The Finds Research Group

DATASHEET 53

Early-medieval and medieval bifacial sheath fittings

by

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Introduction

In early-medieval and medieval Europe swords, knives and daggers were protected by leather, fur or hide sheaths. Composite scabbards were also used with wood, bone or hide inner supports. Some sheaths and scabbards were equipped with metal fittings. These fittings comprised chapes to shield the blade tip and mounts to decorate the leather or protect the sheath's seams and mouth. Different styles of sheaths and fittings were produced contemporaneously. These differed in methods of production, complexity and quality.

Bifacial fittings were openwork or solid metal chapes and mounts that were folded at an almost 180-degree angle. This produced a 'face' on either side of the leather, either identical or a distinct design. Bifacial fittings were either cast from copper alloy, formed of cut copper-alloy sheets or forged from iron. They were attached to sheaths for single-edged swords, daggers and knives. The sheaths themselves were rectangular, triangular, trapezoidal or irregular.

Although dimensions differ between types, overall fittings measured from 15 to 80mm in height and 15 to 60mm in width. The metal was between 2 and 5mm in thickness. Between the two faces the inside of the fitting was between 5 and 12mm across, indicating the thickness of the sheath. Three other sheath fitting styles were used in the medieval era. The simplest were single pieces of cast metal or sheets riveted to one or both faces of the sheath. Sheets of metal were also folded into cylinders and riveted, soldered or folded along the seams. The most advanced chapes were cast through the lost-wax technique. Chapes with two decorated faces were predominant on sword scabbards (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2002).

Development

Bifacial fittings date from the 8th to the 13th century. In the UK bifacial fittings currently date from the 10th to 13th centuries. This chronology is based on excavation and art-historical analysis. Finds present a sample of the total produced; new types of fitting are steadily emerging.

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The earliest bifacial fittings were simple squares and rectangles; they developed in form and design to become ornate cast fittings (Brather 2008; Kowalska 2014). Simple forged and cut fittings were still produced alongside more elaborate fittings.

Sheath components

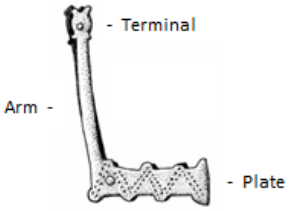

Fig. 1: Terminology; Class C chape (WILT-40FFD4)

Fig. 1 depicts the three components of bifacial fittings on each face. The plate protected the sheath leather and served as the central device. The arm secured the fitting to the leather through a rivet in the terminal. Additional rivets could hold the fitting through the plate.

Arms were either plain or decorated with cast or engraved decoration that often mirrored the plate motif. Decorative versions were engraved with bands or diamonds.

Terminals were cast in multiple forms, predominantly squares, circles, crescents and triangles. Elaborate terminals were multiple lobes and bifurcating ends (Fig. 1). Some are possible abstract zoomorphic and anthropomorphic designs.

Most rivets were square- and circular-headed iron nails; copper-alloy rivets were also used. Gilded pins were used on expensive continental fittings (Dijkstra 2011; Brand and Spiong 2005).

Some continental sheaths had additional mounts. These included seam pins to hold seams in place of, or in addition to stitching, mounts and suspension fittings. Suspension fittings followed relatively standard forms. They were attached to a belt and used to hold the sheath with straps or metal coils, like those in Fig. 2. Several continental sheath styles had decorative stitching or trimming.

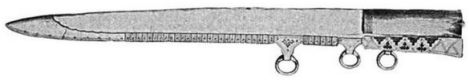

Fig. 2: Continental sheath with additional mounts; Class B chape (after Hjarder and Vike 2016)

Square or rectangular mounts were wrapped around the seam, waist and neck of some sheaths. These were either plain or decorated in complementary patterns to the chape. A secondary mount was, on certain types, riveted to the outer surface of the bifacial fitting. These had geometric, vegetal and zoomorphic iconography.

No bifacial fittings from the UK have been excavated with their sheaths. Possible seam fittings have been excavated in contexts alongside bifacial fittings.

Classification

Bifacial fittings are allocated into six classes based on construction, and the outline shape of the fitting. Specific types are included within each class, categorised by individual style and replicated design. These types are being catalogued by the author for future publication (Bishop forthcoming). This typology is designed to incorporate additional fitting styles as they arise.

