Book Reviews

THE EARLY AND MIDDLE BRONZE AGE SPEARHEADS OF BRITAIN

Published corpora are landmarks when they come – which is all too infrequently. Richard Davis is one of few scholars in recent decades prepared to put in the necessary effort and he has done so with one of the major and surprisingly neglected types of Bronze Age metalwork – the spearhead.

The corpus, published as part of the ever-productive and invaluable Prähistorische Bronzefunde series, has been restricted largely to Early and Middle Bronze Age spearheads, and thus mainly to tanged and looped-sOCKETed forms. However, neither of these delimitations – temporal or morphological – is strictly adhered to. Pegged spearheads of the late Middle Bronze Age, such as found in a few Penard hoards, are omitted on the basis that they cannot be distinguished in typological terms from a great number of Late Bronze Age examples (p.6). However, unlooped pegged spearheads of Early Bronze Age type and a few others (nos 195, 196, 678 & 679) are included. Conversely, Davis has brought in to his fold a small group of overtly Late Bronze Age spearheads which happen to have harked back to the loop feature perhaps ‘as a revival of an old design that was connected with warrior ancestors…’ (p.163), and yet these are all pegged as is appropriate to their period. And there are, again, a few others (nos 687, 688, 1011, 1011A) that have to be attributed to later traditions. One might quibble too with Davis’ decision to call Group 10 spearheads ‘protected-looped’ – a perforation set well into a broad blade can hardly be described as a loop even if that is the ancestry.

Davis draws extensively on the complementary work covering Irish Middle Bronze Age spearheads by Greer Ramsey (1989), a crucial work sadly not published. At last it is possible to see the broad patterns of the various types across these islands and the near Continent. Davis’ use only of absolute numbers of finds, however, limits interpretation. Relative numbers for separate regions would offer much greater insights, side-stepping some of the biases caused in deposition and recovery patterns.

On the recording side, the catalogue entries are in the familiar PBF format which allows only succinct description. While the illustrations generally give a good rendering of the objects concerned, they lack any side views except for a detail for the loop. Side views are necessary for comprehending the full form of Groups 2, 3 and 4 spearheads (Early and early Middle Bronze Age); they can also best portray the severe bending that Davis sometimes attributes to intentional damage as part of deposition rituals as well as the reworking of tips which may be suspected from a number of the drawings. Reworking can affect the classification of blade shape on which Davis relies heavily, hence for example creating a nonsensical ‘variant’ out of a single spearhead (no 194). Aside from the Variants, always comprising very few examples, the classification scheme comprises broad Groups with sub-divisions termed Types.

Davis’ Groups stand up to scrutiny pretty well, although most are essentially spearhead types that have stood the test of time for over a century. Group 1 comprises tanged spearheads, the only difficulty of definition coming with regard to the miscellaneous series of Early Bronze Age tanged knives (p.34) and this is relevant to nos 42, 44 & 45. Group 2 covers all the Early Bronze
Age socketed types, those with pegholes (2A) and those with loops (2B). The previously accepted and still apposite term ‘end-looped’ is rejected by Davis for the latter, whose more northerly and westerly distribution links in with a strong representation in Ireland. The less frequent pegged form is decidedly more south-easterly.

Group 3 is easily recognisable as the overtly kite-shaped type, also characterised by ribs converging along the blade wings and a midrib that stops short of the tip. Davis makes the interesting suggestion that the broader blades were developed to serve better in ‘cutting moves’ during combat (p.47). Group 3 is also well known for its abundance in Ireland, 303 examples compared to 48 scattered across Britain. A minor type, 3A, has a specific under-blade moulding linking it to Group 2B spearheads (p.47) and the Killymaddy moulds, Co Antrim, give an Acton-equivalent date.

Within Group 6 the main basis of sub-division is blade shape, but this poses boundary problems for, in Davis’ own estimation, both corrosion and regular re-sharpening have affected the precise line of the blade edges (p.66). Of the three shapes he identifies, most are ‘flame’ (296), fewer ‘ogival’ (64) and fewer still ‘leaf’ (34, although 15 or more could be added). Despite the considerable numbers of this ‘developed’ side-looped suite in Britain, there are relatively few from Ireland (Ramsey 1989). Davis further sub-divides the first shape perhaps simply because of the large population available and differences in distribution between the five resulting Types (6A-6E) are subtle. The thorny problem of the longevity of side-looped spearheads endures because of the episodic hoard record and Peter Northover’s evaluation of metal composition becomes crucial for it turns out that Group 6 above all others has compositions consistent with his ‘M’ metal circulating in the Acton and early Taunton phases (p.180); they can also have ‘later’ compositions. External hoards, such as that from Caen in Normandy (Edeine 1961) and a radiocarbon-dated example (Needham et al 1997, DoB 31) make Davis’ view of the ‘developed’ side-looped spearhead emerging only towards the end of Acton (p.108) look unduly conservative.

