

PLATE I



Buckle Plate from Sarre. (Scale : $\frac{3}{4}$).

A SILVER-INLAID BUCKLE FROM SARRE

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MANY of the items of grave furniture found in the excavations of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Sarre in the middle of the nineteenth century were published in accounts which listed the grave groups with varying degrees of accuracy and illustrated many of the more interesting objects.¹ One small, flat piece of iron was amongst the fragments ignored in the reports but still extant in Maidstone Museum, and as it was recently noticed that its shape was that of a trapezoidal buckle plate of continental type it was X-rayed to discover whether it was inlaid with other metals as was customary with this kind of personal adornment. The radiograph showed that most of the inlay was indeed intact under its heavy covering of rust, and this covering was removed at the laboratory of the Institute of Archaeology, University of London, to restore the plate to something like its original condition (Pl. I).

DESCRIPTION

Iron buckle plate, trapezoid, with remains of two projections on the wider of the narrow ends for attachment to the loop. There is one dome-headed rivet in the middle of the narrower end, and a pair of rivet holes near the corners of the wider end. The entire face is covered with inlaid silver strips: within a single-line frame there is a border of transverse strips along each long side, within this a zone of zigzag strips, in the middle a panel of four-strand interlace in double lines containing a row of dots, finishing in a single loop at one end and a double loop at the other, the interlace in the central part being angular rather than curved. The space between the interlace and the border is filled with diagonal strips. Near the buckle loop position is a panel of longitudinal strips and a zigzag border which would have framed the shield-on-tongue. Each rivet hole is surrounded by an inlaid circle, and it is possible that the domed heads of the rivets were originally covered with silver sheet. Length 8.1 cm., wider end 5 cm., narrower end 4 cm.

Iron buckles with plates of various shapes inlaid with silver and bronze were extremely popular amongst the Franks, Burgundians and Alemanni, and were widespread in Europe, mostly during the span of the seventh century. Buckles of this type found in Belgium have been

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, ii (1859), xlii; iii (1860), 36-43; v (1863), 305-22; vi (1866), 157-85; vii (1868), 307-21; viii (1872), 171; lxxiii (1959), 196-201.

studied by Mme B. Trenteseau,² and this one falls in with certain specifications laid down by her for the grouping of the Belgian examples. The shape is of Group Ba, i.e. a trapezoidal outline with the narrowest edge straight. The scheme of decoration is I, 3, i.e. there is a central panel of geometric decoration (here a four-strand interlace) framed with geometric motifs (lines and zigzags). The technique is of the second type, incrustation, i.e. strips and dots inlaid in grooves in the iron. There is no doubt that the shortest side was originally straight as this is confirmed by the remains of an inlaid strip running parallel to it. However, in the design the inlaid strips run diagonally towards the terminal rivet as they do on buckles with a 'swallow-tail' outline.³

It may not be necessary to search further afield than Belgium for the origin of this piece, but the state of research is not yet sufficiently comprehensive to allow definite localizations. Although catalogues have been made of the Belgian and Swiss material, the enormous range of buckles in other countries has so far been outside the capability of a single investigator.⁴

In view of the extensive output of the workshops producing such belt equipment across the Channel, the numbers reaching this country were very low. The fact that the Sarre plate has escaped detection up to now shows that some must have been overlooked in earlier excavations because the action of rust had obscured the shape and hidden the inlay, but none were found, for instance, in the more recently excavated cemetery at Dover which was a site conveniently placed for continental trade.

The technique is one handed on from the late-Roman period where it was employed on bronze buckles for the use of the army,⁵ and it continued for a while in the fifth century both on the Continent and in England.⁶ It disappeared almost entirely during the sixth century both here and abroad, but the technique did come into its own again in the hands of later Anglo-Saxon craftsmen in the ninth century, as we can see from the manufacture of types of seax and swords which can

² B. Trenteseau, 'Les Techniques de la Damasquinure mérovingienne' *Helinium*, v (1965) 1, 32-43; *La Damasquinure mérovingienne en Belgique* (1966); 'Certaines Techniques de Damasquinure, sont elles caractéristiques pour des Ateliers déterminés?', *Helinium*, x (1970), 250-73.

³ J. Werner, *Das Alamannische Gräberfeld von Bülach* (1953), Taf. XXI, 2.

⁴ For a summary of work completed so far, and an assessment of the task ahead, see: A. France-Lanord, 'A propos des Garnitures de Ceintures damasquinées mérovingiennes', *Revue Archéologique*, 2 (1973), 273-98.

