

A MODEL SWORD FROM BUCKLERSBURY HOUSE, LONDON

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A small object from the site of Bucklersbury House, London, and now in the Museum of London,¹ belongs to a group of Roman miniature swords. It consists of a slender, double edged, blade 106mm long (Fig. 1). The tang of the blade passes through a rectangular sectioned piece of bone, 33mm wide, which is well polished, and decorated with a single groove. This forms the hilt-guard of the sword, above which may be seen a slight continuation of the tang which, when complete, would have retained the handle and pommel.

The identification of this piece as a model sword or dagger is confirmed by a small number of finds from the continent. These show that the completed object consisted of five parts, of which the iron blade and bone guard formed two. The remaining elements were a small ribbed handle, a miniature version of that on the *gladius*;² a pommel, not unlike the guard in shape; and a scabbard. With the exception of the iron blade the other pieces are in bone. The only complete example known is from Cologne (Fig. 2, 5).³ The survival of guard and blade, as at London, is attested at Augst;⁴ handle, guard and blade at Trier (Fig. 2, 3)⁵ and Augst (Fig. 2, 4);⁶ pommel, handle, guard and blade from France.⁷ The discovery of isolated miniature ribbed handles is rare, examples are recorded from Verulamium (Fig. 2, 2)⁸ and Hedderheim (Fig. 2, 1)⁹. By far the most common element is the sheath, but even these are unusual in Britain only represented by those from Verulamium¹⁰ and Colchester (Fig. 2, 13).¹¹ On the continent they are known from Trier (Fig. 2, 7, 8, 10, 12),¹² Augst (Fig. 2, 6, 9, 14),¹³ Hedderheim (Fig. 2, 11)¹⁴ Autun¹⁵ and Mont Auxois.¹⁶ The sheaths vary quite considerably in size and decoration.¹⁷ They are basically sub-rectangular with a rounded section and two perforated 'wings' at the end where the sheath joins the handle. They are carved from a solid piece of bone, and longitudinally perforated. This hole is enlarged into a double 'key-hole' at the end where the sheath meets the handle to allow for the insertion of the blade. The front of the scabbard is decorated by varying numbers of straight, incised lines. The remaining sides are plain. At the lower end of the scabbard the perforation is circular and is usually plugged with a small piece of bone.

The function of these model swords is uncertain, although in view of the blade and handle elements, their representation is best seen as a *gladius*. They occur mainly on civilian sites and, in view of their subject, their rarity in military contexts in Britain and on the Rhine might seem surprising. The

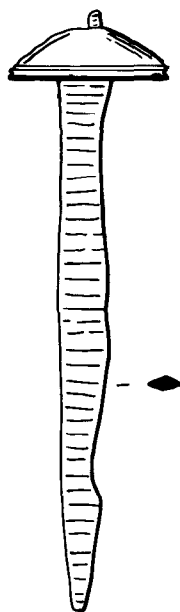


Fig. 1. Model Swords: Example from Bucklersbury House (2/3).

closest parallels are from Trier (e.g. Fig. 2, 15), where a number of similar pieces occur, but which are carved from a single piece of bone, without the iron blade. They are not necessarily related to the small, bronze model series usually interpreted as having some votive function,¹⁸ although bronze miniature swords do occur.¹⁹

The London model is most likely to be derived from the Walbrook, as are the majority of the Bucklersbury House finds. This places the object firmly in the early Roman period, not after *c.* AD 155 and possibly much earlier.²⁰ Despite the number of parallels noted few are securely dated. The scabbard from Verulamium is Antonine, whilst one of the Augst sheaths is probably mid second century. The Augst blade, guard and handle is late first or second century. The use of the ribbed handle, most commonly an early Roman type, confirms the dating suggested by the London, Verulamium and Augst pieces. The absence of these forms from both Vindonissa and Pompeii is perhaps surprising in view of the numerous handles from both sites, but it would be presumptive to draw conclusions from such negative evidence. A first or second century date is suggested.