Particular blade types were not aligned with one style of fitting. Large knives and seaxes, for instance, were held in class A and class F sheaths.

At the time of publication 450 bifacial fittings had been recorded in the UK. The quantity and replication of fittings suggests they were low- to medium-value objects.

Decoration

Bifacial fittings were cast in varied single and conjoined moulds. Niello inlay and gilding are present on some chapes.

Some plates were decorated with scored lines, punched circles or triangles onto the surface of the metal. Repoussé circles were also created. Some designs followed the contours of the plate or delineated human and animal limbs. Expression of hair, fur or feathers is probable. Diagonal, vertical and horizontal lines were engraved on the arm or plate of certain fittings.

The most complex openwork and solid fittings were produced with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs. These are distinct from contemporary chapes made through lost wax technique or forged from sheet metal. Bifacial fittings were less heavily influenced by contemporary art styles than sword chapes, but late Viking, Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque artistic influence was present.

Several types had singular or multiple holes cast or punched in the plate. These differ in quality, with several crude examples. This openwork was a decorative feature, but it is possible decorative pins were held in some fittings. In the case of class D and E fittings, as defined below, they were used to define sections of the body including head and limbs.

Bifacial fittings from separate classes were connected iconographically and were contemporary in production.

Fitting production

Matching fittings were in use in separate cultural and economic European spheres. Some nearly identical fittings may have been imported to the UK. Trade, migration and the simplicity of design ensured mass use of bifacial fittings to reinforce knife sheaths. There are no known production sites in England and no large workshops have been identified in continental Europe.

Continental fittings were produced in urban craft-working centres. Several were cast at sites where other contemporary dress accessories were being produced (Mårtensson 1976). Craftsmen probably made bifacial fittings in addition to other, similar dress accessories.

Replicated images were present on fittings. Numerous class F fittings had a simple image on the reverse that was distinct from the front face. These comprised crosses, saltire crosses, stars and Chi-Rhos. Most were crude and engraved with a sharp chisel. The designs were either duplicated decorative features or marks connected to the workmanship of the object.

Context and distribution

Fitted sheaths accompanied male and female weapon and ornament assemblages in continental Europe. They were included in elite burial jewellery sets. In England, they are predominantly individual finds, with some from dress accessory refuse deposits and castle contexts (Goodall and Paterson 2000, 130; Tillyard and Popescu 2009, 525). At present, none have been acknowledged from burials sites in the British Isles. Large proportions of fittings are recovered through metal detecting. These are recorded through the PAS, equivalent continental European institutions like MEDEA and by interest groups.

The simplicity of design meant that bifacial fittings were used contemporaneously by multiple cultural groups (Brand and Spiong 2005; Krabath 2001). Over 1,500 have been catalogued from northern England to western Russia, stretching south as far as Slovenia (Vlasaty 2015; Milavec and Modrijan 2014). In the UK, the vast majority have been catalogued in England.

Fittings are found in rural and urban deposits. These include towns like London and Spandau, Germany, and administrative centres such as Norwich Castle, Norfolk (Tillyard and Popescu 2009, 525). In England, the majority are from East Anglia, where historic cooperation between metal detectorists and archaeologists has enabled widespread cataloguing. Variables like this affect the distributional analysis of this dataset. Some styles are more prevalent in northern England, but other types have a more southerly orientation. No Danelaw boundary has been established.

Social context

Despite individuality among bifacial fittings, there was uniformity in design. Multiple replicated examples have been recovered. This is due to comparable sheaths and blades being used by owners who were similar in status and cultural position.

Bifacial fittings were part of a piece of martial equipment. They were valued and several show signs of repair or reuse. Medieval sheaths were also repaired or customised after extensive use (Cameron 2000). It has been argued that some sword chapes served as emblems of rank (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2002, 103). This is possible for complex bifacial fittings and the sheaths they adorned.

Typology

Group One

Group One fittings have a broadly square or rectangular plate, with some trapezoidal forms. They were constructed in an L or J shape. The arm was cast between 50 and 90 degrees, depending on the shape of the blade and sheath. Fittings were secured to the sheath by rivets through the top or bottom of the arm, base or terminal. Rivets numbered between one and three.

