

‘The original may yet be discovered’: seven Bronze Age swords supposedly from Netherley, Kincardineshire

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ABSTRACT

Among the leaf-shaped swords in the collections of the University of Aberdeen are three that have been recorded as having similar provenances in Kincardineshire. University museum records show that they have been described in very different ways over the two centuries since the first of them was reported as a ‘Roman gladius’. Since then discussion has varied, now focusing on whether they were made in the later Bronze Age or if they are recent replicas. Through a combination of metallurgical analysis and archival research, this paper untangles the stories of the swords. From what can now be shown to have been a single original sword, at least six copies were made; in addition to the two in the University, four reached the collections of other museums, making this perhaps the largest known group of 19th-century replica prehistoric metalwork from the British Isles. The history of these swords demonstrates changing attitudes of antiquarians and archaeologists to the distant past, particularly the shift from an interest in links to Roman invaders, founded in Classical sources, to the search for indigenous histories.

‘A VERY FINE ROMAN GLADIUS’

Writing a catalogue of the museum in Marischal College, Aberdeen,¹ Professor William Knight recorded

A Roman Gladius, and sheath.² Found in 1809 under deep moss on the estate of Balnagubs, in the line between the Roman camps of Rae-dykes and Drumoak. Presented in June 1818 by George Kerr Esqr., Surgeon, Aberdeen (Knight 1810–21).

Writing about the discovery of the sword (referred to here as Sword 1), John Stuart, Professor of Greek in Marischal College, explained that ‘we must be permitted to believe that the arms of our ancestors were, in the age of Agricola, nearly the same as in modern times, viz. the small shield and great iron sword or claymore; and that those of the same metal and

form as the one now described, were infallibly Roman’ (Stuart 1823, 35). While the attribution of bronze leaf-shaped swords to the Romans had been common in Scotland since the 18th century (Piggott 1984; 1989, 98) and was shared by other local antiquarians (eg Grant, 1792; 1818), Stuart here gives a very clear and specific reason for their identification as Roman. Writing a year after the visit of George IV to Scotland, Stuart’s equation of contemporary Highlanders and ancient Caledonians emphasized the primitive and historically marginal character of both. This was an attitude most clearly expressed by Sir Walter Scott, who saw Scottish history as ‘a series of violent tragedies’ (Morrison 2003, 48) such as the Battle of Culloden or the defeat of the Caledonians by Agricola at Mons Graupius that contributed little to contemporary Scotland. He thus contrasted Highland Scotland

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and Britain as ‘settled prosperity and empirical common sense. . . . Scotland is childhood, Britain adulthood: this is Scott’s essential and repeated equation’ (Pittock 1993, 147).

William Roy’s *Military Antiquities of the Romans in Britain* was published in 1793, demonstrating the links between Roman civilisation and the antiquities that survived in the Scottish landscape. Similarly, writing in *Archaeologia Scotica*, John Grant (1818, 31) claimed that ‘the source whence we are to draw authentic information concerning the early ages of British history, is from the Greek and Roman writers’, while John Stuart (1818, 54) believed that ‘the historical records of the Romans, [are] our best guide, and almost only authority’ to interpreting remains from antiquity. To classically-educated Scottish antiquarians of the early 19th century, the history of Roman Scotland was dominated by the *Agricola* of Tacitus, which culminates in the battle of Mons Graupius and the defeat of the Caledonians under their leader Calgacus. Attempts to link the literary account of the *Agricola* with archaeological evidence have continued to dominate accounts of the Roman invasion of Scotland to the present day (eg Hanson 1987; Maxwell 1989; Breeze 1996; Breeze 2002; Fraser 2005).

Although the case had been made for the battle having taken place near Raedykes (Barclay 1792), Roy (1793, 87) commented that certainty would only come with archaeological finds:

Somewhere, therefore, about Fettercairn, Monboddoo, or perhaps even still nearer to Stonehaven, it would seem probable that the battle may have happened; but unless a number of old Roman and Caledonian arms should, by mere accident, be dug up in the neighbourhood of those places, or that the vestiges of a camp should be discovered fronting one or other of them . . . , we can never hope to ascertain the particular spot.

