

TWO ROMAN IVORIES FROM GREENWICH PARK, LONDON

STEPHEN GREEP

The two ivories which form the subject of this short paper were among the finds recovered during excavations in 1902 on the site of a Roman building in Greenwich Park and were subsequently published by Webster in his discussion of the site¹. Both objects are now deposited, together with a small number of other finds² from the 1902 excavation, in the British Museum. The site has been the subject of recent small scale excavations by Mr. H. Sheldon and Mr. B. Yule in advance of tree planting though no comparable objects were recovered³.

The first piece consists of two parts, the front and back of a scabbard chape⁴ (Fig. 1). Both are incomplete, front and back being 68mm high, the front 56mm at its widest, the reverse only 28mm. Although clearly associated by its method of construction (see

below) with other two-piece box-chapes it lacks the splayed ends and decoration of the more common forms⁵. Instead it is a true rectangle in shape and decorated simply with a pair of grooves towards either edge, both front and back, rather than the central mid-rib and pelta-shaped cut-outs more normal on box chapes. Only the outer surfaces are worked to a smooth finish, the interior being left relatively rough. As with all two-piece chapes the back fits, and was presumably glued into, an internal groove on either side of the chape front (Fig. 2), effectively forming a box, constituting the complete scabbard chape. The regular shape of the Greenwich Park chape appears unique, the use of ivory unusual, but not unknown. A chape from Nettleton, Wilts.⁶ is manufactured from a single piece of ivory and is of the normal sub-rectangular form, decorated with pelta-shaped cut-outs. A number of round ivory chapes, also manu-

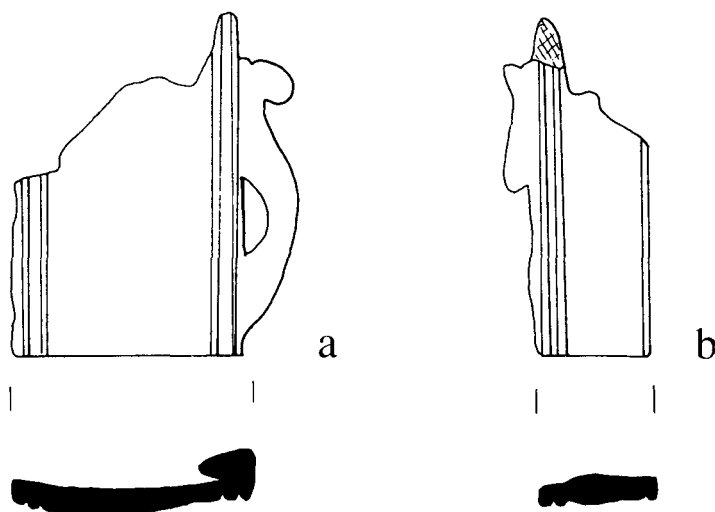


Fig. 1 Ivory scabbard chape: a) front b) back. (2/3)

factured from a single piece of ivory, are known from the Continent⁷. Whereas most bone chapes were constructed in two parts because a piece of bone wide enough for single piece manufacture could rarely be found, this was clearly not the case with ivory examples. That the Greenwich Park chape is constructed in two parts, unnecessarily, is therefore most unusual.

To the side of the chape front, and carved in one with it, is a representation of a scabbard slide with a central rectangular opening and one end terminating in a knob, a form recently discussed by Chapman⁸. Slides of this type are

themselves rare British finds being limited to examples from London⁹, Colchester¹⁰, Llandough¹¹, York¹² and South Shields¹³, and are equally uncommon on the Continent¹⁴. Scabbard slides such as these¹⁵ are to be associated with the long sword and served as a method of suspension, providing a loop for the sword with a belt passing through the central rectangular opening. They were vertically fastened to the scabbard and secured by binding through lateral holes and, additionally, by the presence of a small tab at either end which could be placed under the leather scabbard covering (Fig. 3). The

