

An Iron Age bridle bit from the River Tyne

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SUMMARY

A complete copper alloy bridle bit was found in the River Tyne just west of Newcastle upon Tyne, probably some time before 1884. It was donated to the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, and was accessioned in 1947, although there are no details about exactly when it was donated, or by whom.¹

DESCRIPTION

THE BIT (fig. 1) is a double-jointed snaffle of Palk's 1984 Category E, made of copper alloy with the side-link cast in one with the rein ring.² Most double-jointed bits have separate rein rings, often made of iron, but this is a rarer sub-type that was less flexible in use than those made up of five separate elements (Palk 1984, 4, 89). It is undecorated, symmetrical, with plain rein rings combined with side-links with pointed terminals and a short centre link with a central collar and although there are some minor casting faults on the side-links and centre link, it is generally well-made. Evidence of wear of the oval loops on the side-links show that it had been used. Due to this wear it currently has a mouth-width of 125 mm, although its original width would put it close to the mean measurement for this type of bit, and was suitable for use on a large pony (Palk 1984, fig. 20).

Dimensions: overall: L: 250 mm; rings: Diam: 65–7 mm and 62–5 mm; Th: 6–7 mm; central link: L: 57 mm, W: 21 mm, Th: 7 mm.

PARALLELS AND DATING

There are two other examples of Category E double-jointed bits with similar simple pointed terminals, both of which come from North Yorkshire. A complete bit was found at Hunmanby and a fragmentary piece has recently been found at Norton-on-Derwent (Palk 1984, pl. V, fig. C13, no. DJ19; Worrell and Pearce 2011, fig. 3, P.A.S. LVPL-ECD916).

Palk dates Category E double-jointed bits to 200 BC–0 BC (1984, 83, 103).

LOCATION OF FIND SPOT

The accession record states that it was 'found in the River Tyne, (near Kay's Meadows)'. This is likely to be a mistake for King's Meadows, a large island in the river between Elswick and Dunston. In the nineteenth century the island was c. 1.5 km long and c. 0.15 km at its widest point, with enough space for trees, fields and a pub, and was the occasional venue for horse-races (Holmes 1892, 208; Heslop 2009, 5).³ It divided the river into two narrow channels, with the position of the deep water channel changing over time, and was only accessible by boat. The island made the river difficult to navigate so between 1882 and 1884 King's Meadows and other nearby, smaller islands were completely removed by dredging (Holmes 1892, 208, 210).

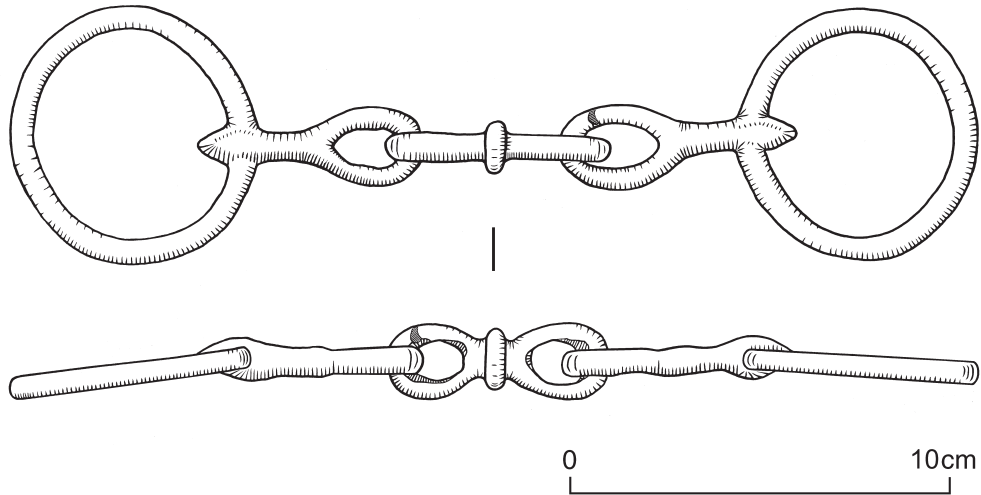


Fig. 1 The bridle bit from the River Tyne. Scale 1:2.

A large number of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age objects, dating to c. 1000–450 BC, have been recovered from the river between the island and the location of a possible river crossing somewhere close to the current position of the Swing Bridge, covering a distance of c. 2 km (Heslop 2009, 4; Graves and Heslop 2013, 25, table 2.2). These may have been objects left as votive offerings at a site or sites used for religious ceremonies such as a cult location in the form of a timber causeway built out into the deep channel of the river, or at a crossing point, or at a boundary between tribal areas (Graves and Heslop 2013, 24–6). Two of the artefacts, a Late Bronze Age spearhead and dagger, are known to have come from the island itself (Miket 1984, 38, no. 4; 39, no. 11).⁴ While the bridle bit is later in date, the fact that it is complete means it could also be a votive offering and that the area retained its religious significance.

NOTES

¹ Accession number: TWCMS : T5930.

² Also known as a three-link bit; this sub-type shares some characteristics with the later ‘derivative three-link bit’, Palk’s ‘straight bar bit’.

³ National Grid: NZ218632.

⁴ An iron horse bit (Miket 1984, 39, no. 13) said to be Iron Age was also found on the island, but this is in fact a fragment of a cheek-piece from a late fifteenth- to sixteenth-century curb bit.

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