Along with other antiquarians in the north-east, Stuart (1823) took up this challenge, arguing that the remains of the Roman camp associated with the battle of Mons Graupius had recently been

destroyed in Stonehaven. He saw Raedykes as a Caledonian camp, as it was

totally unlike those of the Romans in Scotland, which are universally rectangular, whereas in this one there is not a single right angle in its whole extent, which may amount to forty or fifty acres. Besides this, the intrenchment [*sic*] is strongest towards the sea, with several outworks on that side, an evident proof that they expected the enemy from that quarter. On an adjoining hill called the Kempstone Hill (Kemp, a fight), were found not fewer than five or six Druidical circles (Stuart 1823, 300).

A rusty iron loop found at Raedykes about 1800 and presented by Stuart to Marischal College Museum in 1812 (Knight 1810–21) was thus described as being ‘useful for no other purpose than to contain the axle of one of [the Caledonian] war chariots’ (Stuart 1823, 300). A visitor to the museum in 1825, Rev John Skinner of Camerton in Somerset, sketched the object and noted this attribution, presumably from a label in the display case (Skinner 1825). A list of ‘Curiosities Preserved in the Museum’ notes it, however, as having belonged to the other side in the battle:

An Iron Hoop supposed to belonging [*sic*] to the axle of *Agricola*’s Chariot. Found near the place where *Agricola* fought a desperate battle near Dunnottar (very much rusted no Wonder) (Anon 1833).

Stuart considered that the sword had been lost during the advance northwards by *Agricola*’s successor after the battle (Stuart 1823, 304) as it lay on a line between Raedykes (NGR: NO841901) and the Roman temporary camp on the Dee at Normandykes (NGR: NO829993). The power of this supposed association gave a provenance that was to last for over a century, with implicit references to Stuart’s provenance in museum catalogues of 1887 and 1912. Likewise, despite the identification of leaf-shaped swords as originating in the Bronze Age in the dominant texts of later 19th-century Scottish archaeology,

the *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* (Wilson 1851; 1863) and *Scotland in Pagan Times* (Anderson, 1886), the 1887 catalogue of the University's Archaeological Museum listed the sword and axle-loop with two bronze tripod pots, one of which was found in the same area, in a section titled 'Romano-British' (Michie, 1887), while in 1930 the Aberdeen City librarian could still comment it was 'at least of some significance' that the sword was discovered 'on the actual line of march of the legionaries across this district' (Fraser 1930, 64). Even though the swords were not described as Roman in the 1912 catalogue of the Anthropological Museum to which the University's archaeological collections had been transferred in 1907, the findspot continued to be given as 'in line between Roman camps of Rae-dykes and Drumoak' (Reid 1912, 20).

A further leaf-shaped sword (Sword 2) from Netherley was presented to the university in the 19th century, appearing for the first time in the 1887 catalogue. Unfortunately, the date of acquisition is not recorded as there are no known acquisition books or catalogues from the mid-19th century. The faint traces of the words 'Agricola' and 'Rome' appear on this sword, probably written prior to its acquisition by the museum. This sword was also described as a 'Roman Gladius', this time 'found under moss near three skulls, at Netherley, Kincardineshire' (Michie 1887, 20). This is an uncommon association but one that is known elsewhere, as with the Duddingston Loch hoard, in which Ewart Park phase swords are said to have been found with human bones (Coles 1959–60, 117), although the certainty of this association has been queried by Burgess (1976). As none of the earlier records of the swords mention the association with human bones, however, it cannot be given much credence.