Group 9 introduces the most striking weakness of Davis’ classification. Most Group 9 basal-looped spearheads (9B & 9C) have the unmistakable long sub-triangular blades. Type 9A, however, comprising 31 examples, is defined as having a ‘flame’ blade. Davis groups it with the triangular blade forms because, he argues, they have ‘projecting’ rather than ‘incorporated’ loops. This proves to be a fine distinction in comparison to the range within Group 8; taken all together these present a very finely graduated spectrum between straight and angled blade-base/loop-plate junctions. Davis repeatedly emphasises the careful working of many cast loops to create lozenge plates during the post-cast finishing process, but has failed to realise that this often and variably results in a break in the outline between loop, which is hammered inwards, and blade edge, which is stretched outwards in the process of hammer-sharpening. Supporting evidence that most of Type 9A spearheads belong to an earlier horizon than the rest of Group 9 comes from radiocarbon determinations on corpus nos 830, 844 & 858 which, despite Davis’ reservations (p.154), collectively point to a date in or close to the 14th century (DoB’s 32, 47, 19). Type 9B and 9C together (124 examples) have a decidedly English distribution, yet reasonable numbers from Ireland (40) suggest this could be down to regional patterns of deposition rather than actual circulation.

The leaf-shaped basal-looped spearheads of Group 8 have long been recognised to pre-date their sub-triangular cousins Group 9 (this goes back to Hawkes and Smith, rather than just Rowlands, p.117). Davis attempts to derive them from effectively triangular Irish spearheads which he describes as ‘kite-shaped’ (p.119) and the typological argument for the Irish origin he claims for basal-looped spearheads is poor; Britain or NW Europe are much better candidates for the integration of moderately long leaf blades and loops. Group 8 also suffers from some poor grouping and attributions. Some spearheads placed in Type 8A (eg, nos 715, 718, 725, 762, 768) show the blade ogivality appropriate to 8B. The high average length of the ogival-bladed type is
noted and this could suggest that ogivality was a consequence of stretching blade length without wanting to increase width and overall weight in equal proportion.

Three less familiar groups have emerged from the study. **Group 4** spearheads are defined on the basis of kite-shaped blades which are narrower than in Group 3 and rib-less; midribs now usually extend all the way to the tip. Most of Type 4A (but not nos 132, 135-6, 142, 144 – for which cf Group 6) can probably be combined with 4B, whose smaller size hardly merits a separate ‘type’. Otherwise this is a useful grouping with typological links to Early Bronze Age socketed spearheads, including the long midrib and it is hard to see why Davis places them only towards the end of Acton (p.58).

**Group 5** ‘wide-blade’ spearheads are characterised by leaf blades that have sometimes in the past been dubbed ‘ivy-leaf’ (a term not favoured by Davis); they were previously regarded by Rowlands (1976, 52) as a sub-group within the large side-looped class. There is though the important additional distinction of a midrib curtailed part way along the blade where it becomes a narrow beading, just as on Group 3 weapons. The contrast between the two Groups is accentuated by the lack of blade ribs on 5 despite the broad span of the blade wings. Davis sees Group 5 as having derived from Group 3 in the middle of the Acton stage (p.64), but potential influence from continental leaf-shaped spearheads, as so often in this volume, is ignored (note the imported Tréboul type spearhead from Battlegore, Somerset, no 1040). Their predominance in Britain relative to Ireland (43:6) also gives a broadly complementary distribution.

**Group 7** is avowedly an eclectic mix characterised by variant loop positions and configurations and called collectively by Davis ‘special side-looped spearheads’. Type 7A spearheads have just single loops. Three with highly distinctive so-called ‘rapier-shaped’ blades are classified as type 7E to which could be added spearhead nos 700 and probably 699 (from 7D). Type 7D, ‘large’, is by far the least satisfactory type in this group and the remaining examples go better loosely grouped with type 7B, all having loops high on the socket. Most of Group 7 can be assigned to the Penard metalworking assemblage on the combined basis of associations, radiocarbon dates and metal composition.