Class A

Fig. 3: Class A chape (IOW-9D8244)

Class A fittings were chapes and mounts. The majority of fittings had blank plates or were modestly decorated with cast or engraved geometric or vegetal motifs (Fig. 3). Rounded bands were produced on several fitting rims as an ornamental feature. The upper ridge was frequently larger.

Fig. 4: Class A chape (WILT-252363)

Arm terminals were cast in a variety of styles: squares, circles, triangles, crescents and irregular shapes such as in Fig. 4. A transverse bar differentiated this element on some designs.

Class B

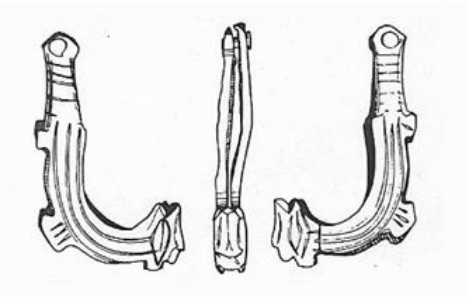

Fig. 5: Class B chape (after Goodall 1984, 344)

This class was folded into a J shape. Surviving examples are either plain or zoomorphic like Figs 5 and 6. The curved plate either merged with the arm or was separated by an ornamental design. On zoomorphic forms it was produced as a tail. Early forms were simple iron constructions, but later continental variants had secondary mounts. These were decorative and attached through existing rivet holes.

Fig. 6: Class B chape (FAKL-7E5827)

These fittings are solid with shallow decorative lines. The protrusions on each face are probable representations of limbs, similar to ornate class E fittings. It may represent a stylised backwards-facing creature.

Class C

Fig. 7: Class C chape (DENO-851F37)

Class C is composed of broadly L-shaped fittings. More developed fittings were cast in the profile of an abstract creature (Figs 7-9). Class C fittings were related to class A and appear to be a development of simple chapes.

Fig. 8: Class C chape (SUR-8D628E)

Fittings were secured with rivets through the hind limb of the animal (Fig. 7), or in the arm; the minority were secured through the terminal. Some terminals were a separate zoomorphic head. Fittings with this additional rivet are recovered in a higher proportion of completeness.

Fig. 9: Class C chape (BH-C0EBC5)

On zoomorphic fittings the fold formed the head of twin zoomorphic beasts. Their bodies were produced as the scabbard plates. A canine, equine or mythical beast such as a dragon is plausible. A stylised bridled horse has also been suggested (HAMP-A201E7). This class exhibits late-Viking artistic influence.

Fittings were cast to similar specifications, but multiple abstract styles were produced. There was a divergence in quality and naturalism between each type. An indicative element of several types is the ‘wing’ and ‘tail’ attached to the arm. This created a horizontal V-shaped gap.

Class D

Fig. 10: Class D chape (LIN-E5C477)

This class was secured in the arm and plate base, with a total of two or three rivets. Surviving fittings are solid and openwork L-shaped structures. High-quality motifs were abstract zoomorphic and anthropomorphic designs. Vegetative elements were also present.

The iconography was varied and divergent in quality and complexity. Modest designs were a

development of class A fittings. Several types had an extension at the plate base to house a rivet, like in Fig. 11.

Fig. 11: Class D chape (NMS-B23C67)

Another appendage was present at the top of some fittings' plates which was not functional and may depict a wing or saddle. Some plates were embossed with dots or triangles to highlight particular elements, including this projection on fittings (Fig. 10).

Several types had decorative arms with bands or diamond ornaments. Some terminals were cast in the shape of lobes, diamonds and triangles.

Fig. 12: Class D chape (Museum of London: 437257)

The type shown in Fig. 12 had two distinct high relief scenes on each face which contained combative elements. This type was produced with several subtle variations between fittings. It was one of the later and more developed chape types. It was a high-quality production associated with elite ownership (Bliss 2017).

Group Two

Group Two fittings were triangular. They were attached to triangular and rectangular sheaths.