It is striking that elsewhere in the 1887 catalogue, listed with other Bronze Age metalwork, is a reference to two 'bronze leaf-shaped swords' (Michie 1887, 23), though without any provenance. It is likely that this refers to the same two swords (Swords 1 and

2), as there are no other records of more than two leaf-shaped swords until the acquisition of a third in 1930. The two recorded find-spots associated with these swords, Balnagubs (NGR: NO864948) and Netherley (NGR: NO853934), lie less than 2km apart on either side of the Red Moss of Netherley. Knight (1810–21) refers to both place-names at different points of his catalogue, while Stuart (1823, 304) notes that it was found on the property of 'Mr Silver of Netherley'. It is therefore not possible to identify a more precise provenance.

BRONZE AGE SWORDS

By the mid-19th century bronze swords were generally recognized as dating to the Bronze Age. Still relying on the authority of Classical sources, Wilson (1851, 230) argued that they must be earlier, as they were unlike the large and blunt-ended Caledonian swords described by Tacitus, while he also noted (*ibid*, 230–1) the depiction of what he described as 'leaf-shaped' swords on ancient Greek pottery. Sir Walter Scott was among the first to recognize leaf-shaped swords as being prehistoric rather than Roman (Cheape et al 2002, 64), explaining in the preface to his *Border Antiquities* (Scott 1814, ix–xi) 'facts which certainly go far to establish that these brazen swords ... are of British, not of Roman manufacture'.

In 1846–7, the Danish antiquary J J A Worsaae made a journey through England, Scotland and Ireland during which he collected a number of items for the Royal Museum of Northern Antiquities in Copenhagen, now the National Museum of Denmark. In his memoirs he recorded that on 8 April 1847, while in Dublin, 'I received advice from Edinburgh that there was sent to me in London (addressed to Christian Roach Smidt) from the Antiquarian Society's collection 1 bronze sword, 2 bronze palstaves and a bowl shaped brooch, found beside a skeleton in Caithness' (Worsaae 1934, 335). On 30 November 1846, the Secretary of the

Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (1846a) had ‘read a letter from Mr Worsaae (who had lately visited Scotland on a mission from the Danish Government) proposing to exchange a few duplicate articles belonging to the Society for others of a similar description’. This request was agreed by the Society (1846b) on 25 December 1846. The form of this sword (here Sword 7) is almost identical to Sword 2.³

Worsaae’s motivation for acquiring these items was quite explicit, suggesting that ‘I think it will be interesting to have in our museum a small collection of Scandinavian antiquities found abroad, apart from what we already have from Greenland, Iceland and Norway’ (Worsaae 1934, 335). Viewing such swords as being Danish in *The Primeval Antiquities of Denmark* (first published in Danish in 1843) he argued that ‘to sail across the ocean and to wield the sword in sanguinary conflict, for the sake of winning glory and booty, formed from the earliest times the occupation and the delight of the inhabitants of the North’ (Worsaae 1849, 25) and that ‘We hold in our hands the swords, with which they made the Danish name respected and feared.... The remains of antiquity thus binds us more firmly to our native Land’ (ibid 149–50). His emphasis of a specifically Danish/Nordic origin for bronze swords found in Denmark and the importance of antiquities to national identity was clearly political (Smiles 1994, 30) and must be seen in the context of the build-up to the 1848–50 Danish–Prussian war during which ‘from the point of view of an archaeologist, he fought foreign encroachments, by publishing a series of part-political, part-scientific brochures’ (Müller 1886, 178).

On 12 May 1847, a letter to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (1847) was read ‘in which Herr Worsaae mentioned that the sword he had received from the Society turned out on close examination to be not genuine’ and that Worsaae had seen similar swords ‘forged in the North of the Country, and he presumed the sword in question had come from that quarter’ (ibid). The Society therefore decided

that ‘should they receive any donations of genuine swords similar in appearance to that presented to the Museum at Copenhagen, one of them should be reserved and forwarded in its stead’ (ibid), though this never happened. The sword was recorded in the inventory of the National Museum of Denmark as a ‘facsimile in metal of a bronze sword found in Scotland. Looks exactly like the Irish. About 1 Alen long’ (Axboe, pers comm). It is now part of the museum’s ‘Comparative collection’ of foreign antiquities, which was displayed by Ole Klindt-Jensen in the late 1960s (ibid).

