

IV.

NOTICE OF A BRONZE SWORD FOUND ON THE ESTATE OF WATER-NISH, SKYE. BY CHARLES H. BEDFORD, M.B., C.M. EDIN., M.R.C.S. ENG., F.S.A. SCOT., SURGEON IN H.M. INDIAN ARMY.

The sword which, through the kindness of my friend, Captain Macdonald of Waternish, I am enabled to exhibit before the Society was found, some time since, 4 feet below the surface of a peat moss on the hill overlooking the ruined church and graveyard of Trumpan, which is situated on the Waternish estate in the west of Skye. The find was, I believe, a single one.

The specimen will, at a glance, be seen to belong to that most elegant form of bronze weapon—the leaf-shaped. This is a variety, which I need scarcely remind you, occurs only in the “hoards” which characterise the later Bronze Age, and is essentially a thrusting rather than a cutting or parrying weapon.¹

This example is similar, in most respects, to others found in the Western Highlands.

As to dimensions, the entire length is $23\frac{1}{4}$ inches; at the broadest part (which is one third of the whole length from the point) it measures $1\frac{5}{8}$ inch; at its narrowest part (*i.e.*, some 5 inches from the hilt) its breadth is $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch; at the wings of the hilt-plate it is 2 inches broad; and what remains of the grip measures $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches long.

The blade is, as usual, bi-convex on the transverse section, and is provided with the customary “marginal strip,” which is $\frac{3}{16}$ inch wide, and terminates abruptly 1 inch from the winged extremity of the hilt-plate. This strip is formed by hammering the metal out to a thin edge, and then planing it flat with a whetstone.²

This nicking of the edge is a common feature of Scottish, English, Irish, and French swords of this period, as well as of the earliest iron swords of the tumuli.³

¹ *Scotland in Pagan Times*, by J. Anderson, LL.D.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Proceedings*, vol. xxiii. p. 325.

The abrupt termination of the "marginal strip," an inch or more from the hilt, has probably for its functions—(1) the extension of the available grip; (2) to save the hand from cutting, should the blade, either by reason of sweat or blood on the handle when in use, or, through the assertion of the law of inertia by any resistant body against which the blade was thrust, slip back in the swordsman's hand.

As no cross-guard was present, this was specially likely to occur.

The blade of this specimen is devoid of a midrib; and has, bounding the cutting edge internally, a very faintly raised ridge, inside which is a slight hollow gradually merging into the plano-convex surface which forms the central and most extensive portion of the weapon. This latter surface ends as a sharp toe in the hilt-plate, more than an inch behind the rivet holes in the wings.

The blade, as a whole, is in an excellent state of preservation.

Coming now to the handle—a part of much interest in the swords of this period—we note that it has been cast in the same matrix with the blade. The side-plates, which were generally convex pieces of horn, bone, or wood, have been riveted into four rivet holes, which have in this specimen been drilled, and not produced in the casting. Bronze pins were generally used for fixing the side-plates to the hilt-plate; but nothing remains of either these or the side plates in this case. The arrangement of the rivet holes forms a curious study in the bronze swords of this period. In this case, there have been four—one at the extremity of each of the wings, and two others situated one behind the other, and respectively $1\frac{3}{4}$ and $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches behind those in the wings. Through the latter hole the hilt-plate has been fractured. The handle is flat, $\frac{3}{4}$ inch broad and $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. The handles of the leaf-shaped bronze swords are generally small,¹ which forces the conviction on one that there can have been no such great disparity in size between the hands of the wielders of these weapons and those of our less warlike contemporaries.

Long sword blades generally have long hilt-plates, as pointed out by Dr Evans,² but this does not necessitate the hand which gripped the sword being large.

¹ *Ancient Bronze Implements of Great Britain*, by John Evans, D.C.L., &c., p. 276; also Sir J. Lubbock, *Prehistoric Times*, p. 32.

² *Ibid.*, p. 277.

I should like to direct attention to two slight, bilateral depressions which occur on both surfaces of the hilt-plate, and which are placed $\frac{1}{4}$ inch behind the rivet holes in the wings. They are placed opposite one another, but are not patent. These, I am informed, are rather common in swords of this form; but the "raison d'être" has not, so far as I am aware, been explained.

In Dr Anderson's work on *Scotland in Pagan Times*, somewhat similar depressions are noticed, but these differed:—(1) in not being placed opposite each other; (2) they occurred in a sword with a pommel hilt entirely cast in bronze—the pommel being cast on clay. They are accounted for, in this latter case, by the core probably having been held, during the casting, on wooden pins or other projections. These, when the metal cooled, left their mark as small, asymmetrical depressions.

This explanation does not apply in the specimen before the Society now, for there was no hollow pommel on it to necessitate, in the casting, the use of the wooden supports. This sword was found on a site of interest, being the spot assigned by tradition as the scene of a sanguinary encounter between the Macdonalds and the Macleods. The battle is known, in the Gaelic, as "Blarmilligary," or "the battle of the ruined dike," from the circumstance of the dead being placed alongside of a turf-dike, which was then thrown over them—a speedy but primitive mode of interment.

In conclusion, I may briefly mention the following finds of bronze swords in Skye, so far as I have been able to learn:—

1. One got at the Point of Sleat, Armadale, in or about 1851, along with two spear-heads of bronze and a long, narrow, bronze pin. This one is described in the *Proceedings* by Dr J. A. Smith,¹ and belonged to the late Lord Macdonald.

2. Another one is figured in *Pennant's Tour*.² This one had a rounded pommel on the handle, and belonged to Colonel Macleod of Talisker.

3. A very complete specimen, 2 feet long, found in the moss at

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. iii. p. 101.

² *Tour in Scotland*, vol. ii. p. 334, plate xlv.

Lyndale, near Loch Greshornish. This one was the property of Mr Macdonald of Balranald.¹

4. One, 26 inches long, which was found broken ⁷ across the middle. This specimen was described by Dr Cochrane Patrick in the *Proceedings*,² and is now in the Museum.

The two following were presented to the Society³ by Captain William Stewart, and were found at Rigg, in the east of Skye:—

5. This is an ordinary example, $26\frac{1}{4}$ inches long.

6. The last is the only described Scottish bronze sword with a mid-rib. It is $28\frac{5}{8}$ inches long, and has two rivet slots in the grip and two rivet holes in the wings.

All of these specimens approximate very closely in form and most also in dimensions to the one now before you, which is the only bronze sword which has been found in the Waternish district to my knowledge.

There have been also, I am informed, numerous finds of arrow-heads (probably flint) and coins in the same district.

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. xiii. p. 326.

² *Ibid.*, vol. xiv. p. 96.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. xxi. p. 220.