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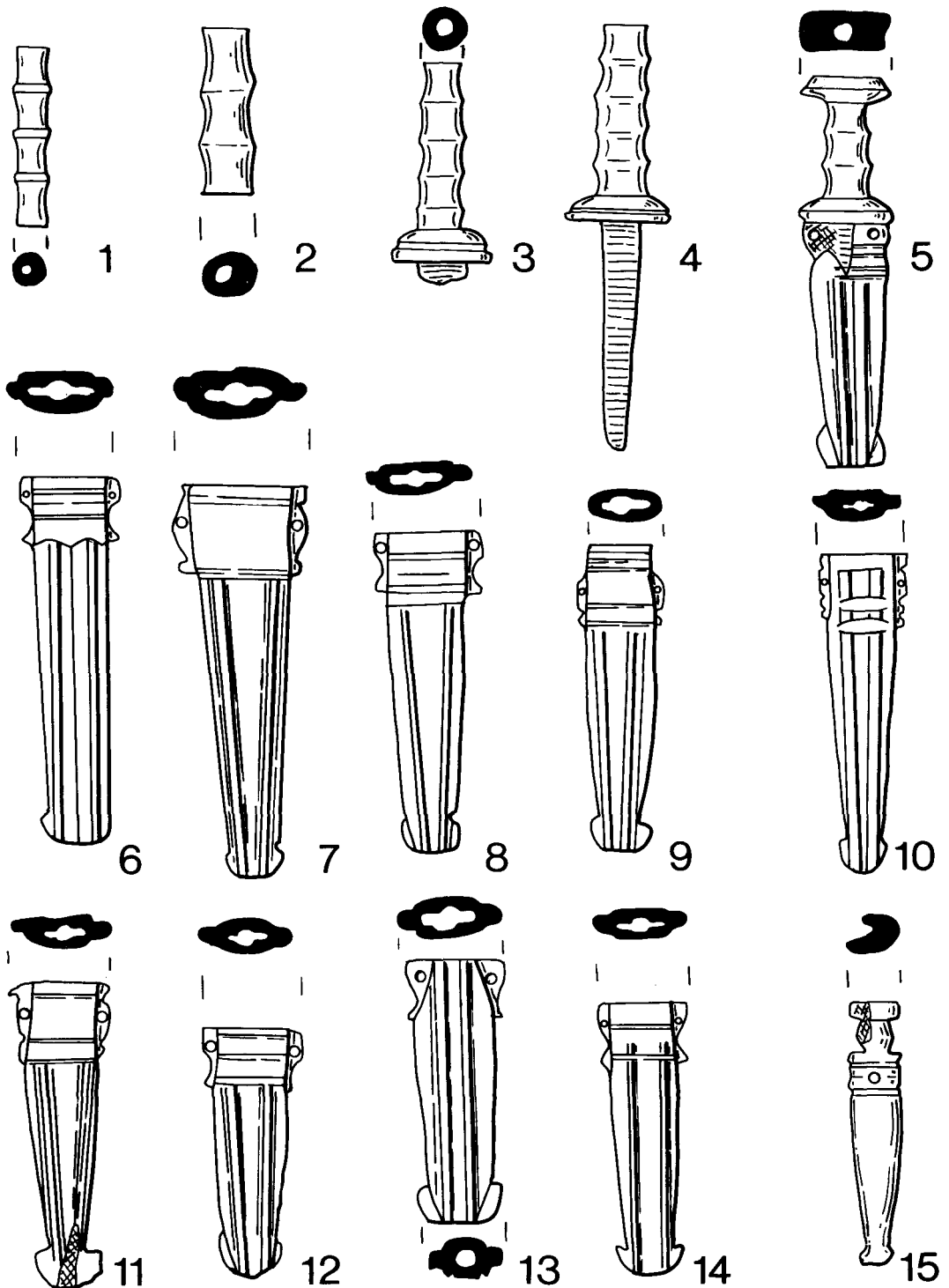


Fig. 2. Model swords: British and Continental parallels (2/3).