By the 1886 publication of Joseph Anderson’s Rhind lectures on the Bronze Age to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, such swords were so clearly seen as belonging to the ‘advanced or fully-developed stage of the Bronze Age industry’ (Anderson 1886, 169) that there was no need to argue their date. Twentieth century work (eg Coles 1959–60; Colquhoun & Burgess 1988; Cowie 1988; Cowie & O’Connor 2007) has developed a finer chronology based on archaeological associations and typology, while much recent work has focused on radiocarbon dating and metal analysis (eg Needham et al 1998; Rohl & Needham 1998), placing them in the Ewart Park phase with a date centred on 1020–800 BC (Rohl & Needham 1998, 105). Escaping from the repetition of antiquarian descriptions, archaeological discussion had thus turned to a study of the swords themselves.

CAST AND FORGED METALS?

A further four swords of almost identical appearance to the one from Netherley have been identified: one in Marischal Museum (Sword 3), one in the collections of Aberdeen City Council (Sword 4), one in the Royal Armouries collection that is currently on loan to the British Museum (Sword 5) and one in the National Museums of Scotland (Sword 6), making a total of six copies (see illus 1 – though note that Sword 7 is not illustrated). Unfortunately, although most have



ILLUS 1 The original sword and copies (l-r: Sword 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)

associations with North-East Scotland, none are supported by detailed early archival sources. In summary, the provenance of the swords is as follows:

Sword 1

The sword now catalogued as ABDUA:19680 in the University of Aberdeen's collections was that found in 1809 and acquired by Marischal College in 1818 as a gift from George Kerr (Knight 1810–21). It appears both as one of two Roman swords and as one of two leaf-shaped swords in the 1887 museum catalogue (Michie 1887, 20 & 23). It was later catalogued as no. 252 by Reid (1912, 18) who says that it was donated by 'Mr. Silver of Netherley', as 'Kincardineshire 5' by Coles (1959–60, 84), as no. 467 by Colquhoun & Burgess (1988, 90 no 467), who classify it as a Ewart Park type of their Northern Step 1, and by Inglis (1988,

49) who refers to it as having been 'found under a moss near three skulls'.

Sword 2

Now in the University of Aberdeen's collections, catalogued as ABDUA:19681, the sword was first recorded in the 1887 Catalogue of King's College Museum both as a Roman sword 'found under moss near three skulls, at Netherley, Kincardineshire' donated by William Keith (Michie 1887, 20) and as one of two unprovenanced leaf-shaped swords (Michie 1887, 23). It was later catalogued as no. 253 by Reid (1912, 18) who records that it was donated by George Kerr, as 'Kincardineshire 1' from Balnagubs by Coles (1959–60, 84), by Inglis (1988, 49) and as a copy of ABDUA:19680 by Colquhoun & Burgess (1988, 90 no 467a). It is illustrated by Cowie (1988, 49, ill. 28) as having been found with chape ABDUA:19689.

Sword 3

ABDUA:19683 was acquired by the University of Aberdeen in 1953 from the collections of Christ's College, Aberdeen, whose museum had its origins in the private collections of Alexander Thomson (Hunt 1984). A handwritten catalogue of Thomson's private museum dating to 1862 refers to the sword as '1 Model of bronze sword found at Netherley (about 1815) Dr Geo. Kerr'⁴ (Thomson 1862). The belief that this sword was not authentic continued when it was acquired by the University, with the additional comment on the 1953 record describing it as 'a forgery being copy of 252' (Sword 1). Further authority for this was given by a handwritten note on the record 'Information from Mr Colquhoun [sic], Research Assist, Newcastle-upon-Tyne University 17/8/78', who duly recorded it as a fake (Colquhoun & Burgess 1988, 90 no 467b). However, Coles (1959–60, 84) included it in his corpus as 'Kincardineshire 6'. Considered by the museum to be a modern recent replica, the sword was treated differently from others in the collection over the following decades: it was lent to Inverurie Museum from 1965–71, had a wooden handle added in the early 1980s and was included in the 1988 catalogue of Bronze Age metalwork (Inglis 1988). It was handled by school classes and other groups, with the haft helping them to handle it as a weapon rather than as a museum object and signalling its status as a replica.

