

NOTES

A copper-alloy boar figurine from Flexford, near Guildford

Archaeological excavations at Flexford, near Guildford, in 2011 involved the discovery of a small copper-alloy ('bronze') boar (or pig) figurine from excavation trench 17, context 003. The purpose of such figurines, which are generally dated to the Late Iron Age and Roman periods, is not known but may include: toys (Liversidge 1968, 147), votive offerings, including those made by hunters (Toynbee 1964, 125; 1996, 133) and those associated with foundation deposits (Mills 1993, 31), and perhaps with domestic cults/shrines (Rudling 2008, 128).

The Flexford figurine (figs 1 and 2), which is a solid casting weighing 10.89g, is 42mm long, a maximum height of 21mm and a maximum width of 10.5mm. It has a long horizontal snout with a horizontal groove for a mouth, but no obvious nostrils. There are also no discernible signs of either eyes or ears. The crest is demarked by a pair of slightly angled grooves rising towards the head on both sides of the boar, above which are more lightly incised vertical lines representing bristles. The body is fairly short and high. The straight legs are short and squat, two being slightly damaged, as is the tail area, with the tail itself missing. Overall this figurine, with its apparent absence of such features as eyes, ears and nostrils, has a fairly minimalist style and is not closely paralleled by any of the relatively large number of similar bronze figurines found in Sussex (Mills 1993).

The dating, distribution and function of similar small bronze boars have been reviewed by Foster (1977), Mills (1993) and Rudling (2001, 116–17; 2008, 128). Although such boars have been dated to both the Iron Age and Romano-British periods, most have not been recovered from datable and secure archaeological contexts and this makes the Flexford example of greater significance. The Flexford boar was found in the upper fill of a Romano-British ditch. Pottery from the context included a group of Portchester D sherds, suggesting a latest date for the fill of the ditch in the 4th century, but Late Iron Age sherds both in this context and in the adjacent context suggest the ditch had cut earlier deposits (David Calow, pers comm).

The distribution of boar figurines in Britain is widespread, but with a noticeable concentration in Sussex, especially between the rivers Arun and Cuckmere. They also occur in Ireland and on the Continent (Foster 1977, 33, 45–9). At the time of Foster's survey (1977) there were only 22 such figurines known in the British Isles, but now, largely as a result of a big increase in metal detecting as a hobby and the reporting of finds to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, the number of such boar figurines has risen to over 35 recorded examples. However, no other boar figurine has yet been recorded for Surrey. The nearest findspots of boar figurines to Surrey include two unrecorded boars from Alfoldean (see below), other such finds from Sussex (eleven, possibly twelve), the three boars 'of undoubted Iron Age date' recovered from a field near Hounslow (Middlesex) in 1864 (Foster 1977, 10–13), London (3) and Kent (1). Further afield, boar figurines have been discovered in Essex (3), Hertfordshire (1), Suffolk (1), Norfolk (1), Cambridgeshire (1), (Lincolnshire (2), Warwickshire (1), Wiltshire (1), Somerset (1), Glamorganshire (1), Montgomeryshire (1), Yorkshire (1) and Northumberland (Chesters Fort) (1), thus indicating a predominantly south-east England focus, with the largest concentration of figurines (thirteen, or fourteen if the lost example from Washington is included – see below) in Sussex.

The two small boar figurines from Alfoldean (see above) were found by a metal detectorist 'within a metre of each other' to the south of the posting station in the field to the east