The small group of **Late Bronze Age basal-looped spearheads** (no Group number), although looking back in some respects to the Middle Bronze Age series, stand apart in time (Ewart phase) and morphology. Sockets are suddenly short rather than long and pegholes are consistently present; the weapons are large, relatively thick and heavy, though well crafted (p.160). Loop plates are narrow, following on from Group 9, but tend to be more square-cut. Midribs are, with one exception, of rounded lozenge section, but one point of internal diversity is that five have ‘projecting’ loops (Type A) and three have ‘incorporated’ loops (Type B).

For Richard Davis, the over-riding explanation of changing spearhead style is the onward march of technological skills to the exclusion of any more socially driven factors. Constantly, one is reminded of nineteenth century models of ‘industrial progress’ in the evolution of this weapon class. While high craft skills were patently involved and in general these improved with time, a purely evolutionary model fails to ask why at certain times there may be step changes in design, or why certain forms may run in parallel, being either complementary in function (eg, Group 6 side-looped spearheads versus Groups 8 & 9 basal-looped) or competitive in status expression, as may be the case between protected-opening spearheads (Group 10) and the contemporary, triangular basal-looped ones (Group 9). Such ideas are not explored by Davis and his determination to find linear evolutionary strands undoubtedly constrains some types too narrowly in time.
When Davis does allow some longer continuation of certain types, it is put down to the old chestnut of regional retardation; regions beyond the Thames and Trent valleys and the Fenlands had yet to catch up with their technological advances (eg, p.110, 153). Differential technological accomplishment should not be ruled out, but cannot be argued on the basis of recovered distributions without careful evaluation of bias factors. While Davis accepts that a high proportion of spearheads were intended as permanent deposits, the obvious corollary is not acknowledged – that choice to deposit permanently in certain circumstances also implies choice not to do so in many others; that bronze production and circulation can exist without necessarily producing archaeological fall-out. The lessons of the Dainton clay mould assemblage (mentioned briefly on p.166) and of other mould finds are not being learnt. Why is the Croglin mould from Cumbria (no 1034) currently impossible to parallel (p.165) – can it really have existed in a style vacuum?

The treatment of contexts is conventional, wet-place finds are automatically seen as votive deposits, those from dry land sites, unknowable, except that hoards are acknowledged to be largely votive. Davis does, however, show an important rise over time in wet-place deposition (p.25 & passim).

Peter Northover’s appendix (pp.174-87) is valuable in bringing together all extant metal analyses (Table 8). An initial passage assesses the compatibility of various techniques applied over more than half a century of analytical programmes, and is followed by comparisons between the Groups and Types (where the sample is large enough) with respect to both alloying and the two trace elements most consistently present: arsenic and nickel. Although there is much overlap between distributions he teases out a number of shifts which can be related to his past definitions of impurity types (based initially on Welsh bronze metalwork) and hence to temporal change. He concludes with some useful new thoughts on the production/reproduction implications of different mould materials. A second appendix lists both secure and possible associated finds (totalling 80!), but the opportunity was not taken to assemble the known circumstances of each.

Many of the criticisms raised might have been avoided with more systematic metrical and feature correlation analysis. This would certainly have given better understanding of modalities versus continuums. Some aspects of terminology are poor. In particular, use of the term ‘ridge’ is unfortunate for the fine beading present along the top of many of the midribs of varied cross-sections. The function of the spearheads is raised from time to time and discussion includes a novel and convincing concept based on weapon-expert advice and a measure of experimental work (pp. 23-4; also Davis 2006). For Davis, Type 9B ‘represented the most effective combat weapon type of the period, with significant advantages over the rapier’ (p.139), but note that early heavy swords already existed in Britain by this stage. Large weapons are repeatedly ascribed to ceremonial functions, but overall there is little sense of parallel functional streams to account, for example, for the predominantly small side-looped spearheads. Difficulty in understanding how the loops themselves would have functioned causes Davis to reflect back to Wilde’s idea that they held tassles etc. He suggests the loops were increasingly non-functional and that they ‘had become considered an integral part of the spearhead “template” in the British Isles during the Middle Bronze Age, and they were retained for reasons of traditional practice, associated with ritual and warrior values’ (p.25).

At time Davis presents an inconsistent classification and an overly evolutionary approach to interpretation. There is no consideration of staccato developments or of pure invention, and above all no discussion of what drove change other than the pursuit of technical advances. There is no summation of trends through time. Critical though I have been of many aspects of this volume, it has deserved a lengthy treatment. Richard Davis’ substantial collation and systematic presentation of the data gives us much to work with and must be applauded above all for that.
References


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