Sword 4

Aberdeen City acquired the sword, now catalogued ABDMS:00352, from an Aberdeen-based collector in 1945. Coles (1959–60, 82) assumes a probable Aberdeenshire provenance, while Colquhoun and Burgess (1988, 90 no. 467c) consider it as a copy and

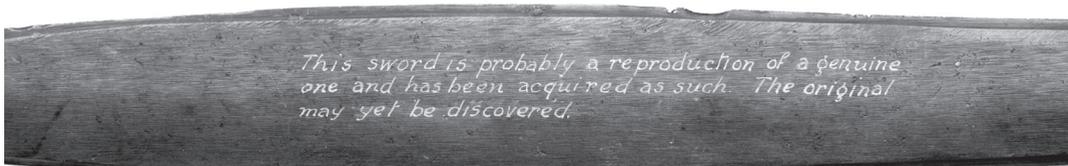
note a possible Caithness provenance for which there appears to be no other evidence.

Sword 5

The sword currently on loan to the British Museum from the Royal Armouries is probably that numbered 41 (Lee-Dillon 1910) with no recorded provenance. It does not appear in Coles (1959–60), though Colquhoun and Burgess (1988, 105 no. 610) suggest 'possibly Kent' as a provenance. Noting its similarity to Sword 1, they consider that 'it is possible that it came from the same mould in antiquity' (Colquhoun & Burgess 1988, 90). The earliest record is the Tower Armoury catalogue of 1870 (Hewitt 1870, 90) after which it was lent to the British Museum as part of a collection of archaeological items – most of which, including the other leaf-shaped swords, were returned in 1988.

Sword 6

NMS: DL54 was purchased by the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now National Museums of Scotland (NMS)) from Haughton House, near Alford in Aberdeenshire in 1925, though whether it was originally acquired by John Farquharson (1779–1854) or his son Robert Farquharson (1823–90) of Haughton is not known (Burke 1914, 649). There is no indication that it was a copy in the report of the acquisition in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Anon 1925–6, 19) and its catalogue number DL54 indicates that it was classified as a 'bronze sword from Scotland' (Cowie, pers comm). Its absence from the recent archaeological studies (Coles 1959–60; Colquhoun & Burgess 1988) is presumably because it was by then known to be a copy and had written on it 'This sword is probably a reproduction of a genuine one and has been acquired as such. The original may yet be discovered' (illus 2).



ILLUS 2 Inscription on Sword 6

Sword 7

The first record of the sword, now 10517 in the National Museum of Denmark, was its acquisition by J J A Worsaae as a gift from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 1846a, 1846b). He subsequently noted it as 'not genuine' (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 1847). It has not featured in any published studies of Scottish Late Bronze Age metalwork.

One of the striking features of the swords is their similarity. Six of them are virtually identical, while the other is very similar but has a broken hilt (Sword 1). While some writers (Worsaae; Colquhoun & Burgess 1988; Coles 1959–60) have considered some or all of these swords to have been modern copies, this has not been unanimous, with Colquhoun and Burgess (1988, 90) considering that the Royal Armouries sword may have been made in antiquity from the same mould as Sword 1.

In the hope of clarifying their status, all but one of the swords were analysed in 2003–4 by the Analytical Research Department of the National Museums of Scotland and the Department of Conservation, Documentation and Science of the British Museum. The sword in the National Museum of Denmark has not been analysed. I am grateful to Laurianne Robinet (NMS) for undertaking preliminary analyses of the Marischal Museum specimens and to Dr Katherine Eremin (NMS) and Paul Craddock (British Museum) for a fuller analysis of the swords and for their helpful comments. The swords currently in Scotland were investigated by the National Museums of Scotland (Eremin & Tate 2004) by energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence (XRF) and X-radiography, while that in London was similarly studied by the British Museum (Craddock, Ambers & Hook 2004). As the XRF analysis was a surface technique, it is important to recognize that the figures may not represent the bulk of the material, so the results should be regarded as semi-quantitative.