Class E

Fig. 13: Class E chape (NMS-A30D06)

Class E fittings were folded into a triangle or irregular quadrilateral chape. Fittings were openwork or solid. Triangular chapes, like Figs 13 and 14 mirrored the blade tip. They were secured with a minimum of one rivet in the terminal. Multiple rivets could be held in the terminal and plate.

Fig. 14: Class E chape (SUSS-CE4E27)

They are a wide variety of forms. Several share anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs. Equine and canine characteristics were frequent. Fig. 15 depicts an abstract canine eating or mating with another creature.

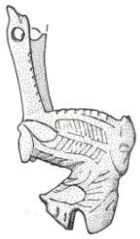

Fig. 15: Class E chape (SUR-43C192)

The majority of scabbard plates joined to form a secondary head at the fold. This was in some instances an entirely separate design. Engraved triangles and lines were prevalent.

Fig. 16: Class E chape (IOW-AE6155)

Several fittings had decorative lips, at the base of the plate, like Fig. 16. These were similar to early-medieval sword chapes and stirrup terminals.

Group Three

Class F

Fig. 17: Class F chape (DUR-895161)

This group is composed of one class of diverse fittings with square, rectangular and trapezoidal plates (Fig. 17). They were folded lengthways across the seam; this formed the base of the chape. Fittings were secured with two riveted arms on each face. Numerous similar moulds were used, but separate replicated forms were cast. The earliest fittings were sheets of iron and copper alloy, some were poorly executed with uneven features (Duncan 2015, 86). Some had complex embossed designs. These simple forms were produced from the 10th century onwards (Krabath 2001). More developed fittings were produced in England. These have been recovered from multiple 13th-century deposits (Egan and Pritchard 2002, 127; Goodall 1980, 185; Hinton 1990, 1082).

Fig. 18: Class F chape (SF-4B7C06)

Geometric, zoomorphic and vegetative elements were widespread, particularly simple replicated motifs. Developed chapes had complex elements. Holes and appendages were prevalent. These included rectangles, domes, crosses and fleurs-de-lis (Figs 18, 19). This latter feature was relatively common among medieval scabbard fittings. Among bifacial fittings, this was most commonly on the top of the plate.

Fig. 19: Class F chape (SF-6163E2)

Faces were frequently non-identical. Many types had an identifiable primary face, with geometric or vegetative motifs. The reverse was frequently plain or scored with singular or multiple lines. Saltire crosses were also chosen (Fig. 18).

Arms were produced between 60 and 90 degrees. These were either left plain or incised

with diagonal or horizontal lines. Terminals were produced in several styles. This included triangles, circles, semicircles and crescents.

Conclusion

Bifacial sheath fittings were metal chapes and mounts, secured to leather sheaths with rivets or decorative pins. The majority were cast copper-alloy objects and embellished with varying degrees of technical and artistic talent. Many are not recovered intact, but survive as fragments of the plate, with most breakages concentrated at a rivet hole.

Bifacial fittings in the UK date from the 10th to the 13th centuries. The quantity, distribution and nature of recorded designs have been affected by discovery bias and will all develop further.

Fittings were related to dress accessories and contemporary dagger and sword scabbard fittings. The iconography was influenced by contemporary art styles. None have been catalogued that are aligned with a particular art style. The majority of motifs were relatively simple vegetative and geometric patterns. More complex imagery including zoomorphic and anthropomorphic elements were produced. Some iconography was combative and correlates with ownership by martial elements of society; potentially with a hunting or military use.

A small percentage of bifacial fittings from England have been excavated. In continental Europe, the majority of fittings have been excavated through archaeological research

Burial evidence from early-medieval Europe suggests that few sheaths were equipped with fittings of any kind. Complete sheaths either contained a single chape or multiple fittings including a chape, seam mounts or pins. Seam mounts are rare in the UK.

The subtle differences existent between fittings from England and continental Europe suggest production in different workshops. The presence of identical fittings in different European regions is indicative of trade and similar cultural requirements (Feveile 2017, 120). Distinct cultural influences and regional variations affected designs, but individual artisans may have influenced specific styles.

Distribution is not regionally confined among sheath fittings. Bifacial fittings are distributed across England, including on island communities such as the Isle of Wight (e.g. IOW-3000E8).

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