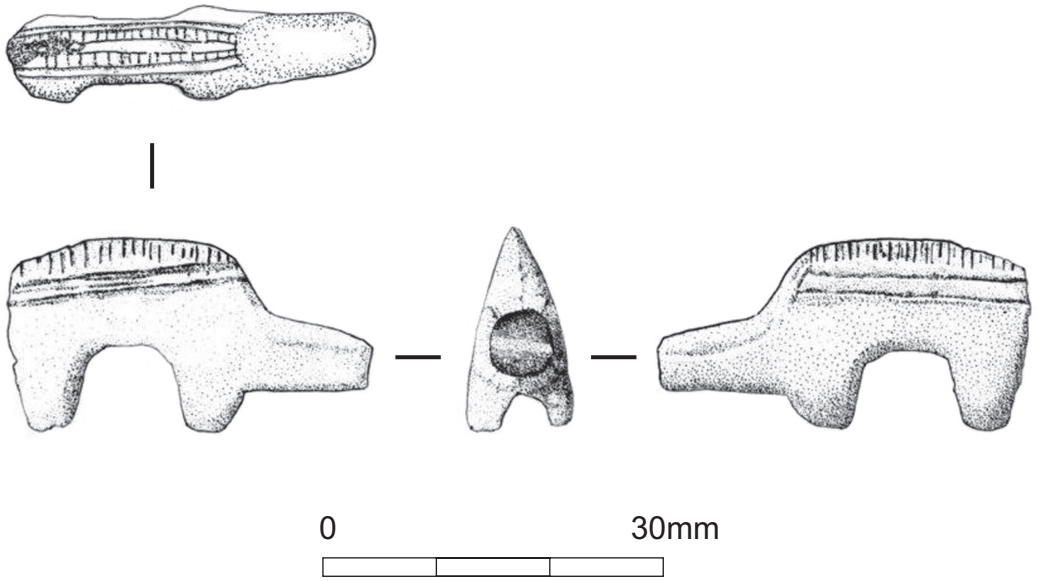


Fig 1 The Flexford boar (drawings by Alan Hall)

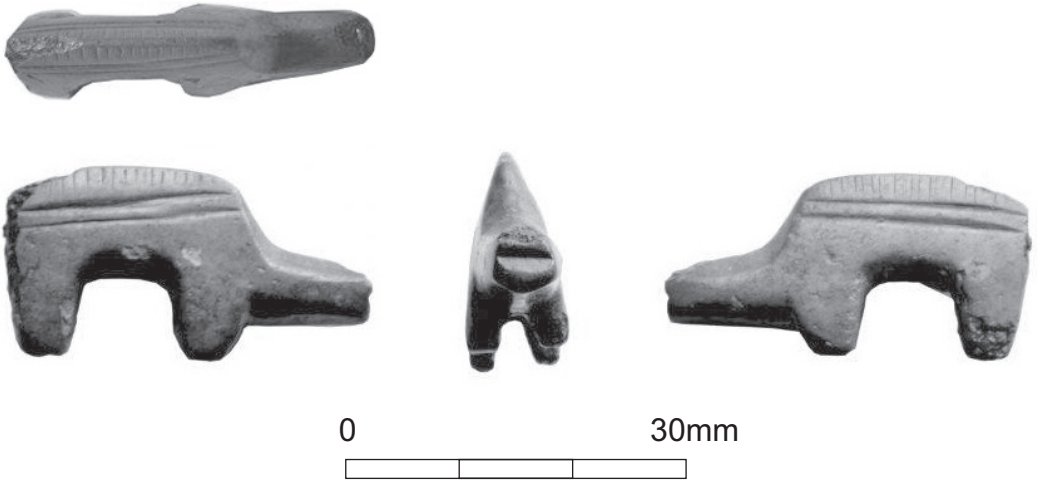


Fig 2 The Flexford boar (photographs by Alan Hall)

of the A29. They were found near a concentration of *c*25 'coins of approximately 2nd Century date [five have been dated to approximately *c.* AD 117–211] and with a circular brooch with remains of enamelling on it', and many loom weight fragments (letter dated 18 December 1985 written by Elizabeth Kelly, Curator of Horsham Museum, to Catherine Johns at the British Museum; Vicky Lillywhite, pers comm). The two boars were examined at both Horsham Museum and the British Museum, but unfortunately no detailed report, drawings, photographs or measurements were made and the items were returned to 'the finder who subsequently moved to France' (Vicky Lillywhite, pers comm). Given this situation the opportunity is taken here to note that Catherine Johns did report in a letter