The analytical work on the swords in Scottish museums has been discussed by Eremin and Tate (2004) who conclude that

The zinc levels in sword 45.2.237 [Sword 4] are above those expected in genuine Bronze Age artefacts. Sword 45.3.237 is hence likely to be a 19th-century copy but appears to have been produced from a different alloy to the other proposed copies.

The composition of sword 19680 [Sword 1] and chape 19689² is within the range expected for genuine Bronze Age artefacts, particularly given the errors from lack of abrasion.... The current analytical data suggests that both artefacts are likely to be genuine.

Swords 19681 [Sword 2], 19683 [Sword 3] and DL54 [Sword 6] have much lower levels of lead and probably have higher levels of bismuth and zinc than expected in Bronze Age metalwork of this period. These swords are hence likely to be 19th-century replicas.

The sword in the Royal Armouries collection (Sword 5) was analysed by Craddock, Ambers & Hook (2004). They concluded that its analysis was similar to that of Sword 4, suggesting that these two swords 'could have been cast from the same stock of metal' (*ibid.*, 3). The similar numbers written on both these swords may also indicate a common origin. They further comment, however, that

on the basis of composition alone, it would be difficult to establish that the swords were not ancient. The tin content is within the range of that found in Late Bronze Age bronze. The occurrence of lead in Late Bronze Age metalwork is very variable, ranging from traces up to almost 30%, and thus the rather low lead content of the swords is of little significance in determining their likely age. Two of the swords have a little zinc which is unusual but not unknown for Bronze Age and Iron Age metalwork from the British Isles (Craddock, Cowell, & Stead 2004)... The trace elements are also of some interest. Small amounts of iron, arsenic, silver, nickel and antimony are regularly found in alloys of all periods and thus are of no particular significance for dating these pieces. The traces of bismuth reported in swords 19681 [Sword 2], 19683 [Sword 3] & DL54 [Sword 6] (but not detected in 45.2.237 [Sword 4] or the Tower Armoury sword [Sword 5]) are



ILLUS 3 Detail of side of hilt of Sword 2 showing file marks

more important. The detection limit for bismuth for the XRF analysis in Edinburgh and in London is approximately 0.1%, and this level would be very high for most prehistoric copper for the British Bronze Age. However, the deep deposits of copper from the south west of England which began to be worked from the beginning of the 18th century, and which by the early 19th century were the dominant copper source, regularly contain substantial traces of bismuth, typically between about 0.05 and 1.0% of bismuth (Craddock & Hook 1997).

Visual examination of the swords also highlights the distinction between Sword 1 and the other swords. Those considered to be 19th-century copies each have distinct file marks on the edges of their hilts, a feature that is unknown on Bronze Age swords (illus 3). The rivet holes also appear modern and created post-casting, having been drilled through in slightly different positions on each sword. X-radiography of five of the swords (Swords 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6) also confirmed that the 'repair line' on the hilt was a superficial feature, with the swords having been cast in one piece. Eremin and Tate (2004, 3–4) also commented that

swords 19683 [Sword 3] and DL54 [Sword 6] have a high porosity in some areas, indicative of casting. The rounded pores show no signs of working, suggesting these swords were left as cast. Sword 19681 [Sword 2] has a homogenous structure with no signs of porosity. In contrast, sword 19680 [Sword 1] has a heterogeneous structure, which may be due to working of the metal after casting, with no signs of porosity.

