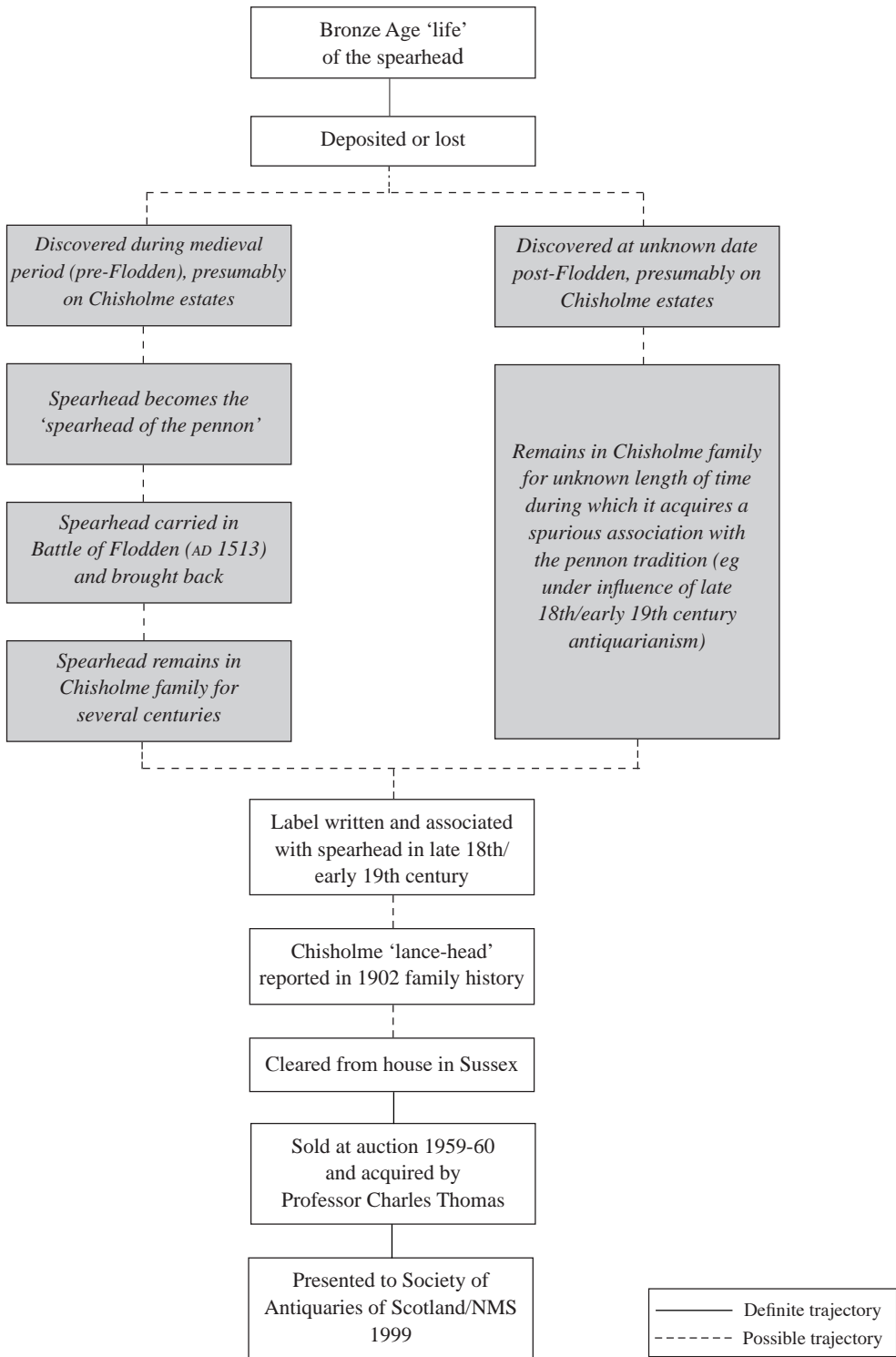
The final strand of this paper is a consideration of the probability that a Bronze Age spearhead deposited or lost in the second millennium BC might be valued and reinterpreted if discovered nearly 3,000 years later in the later medieval period. There are two elements to this: first, affirming that such instances may have occurred; and second, reflecting on how people in the past may have reacted to such objects.

Although it would be tempting to dismiss the idea that a Bronze Age spearhead was found and then curated in the medieval period, there is ample evidence that past populations regularly discovered and reappropriated ancient objects, including earlier Bronze Age objects in the later Bronze Age and Iron Age (Hingley 2009; Knight forthcoming), prehistoric stone axes in the Roman period (Adkins & Adkins 1985; Turner & Wymer 1987), and Roman objects in the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods (White 1988; Eckardt &

Williams 2003; Henig 2008). Such discoveries are fairly commonplace occurrences, referred to in a number of different ways including heirlooms, relics and 'ancestor artefacts' (Cape 2010). The discovery of already old objects was, in many cases, probably incidental during the occupation of previously inhabited areas. A Neolithic carved stone ball found in Norway, for instance, is posited to be a Viking-period find in Scotland that was then transported across the North Sea, perhaps as a 'curio or amulet' (ScARF 2012: 83). Meanwhile, Anglo-Saxon graves were often constructed with reference to Bronze Age barrows (Williams 1998: 92), giving a high chance of discovering Bronze Age objects.