⁵ V. I. Evison, *The Fifth-century Invasions south of the Thames* (1965), pl. 9a.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Maps 2 and 3. Further examples of inlaid work of this period have been found at Kingsworthy, Hants, M. J. Swanton, *The Spearheads of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements*, (1973), 207; St. Peter's, Kent (excavation A. C. Hogarth); and Mucking, Essex, *Antiq. Journ.*, liii (1973), 269.

be recognized as undoubtedly insular.⁷ It was at first thought possible that the few inlaid objects of the seventh century in England might have been evidence of the return of the technique.⁸ However, the number of pieces has not increased since then to any appreciable extent, and it may now be recognized that most were probably imported, i.e. a bronze buckle with triangular plate and inlaid with silver wires from St. John's Cricket Field, Cambridge,⁹ and an iron buckle with triangular plate inlaid with wires of gold colour in cloisonné style, of unknown provenance in the Ashmolean Museum.¹⁰ An iron buckle with triangular plate and three silver dome-headed rivets from Bidford-on-Avon probably belongs to this category.¹¹ The rectangular buckle plate set with garnets and gold and silver wires Kingston Grave 244 has a more substantial claim to be Anglo-Saxon in view of its relationship to a series of bronze buckles of undoubted insular origin,¹² but the inlaid fragment from Kingston Grave 16 with a garnet set in a white cabochon is of uncertain function and origin.¹³ The bronze buckle and plates inlaid with silver sheet and strips from Bekebourne have a close parallel abroad at Burghagel, Dillingen, Grave 3.¹⁴

Further examples of foreign belt suites of the seventh century have been found at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at St. Peter's, Broadstairs, Kent,¹⁵ e.g. a buckle with triangular plate and two other triangular plates in Grave 368, splendidly inlaid with more than one type of metal. The form of the buckle, i.e. oval loop, shield-on-tongue and long triangular plate with a dome-headed rivet in each corner is a common one. The inlaid pattern is rare, but may be equated with the work on a buckle similar in form, except that the end of the plate is rounded instead of pointed, and which was found at Mazinghem in northern France.¹⁶ On both buckle plates there are straight and looped bands of inlay bordered with finer single lines on each side, and with dots

⁷ V. I. Evison, 'A decorated Seax from the Thames at Keen Edge Ferry', *Berks. Arch. Journ.*, 61 (1963/4), 28-36; *id.* 'A Sword from the Thames at Wallingford Bridge', *Arch. Journ.*, cxxiv (1968), 160-89.

⁸ V. I. Evison, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Inlaid Metalwork', *Antiq. Journ.*, xxv (1956), 20-45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, fig. 4.

¹⁰ *Antiq. Journ.*, xxxviii (1958), pl. xxvi, b.

¹¹ Evison, *op. cit.* 1955, 34, note 2; *Arch.*, 73, pl. xii, 2d.

¹² Evison, *op. cit.* 1955, 33, pl. ix, a and b.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pl. ix, c.

¹⁴ Evison, *op. cit.* 1958, 242, pl. xxvi, f, fig. 2; cf. *Bayerische Vorgeschichtsblätter*, 25 (1960), 183, Abb. 3.

¹⁵ Mr. A. C. Hogarth kindly allows me to mention these before his publication of the cemetery. Observations here are based on radiographs only as the objects have not yet been conserved.

¹⁶ A. Bourgeois and R. Terrailon, 'Le Cimetière mérovingien de Mazinghem', *Bull. Trim. de la Soc. Acad. des Antiquaires de la Morinie*, xvii (1952), 552, 565, fig. 59, pl. xiii.

and star shapes in the spaces. In Grave 24 at St. Peter's was a set of buckle with plate and counter plate, on which no inlay has been revealed by radiograph, and an inlaid rectangular plaque which has inlay similar in design to the Sarre plate, i.e. a panel of interlace with zigzag and transverse strip borders. The buckle plate is rectangular and the counter plate trapezoid, with the outline of the short end on both undulating in the 'swallow-tail' fashion occasioned by animal heads in the corners, and the entire set corresponds in shape and in the decoration of the back plate to sets from Switzerland and Belgium.¹⁷ Inlaid buckles which found their way to this country in the seventh century are therefore varied in form, technique and pattern, and might each have come from a different production centre in north-west Europe. As the use of radiography continues on newly excavated ironwork, we may expect further specimens.

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¹⁷ Bülaach Graves 108, 280, 65, 92, 87, 110, Balsthal, Solothurn, Werner, *op. cit.* 1953, Taf. xix, 1-3, Taf. xxi, 2-5, Taf. xxii, 1-4, Taf. xxviii, 8; Trenteseau, *op. cit.* 1966, Torgny, pl. 16.