Close study of the hilt of Sword 1 revealed a deposit of a lead-like metal, presumably solder,

which may relate to the 'completion' of the hilt before a casting was taken to make the copies. The slight 'kink' in the angle of the hilt and a slight difference in form of its end also implies that it was created in the 19th century (illus 4). Unfortunately, a drawing of this sword by Skinner (1825, 28) shows it to be complete, but it does not help date the making of copies as the illustration is not clear enough to show whether it is depicting an original unbroken sword or a 'repaired' sword.

The analyses are consistent with all but Sword 1 being 19th-century copies, though with a metal composition remarkably similar to that characteristic of the Ewart Park phase to which the Netherley sword belongs (Rohl & Needham 1998, 105–9). Perhaps the clearest marker is the raised low zinc content, which would be unusual for pre-Roman metalwork in Scotland. The copies appear to have been made in two batches: one batch, comprising Swords 2, 3 and 6, being more porous and having a higher bismuth and zinc content than Swords 4 and 5.

CONCLUSION: SOUVENIRS AND THE COLLECTION

Bound in with Knight's catalogue is a list ordered by date of acquisition (Knight 1810–21), to which previous writers have not referred. In addition to the information Knight gave in the catalogue, when recording Sword 1 in 1819 he also noted that 'some very exact facsimiles were made and given away, but this is the original, attested J.S.' (ibid). As with other examples given above, this statement is given an authority, that of 'J.S.',



ILLUS 4 Details of hilts of replica swords (l-r: Sword 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)

presumably John Stuart, the College's Professor of Greek and noted antiquarian. Although there is no indication as to how many replicas were made or to whom they were given, this is clear evidence that it was the 'parent' of others made some time between 1809 and 1819.

While it is clear that only one of the swords was made in the Bronze Age, the other swords are much more than fakes. Believed to be a Roman style of sword when the original was found in 1809, the copies appear to have been made within the next few years to celebrate the activities of the Romans in North-East Scotland rather than with any intent to deceive. The copies can therefore be seen as 'souvenirs', as discussed by Stewart (1999, 136) in which a souvenir 'must remain impoverished and partial so that it can be supplemented by a narrative discourse'. The Roman context that was supplied tied the swords to their owners by relating them to a Classical, yet Scottish, history that was eagerly sought by early 19th-century antiquarians.

With their completed hilts, the copies can be seen as new swords rather than merely replicas of the original. As such, they can be seen as 'hyperreal' (Eco 1987), copying the ideal rather than merely their physical state. The existence of the copies did not undermine the aura of the original; rather they highlighted the importance of the original find, just as Benjamin (1999, 236) noted that 'precisely because authenticity is not reproducible, the intensive penetration of certain (mechanical) processes of reproduction was instrumental in differentiating and grading authenticity'. With so many copies made of it, Sword 1 has thus gained an additional significance.⁵

The attributions offered for the swords have mobilized various forms of authority. Perhaps the most significant has been the written authority of experts, whether they be antiquarians, Classical authors or archaeological scientists. Such references also record the importance of the social networks that surrounded the swords in the 19th century within which they were collected

and discussed. They offer a context within which the swords can be understood, most powerfully in narrative forms of accepted status, such as the account of the Roman invasion of Scotland in the *Agricola* or current accounts of the traditions of Bronze Age metalwork deposition (eg Bradley 1998). Indeed, the power of text is such that the written record established by the 1820s became the prime record to which the 1887 and 1912 catalogues referred, rather than to the objects themselves. This may explain the reference to four swords in the 1887 catalogue; by then the Roman swords only existed as texts. As the acceptance of Classical texts as an authority diminished, the antiquarian account became marginalized and the knowledge of the copies made in the early 19th century was ignored and almost became lost along with the belief that they were Roman.

