Book Reviews

DIE SCHILDE DER BRONZEZEIT IN NORD-, WEST- UND ZENTRALEUROPA BY MARION UCKELMANN


Among the most enduring contributions to our Proceedings has been John Coles’s study of Bronze Age shields which has held the field until the appearance of this volume fifty years later (Coles 1962). Looking back, it is perhaps surprising to see that Coles’s discussion was only thirty pages long, followed by a five-page catalogue: Uckelmann’s text on shields, based on her Münster thesis, is more than five times longer and supplemented by sections on cuirasses, shields and greaves, with lists of finds rather than detailed catalogue entries.

A short introduction, concerned mainly with the history of research, is followed by two main chapters. The first, on the finds, contains 90 entries for shields, 1 for a tab (from Flag Fen) and 9 for bronze fittings from organic shields, and ends with discussions of some possible shield finds and of miniature shields. The second chapter, on interpretation, covers: deposition, manufacture, representations of shields, their distribution, chronology, function and interpretation, then the other defensive armour and a concluding discussion of Bronze Age combat. There are summaries in German and English: a recent article on the shield from South Cadbury covers the chronology in particular in English (Needham et al 2012). Each shield is illustrated by both a drawing and a photograph at full size, reproduced at 1:5, often supplemented by detailed photographs at 1:1 or 1:2.

The author identifies eight distinct types, while three shields with related decoration are combined in a Plzeň group and two more with elaborate ornament are not classified. The Lommelev-Nyírtura type combines fragments from Carpathian hoards with a complete example from Denmark. Nipperwiese shields are relatively small and thick with ornament of two concentric ribs. English finds are known from Stuart Needham’s publication (1979) but the type seems to have originated in Germany (the eponymous findspot on the east bank of the River Oder is now Ognica in Poland and the shield found there appears to have been destroyed during World War II). The next four types are found in Britain or Ireland, with the exception of one Yetholm shield from Denmark. Harlech shields have multiple concentric ribs. The two Coveney shields bear a variation whereby the ribs meander to form a snake-like motif. Athenry-Eynsham shields are the smallest type, with large bosses and a single concentric rib. Yetholm shields combine multiple ribs and small bosses in hundreds or even thousands. Bronze shields of Herzsprung type are found in the Nordic area. These are slightly oval in outline, with distinctly oval bosses and U-shaped notches among ribs and bosses. Although geographically distinct, Uckelmann attributes five organic finds from Ireland to the Herzsprung type because of their notches: one shield of leather, two of wood and two wooden formers for leather shields (all the wood identified as alder).

Shields from South Cadbury, Long Wittenham and Chertsey found since Coles wrote have been published in articles mentioned above (Needham et al 2012; Needham 1979). The most
Important recent find is a hoard of at least eighteen Herzsprung shields recovered from an old lake bed at Fröslunda, Sweden, in 1985 and now in Västergötlands Museum, Skara. This has yet to be fully published and was not available for detailed study by Uckelmann. Gravel quarrying on the River Derwent at Church Wilne, Derbyshire, has produced remains of two shields. The finds spot of the shield bought at West Linton, Peeblesshire, has been identified as Culterpark Hill, Lanarkshire. The example from the Thames between Walton and Hampton, Surrey, has been located in Limerick. This was formerly in the Pitt Rivers collection, and may thus be the shield in Frank Holl’s portrait of the General (the resemblance is not exact but the artist could be forgiven for not reproducing all the ribs and bosses; the Coveney shield from Auchmaliddie is to be seen more clearly in the frieze in the main hall of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery). Another old find, published here for the first time, is a Yetholm shield in a private collection since at least the mid-nineteenth century and attributed to North Yorkshire: leather from its grip has been radiocarbon dated.

Since most bronze shields are single finds made long ago, there is little absolute dating evidence. However, a combination of hoard finds from central Europe, radiocarbon dating of the organic finds from Ireland and of the ‘North Yorkshire’ grip, plus the composition of a few bronze analyses by Peter Northover can be combined to produce a plausible picture (see Abb. 28 with Needham et al. 2012, table 5 & fig 7). Purely organic shields go back to the Early Bronze Age in Ireland, while organic shields with bronze fittings were current in the central-European Tumulus culture. The earliest evidence for bronze shields is from the early Urnfield culture in central Europe whence they seem to have spread quickly to southern Scandinavia, Britain and Ireland. Most of the insular types seem to have been in production soon afterwards, during the Penard phase (1300-1125 BC) though manufacture continued into the succeeding Wilburton phase. The South Cadbury shield, whose dry context and finds spot in southern England are both unusual, is currently interpreted as a late find, perhaps deposited when bronze shields were going out of use. This picture is complicated by the representation of shields on rock carvings in regions of Scandinavia and the Iberian Peninsula where bronze shields are unknown. Other types of defensive armour highlight these regional preferences; the people in France who made bronze helmets, cuirasses and greaves must have known of the shields in use across the Channel, and vice-versa. So reconstructions of Bronze Age warriors wearing this defensive armour and carrying a bronze shield do not accurately represent ancient reality. But the armour would have required the same manufacturing technique as the shields while helmets and cuirasses, though not greaves, were deposited in similar wet contexts.

One legacy of Coles’s work is the conclusion that bronze shields could not have been functional. But this was based on the unavailability of bronze for his experimental reconstructions, which were instead made of copper. The relatively hard high-tin bronze of which ancient shields were actually made would have been much more resistant and a few examples, notably Long Wittenham, show what must be marks of weapons. While the manufacture of bronze shields was apparently simple – a lump of bronze must have been hammered into shape with moulds to produce the relief ornament – only the simplest examples have so far been reproduced and there is more experimental work to be done on both production and use.

As well as Coles, Uckelmann follows in the footsteps of other eminent students of the Bronze Age, notably Ernst Sprockhoff and Gero von Merhart; her book will surely come to be regarded as one of the most important contributions to the subject published in the 21st century.

References


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*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*