However, Bronze Age objects occurring within a specifically medieval context are rare. Recently a Bronze Age palstave was excavated from a medieval house deposit at Island Farm, Devon; the excavators suggested that the palstave may have been a collected item, perhaps as a charm (Haynes 2016: 25). In another case, the shaft of a Middle Bronze Age spearhead from Ruskington, Lincolnshire provided a radiocarbon date of AD 1040–1270 (2σ) (Needham et al 1997: 86). Needham et al (ibid) note that there is no reason to doubt this date, and the idea of medieval reappropriation is potentially strengthened by the species of wood, *Betula* sp, which was unique within their dating programme. Two other medieval dates were reported for Bronze Age metalwork (Needham et al 1997: 72, table 4, DoB 6 and 15), although these cannot be considered conclusive. In one case this is due to the ambiguity of determining the object type analysed, and in another it could not be confirmed that the wood was definitely associated with the objects (Dr Stuart Needham pers comm).

As suggested above, on the grounds of the type's distribution, it is possible the spearhead was recovered from the lands owned by the Chisholme family. Whilst a Bronze Age object may be discovered in a much later period, it is more difficult to explain how a 'found object' could then become a 'treasured object' with such a special place in the Chisholme family history. In such situations one must be wary of projecting our modern appreciation of prehistory onto past



ILLUS 6 The definite and possible trajectories of the Bronze Age spearhead

populations. Caple (2010) has suggested that some ancient objects in the past might have been seen as 'venerable objects' that were appreciated for their considerable age and mythical value. In the Roman period, for instance, some prehistoric objects were redeposited in Roman temples, such as the Palaeolithic axes from Witham (Turner & Wymer 1987) or the Bronze Age metalwork from Ashwell, Hertfordshire (Jackson & Burleigh 2018: 159–62), suggesting these may have been linked to religious beliefs and practices of veneration (Caple 2010).

Gilchrist (2013) has similarly emphasised that certain objects in the medieval period may have achieved an heirloom status as a result of their recognised age as well as the materials from which they were made (cf Lillios 1999). Gilchrist presented a Viking sword pommel made of whale bone, deposited in the 12th century in a household in York, some 200 to 300 years after its production (2013: 174). She suggested that this object, and other heirlooms, were valued for the implications of the object and its material. As Gilchrist states: 'Heirlooms prompt feelings of family affect, inter-generational memory and a sense of the passage of time between generations' (Gilchrist 2013: 172).

The Chisholme spearhead may represent an object appreciated in such a way. Recognition that it was a weapon of some antiquity, and eventually its supposed association with the Battle of Flodden, may have given it a mythical status that persisted until the end of the family lineage. At the very least, it appears such a mythology was attributed to this object at some point in the later 18th or early 19th century, when the label was written.

The association of Bronze Age weapons with historical conflicts is also known elsewhere. O'Connor and Cowie (1995: 355) note folklore associated with the findspot of a Bronze Age hoard found under a boulder at Kincardine, Abernethy, Inverness-shire. According to tradition, Colonel John Roy Stewart hid his arms and flags there following Culloden; one of the axeheads in the hoard was even believed to be a relic attached to Colonel Stewart's flagstaff (*ibid*). This case is particularly pertinent to the present discussion as it represents another example of a Bronze Age

object associated with a historically significant battle. In another historical context, David Bell (*forthcoming*) has recently demonstrated that some use-wear on Bronze Age weaponry that was previously assumed to be ancient, may in fact have been caused through use in the Irish Rebellion of 1798. In this latter situation, it is interesting to note that the age of the implements did not actually matter to those using them; instead the recognisable form of blades made it possible to reappropriate them for modern purposes.

The aim of this brief discussion is not to argue conclusively that the Chisholme Bronze Age spearhead was found during the medieval period, subsequently curated and carried to the Battle of Flodden, nor even that it represents an heirloom of the later generations of the Chisholme family, but instead to raise the possibility that such a claim could have a foundation of truth. The idea of retaining heirlooms and venerating artefacts is a common feature in many societies (Lillios 1999; Caple 2010), and the medieval period was no different (Henig 2008; Gilchrist 2013; Robinson & de Beer 2014). Whilst the reaction to such objects inevitably would have varied, and many would have held no significance at all, some were attributed meaning for a variety of reasons.

CONCLUSIONS

It is unlikely that the exact nature of the Chisholme spearhead will ever be known. This article has explored several avenues to try and ascertain the possible veracity of the claim that it was once taken into battle by the Chisholme family. There is certainly a legacy of a treasured lancehead within the family records, and it is this that prompted someone in the 18th or 19th century to write the label which is now associated with the spearhead. That this broadly corresponds with the declining family lineage may not be a coincidence and someone may have been attempting to preserve the family mythology attached to the object. The discovery of a spearhead of this type would not be out of place in the area of the Scottish Borders from which the family originate,

but it remains circumstantial whether this is a genuine provenance. On occasion, objects from other eras were inevitably found by later societies, just as they are today, and if nothing else it is fascinating to observe the mythologies that become attached to them; in this regard, the notion of taking a Bronze Age spearhead into the Battle of Flodden is particularly stimulating and intriguing. It therefore seems wholly apt to conclude by repeating a quote one of us has used before (Cowie 2000a), from Mary Monica Maxwell-Scott's (1915) preface to the *Catalogue of the Armour and Antiquities at Abbotsford*:

If in attempting to give an accurate description ... we are compelled to dispel some of those pleasing illusions which almost insensibly grow up concerning curiosities of [this] kind, we do so reluctantly, and, in Sir Walter's words, regret 'to pluck from our memories a rooted Legend'.

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