NOTES

1. Accession Number 19637.
2. H. Chapman and A. Johnson 'Excavations at Aldgate and Bush Lane House in the City of London' *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 24 (1973) Fig. 22, 12. The model handles copy their full size counterparts closely. The handle form normally served as a grip for the *gladius* as is shown on numerous reliefs, such as on the tombstone of Facilis at Colchester, and in association with *gladii* themselves, as at Rheingonheim, see G. Ulbert, *Des Frühromischen Kastel Rheingonheim* Limesforschungen Band 9 (Berlin 1969) Abb. 3, Taf. 17-18. It is also found, however, with long swords e.g. M. Howe 'From the Museum' *Durobrivae* 6 (1978) Fig. 14 and even daggers e.g. R. Fellman 'Holzerne Schwertgriffe aus dem Schutthügel von Vindomissa' *Helvetica Antiqua* (1966) Abb. 4.
3. F. Fremersdorf, 'Die Denkmäler des römischen Köln' Band 1 *Neuerwerbungen der römischen abteilung des Wallraf-Richartz-Museums während jahre 1923-7* (1928) Taf. 139.
4. Unpublished, Romermuseum Augst.
5. Unpublished, Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier Acc. No. 06, 491.
6. Unpublished, Romermuseum Augst, Acc. No. 69.12885.
7. Unpublished, Musée des Antiquités Nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Acc. No. 70594.
8. Unpublished, Verulamium museum, Acc. No. 78.169. Found during Wheeler's excavation of the Triangular Temple, in 1933. Unstratified.
9. Unpublished, Museum für-vor-u. frühgeschichte, Frankfurt. Volpert colln.
10. Unpublished, Verulamium museum Acc. No. 79.2062 Bath house site, unpublished excavation Mr. C. Saunders and Mr. A. Havercroft.
11. Unpublished excavation Colchester Archaeological Trust Bkc N233 F84 SF 2258 unstratified.
12. Four examples. Unpublished Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier Acc. Nos. 286; 2920; 2921; 01,400.
13. Three examples. Unpublished Romermuseum Augst. Acc. Nos. 1924.427; 1959.1014; 66.1694.
14. Unpublished Museum für-vor-u. frühgeschichte, Frankfurt. Acc. No. 5433.
15. See, *Le Cycle de la material: L'Os* Musée Archeologique Dijon (undated) Pl. 9, 7 & 9.
16. E. Espérandieu, *Les Fouilles de la Croix Saint-Chartres au Mont Auxois* (Paris 1910) Fig. 17.
17. The length of the blade on the London piece (106mm) suggests that the sheath was an unusually large example. The existing scabbards range from 55mm to 88mm long.
18. cf. M. Green, 'Romano-British non-ceramic model objects in south-eastern Britain' *Archaeol. J.* 132 (1975), 54-70; W. Manning, 'A group of bronze models from Sussex in the British Museum' *Antiq. J.* 46 (1966) 50-59; K. Leaby, 'Votive models from Kirmington, South Humberside' *Britannia* 11 (1980) 326-330.
19. Green, *ibid.*, 64 cites model swords from Frilford and Castor, the former of pre-Roman date; and from Chesters cf. M. Green *Small Cult Objects from the Military Area of Roman Britain* British Archaeol. Rep. 52 (Oxford 1976) Pl. 125. A model bronze parazonium was recovered from Verulamium cf. H. Waugh and R. Goodburn, 'The non-ferrous objects' in S. S. Frere, *Verulamium Excavations 1*, Rep. Res. Comm. Soc. Antiq. Lond. 28 (London 1972) Fig. 44, 147, with further references. The use of the sword with an apparent votive significance is also seen on a group of bone spoons from Frocester Court cf. H. S. Gracie and E. Price, 'Frocester Court Roman Villa, Second Report' *Trans. Bristol Gloucs. Archaeol. Soc.* 97 (1979) Fig. 9, 1.
20. R. Merrifield, 'Coins from the Bed of the Wallbrook and their Significance' *Antiq. J.* 42 (1962) 38-52.