

BRONZE AGE METALWORK FROM PERRY OAKS

by Andrew J Lawson

The small assemblage comprises two objects from different, secure contexts, both recovered during hand excavation. Neither object has been metallographically analysed but their outward appearance suggests they are made from copper alloys, presumably bronze.

1. **Ring**, formed from coiled stout rod of oval section with smoothly rounded ends. Context 125004 (base of a large pit); SF No. 2; Conservation No. CD990128

The rod is coiled almost three times to form a short cylinder. Height: 19.6mm; max. ext. diam. 29.7 mm; of rod *c* 7 mm high; 3.5 mm thick. Good condition, mottled pale and dark green surfaces with slight sheen.

Objects of this form are found in contexts of widely different dates. However, their earliest appearance in Britain is during the middle Bronze Age following an origin and spread from Northern Europe (Smith 1959, 149; Rowlands 1976, 96). Associated pottery from the context of this find confirms a middle Bronze Age date and an attribution to Needham's (1996) Period 5 (1500-1150 cal BC). At this time, coiled rings are not common but are occasionally found associated with other ornamental types in hoards belonging to the Taunton Phase of metalworking: for example, at Hollingbury and Stump Cross, Sussex (Smith 1959, fig. 4) or Durnford/Lake, Wilts (Moore and Rowlands 1972, 61-3). They are normally regarded as personal ornaments, as finger rings, on the basis of continental contexts, but they could have performed other functions.

2. **Spearhead**, cast with hollow socket and side loops. Context 149042 (recut of a field boundary); SF No. 25; Conservation No. CD990112

Length 247 mm, max blade width 32.4 mm; with plain, flat blades without bevel; the midrib is angular throughout the length of the leaf-shaped blade but blends into the oval cross-section of the long, hollow cast socket. This bears a single perforated loop with parallel sided protective plate on either side, midway between the rounded blade and the end of the socket: the casting flashes have been smoothed but remain distinct. A large fragment of wood (identified as ash) is lodged within the socket. The surface bears an olive green patina extensively pock marked by areas of light green and brown corrosion.

The spearhead is clearly a middle Bronze Age side-looped spearhead but is at the extreme of the length distribution (Rowlands 1976, fig. 2). The chronological position of this type has been discussed at length (for example, Ehrenburg 1977, 7-9; Rowlands 1979, Ch. II 3), while associated radiocarbon dates have been assessed by Needham *et al.* (1997). Although Needham *et al.* (*op cit.*, 85) admit to a certain imprecision in the dating of metalwork of the Taunton phase as a result of the re-use and long functional life of spearheads, a date between 1450 and 1250 cal BC would seem appropriate.

The radiocarbon date derived from the associated wood fragment (R26802/7; 2932±55 BP) of 1308 BC to 940 BC (2 sigma) therefore appears late in comparison with the anticipated typological date. However, it serves to emphasise both the potential for the reuse of functional bronzes or the deliberate deposition of inherited or 'heirloom' objects in which the antiquity of the object is recognised and valued.

Side looped spearheads are widely distributed throughout southern Britain with a marked concentration in the Thames Valley (Rowlands 1976, Map 15). They have been found both in hoards and as isolated finds, sometimes on settlements and occasionally in burials. Variations in the circumstances of discard or burial suggest that different groups of people in the middle Bronze Age disposed of spearheads in different ways (for example, in wet places, in ditches or in hoards) and presumably for different reasons (Lawson 1999, 100).

References

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