Commenting on ‘the changes which (a work of art) may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership’, in 1936 Walter Benjamin (1999, 214) anticipated the more recent interest in the ‘social life of things’ (Appadurai 1986). While such studies have given rich insights into the changing meanings of objects, they often concentrate on the social context at the expense of studying the material aspects of the objects themselves. Just as Kopytoff (1986, 67) has shown when discussing a Suku hut that ‘the physical state of the hut at each given age corresponds to a particular use’, so the differential damage to the blades of the swords shows that their history since the 1809 discovery has existed in more tangible form than in text alone. The most striking differences are the words that have been written on them. That most of these have been written by museums whose supposed aim is the unchanging preservation shows the importance of such writing. Sometimes, as with the words ‘Agricola’ and ‘Rome’ on Sword 2 or the written comment on Sword 6 that it is a copy, this writing directly relates the object to a wider narrative. The catalogue numbers are different, such as those on the swords in Marischal Museum that relate to the cataloguing systems established in 1912 and the 1980s, in which the

relationship is to the classification system of a collection. Rather than existing as individual objects with biographies, they thus became representatives of those classification schemes, highlighting Stewart’s contention (1999, 153) that the collection’s existence ‘is dependent upon principles of organization and categorization’. It can therefore be seen as symbolizing their transfer from being ‘souvenirs’ to being part of a ‘collection’ (Stewart 1999) rather than just a means by which information could be related to them.

Between their changing physical states and shifting texts, the meanings of the swords have changed dramatically over two hundred years. Only by combining a detailed study of their material aspects with an understanding of their textual context has it been possible to untangle the story. While this has confirmed that one of the swords was made and deposited in the later Bronze Age, probably in association with a chape, it has also revealed a large group of replica leaf-shaped swords in the British Isles, with a clear motivation for their creation. These replicas were made not as fakes to deceive, but as tangible ‘souvenirs’ of the Romans in Scotland. Later, as interpretations of Danish adventures and British bronzeworking became dominant, so the meanings of the swords have changed, encapsulating the changing attitudes of antiquarians and archaeologists to the distant past.

NOTES

- 1 The history and names of university museums in Aberdeen can be confusing. By the late 18th century there were general museums in both King’s College and Marischal College. Following the fusion of the two colleges in 1860 to form the University of Aberdeen, teaching in King’s College was dominated by arts and divinity while Marischal College housed the teaching of science and medicine. The museum of King’s College was thus re-founded to become the University’s Archaeological Museum, while that in Marischal College displayed natural history specimens.



ILLUS 5 Chape ABDUA:19689

Following the building of major extensions to Marischal College at the turn of the 20th century, an Anthropological Museum was established there, drawing together the collections of the King's College Archaeological Museum with material that had been displayed in Marischal College. The Anthropological Museum was re-named Marischal Museum in 1990.

- 2 It is likely that the 'sheath' mentioned by Knight (1810–21) can be identified as a bronze chape in the Marischal Museum collection (ABDUA:19689) (illus 5). This has no clearly recorded provenance and does not appear in discussions of the Netherley swords by Henderson (1938) or Colquhoun & Burgess (1988). It is illustrated as having been found in Netherley by Cowie (1988, 32, ill 28), though Coles (1959–60, 100) identified it as having formed part of a hoard from Cauldhame, Angus. This provenance derives from a drawing held by the Society of Antiquaries of London of two chapes from Cauldhame, one labelled 'Aberdeen Museum'. This seems unlikely, however, as there are no other records of a second chape from Cauldhame and only one chape is mentioned in the first volume of *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Anon, 1851–4, 181) which was published very soon after the discovery in 1853 (Coles 1959–69, 100; Colquhoun & Burgess 1988, 93). It may therefore be that Knight (1810–21) was referring to this chape when he noted that the Balnagubs find consisted of a sword 'and sheath'.
- 3 Unfortunately, it has not been possible to acquire a photograph of this sword for this publication.
- 4 Kerr's role as an antiquarian is discussed with reference to items he donated to the museum in Marischal College in Curtis & Hunter (2006).
- 5 Another group of replica swords was identified by Colquhoun & Burgess (1988, 124 no 772) of

which two are in NMS (DL13 & 15) (Colquhoun & Burgess 1988, 124, nos. 772 & 774).

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