dated 7 January 1986 to Elizabeth Kelly that the Alfoldean boars ‘are quite a curious little pair, and have several features we haven’t seen before. In particular, the piercing of the eyes and the stylised treatment of their hair seems unusual. I should have thought there could be no doubt about a Roman date, but the function of the figurines is more doubtful. My colleague Val Rigby and I both consider that they are more likely to be part of some other object than independent statuettes. This would account to some extent for the general degree of stylization, and for the abbreviated legs, which even allowing for corrosion must always have been very perfunctorily treated’. Johns also suggested that the discovery of the two boars near a concentration of coins and the brooch might indicate a religious site, perhaps ‘a temple [or shrine] precinct’. An additional probable find from Sussex is a small boar figurine, sadly now lost, ‘found some 20 years ago on Locks Farm [Washington], below and to the north-west of Chanctonbury Ring’, West Sussex (Pennington 2011, 71). Although some boar figurines share similarities of style/size with other such figurines, it would seem that no two are identical; perhaps this is partly a result of the lost wax casting method of manufacture with the need for each image to be uniquely modelled in wax (Mills 1993, 25–6).

Valery Rigby and Catherine Johns of the British Museum (see above) were of the opinion that the Alfoldean boars with their ‘abbreviated legs’ ‘are more likely to be part of some other object’. Joanna Bird (pers comm) has suggested that the Flexford boar, which also has short legs, may likewise have been part of a composite object such as a sceptre, for which the boar could have served as a terminal: a possible parallel is the owl terminal still attached to the end of a sceptre from Willingham Fen, Cambridgeshire (Henig 1984, fig 62). Alternatively, the boar may have served as the crest of a head-dress: one of the Iron Age boars from Hounslow is attached to a convex base, which Miranda Green (1992, 152) interprets as probably being part of a helmet. Joanna Bird has also pointed out that one of the Roman-period head-dresses from Felmingham Hall, Norfolk has the feet of a bird remaining on the top, and that there are also two raven figurines with damaged legs in the hoard as well (Henig 1984, 137). In addition, the obverse of a Late Iron Age silver coin from Esztergom, Hungary depicts a human head surmounted by a boar (perhaps on a head-dress or helmet) (illustrated by Green 1992, fig 6.23). Green (1992) also shows (fig 4.19) a boar figurine from Powys with short damaged legs, which she identifies as a helmet-crest. Bird (pers comm) concludes that there is clearly some emphasis on war/hunting imagery, but ‘how far this may have declined into a residual votive association in the Roman period at a site like Flexford is impossible to assess’. She also notes that the Flexford site has yielded ‘other ritual material’, including the deposition in a pit of a copper-alloy vessel containing a samian patera of unique type, several glass vessels and c4kg of fragments of tin ingot or scrap pewter.

It is tempting to associate the various ‘boar’ figurines with a Celtic ‘boar cult’, the boar being considered by Ann Ross as ‘symbolic of fertility (agricultural and sexual) and of war. In it were contained all the passions of the Celtic people – hunting, feasting, fighting and procreation. It was an animal form appropriate to the gods, a food fitting for the otherworld feasts of the Celtic heroic world’ (Ross 1974, 390–404). However, the Flexford figurine and most, if not all, of the similar figurines from Sussex fail to provide ‘naturalistic representations of boars, the proportions are wrong and certain features are emphasised whilst others are very stylised’, the figurines presenting ‘a rather humorous caricature of a boar’ (Mills 1993, 17). Could it be that these figurines actually represent semi-wild pigs rather than wild boars? (Foster 1977, 23–5). It is perhaps worth noting in this context that Romano-Celtic Temple 2 at Chanctonbury Ring in Sussex yielded the remains of a minimum of 84 pigs with no remains identified as those of wild boar (Rudling 2001, 115). It is also worth further noting that two of the Sussex ‘boar’ figurines were found in the parish of Washington in the vicinity of Chanctonbury Ring (ie on North Farm (Rudling 2008, fig. 6.12) and Locks Farm (see above) respectively). Another bronze boar discovered near to Chanctonbury Ring is the well-known and much more naturalistic plaque found at the Romano-British circular shrine at Muntham Court. It has been suggested that this figurine may indicate ‘a local hunting cult’ (Green 1983, 61; Rudling 2008, 128 and fig 6.9).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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