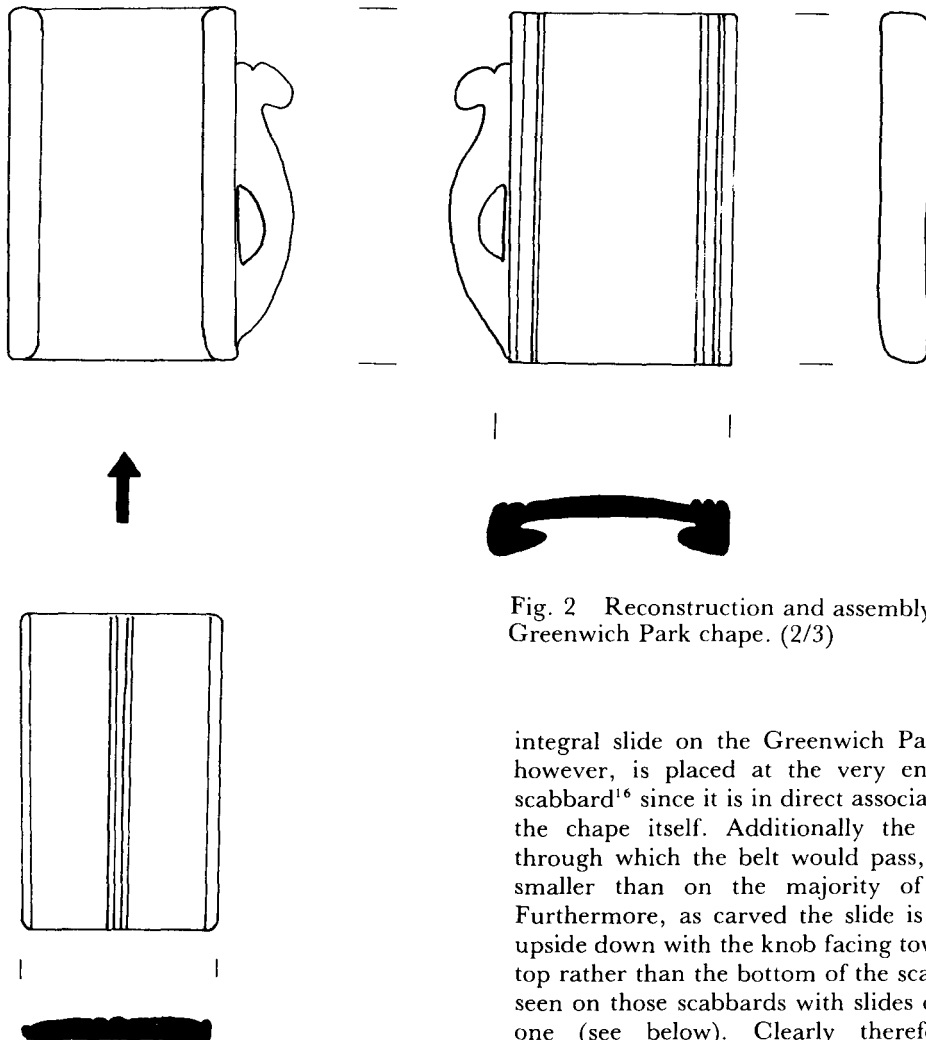


Fig. 2 Reconstruction and assembly of the Greenwich Park chape. (2/3)

integral slide on the Greenwich Park piece, however, is placed at the very end of the scabbard¹⁶ since it is in direct association with the chape itself. Additionally the aperture through which the belt would pass, is much smaller than on the majority of slides¹⁷. Furthermore, as carved the slide is depicted upside down with the knob facing towards the top rather than the bottom of the scabbard as seen on those scabbards with slides carved in one (see below). Clearly therefore, the

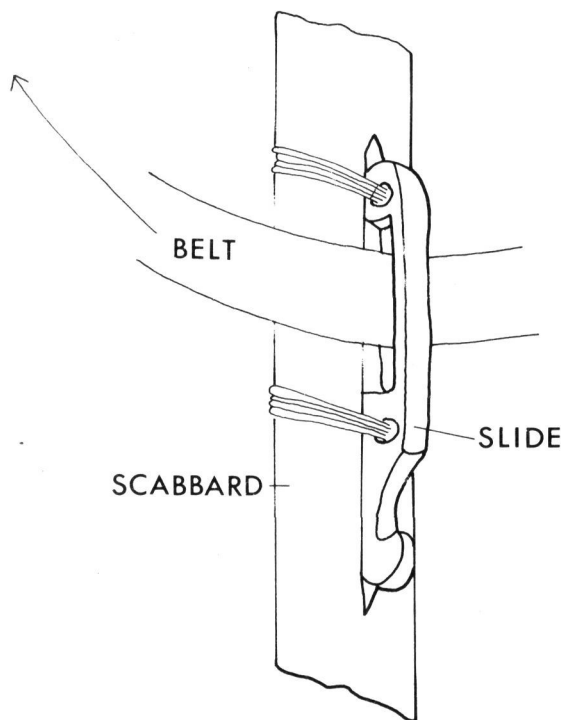


Fig. 3 Attachment and function of scabbard slides (after Chapman, 1977).

Greenwich Park slide must be regarded as no more than a representation.

Two further objects are relevant to the discussion. At Omal, Belgium¹⁸ a single-piece ivory scabbard with integral slides on either side carved in a functional position was discovered in a late Roman grave. A second association of ivory scabbard with integral slide is recorded from a Roman cemetery at Khisfine near Damascus¹⁹, this too having a slide in a functional position.

The dating of the Greenwich Park chape must rely upon the evidence for both bone box-chapes and the slides discussed above. The chronology and development of the box-chape series has been discussed by Oldenstein²⁰ who concluded, on continental evidence, that they belonged to the late 2nd and 3rd centuries. The evidence from Britain confirms his

conclusions. There are examples from Dover²¹ and Caerleon²² which lie early in the sequence but the majority of dated pieces belong to the 3rd century²³. The chronology of scabbard slides is less secure. There are two examples from the Saalburg²⁴ on the Rhine *limes* abandoned *c.* AD 260²⁵ and Trousdale²⁶ notes further examples from Nydam, Denmark, in early 3rd-century contexts and a 3rd-century piece from Novae, Bulgaria. The ivory scabbard with integral slide from the Khisfine cemetery (see above) is from a grave of the 2nd century but one of the two London examples was from a dump deposit containing coins to AD 364²⁷. The evidence therefore points most strongly to a date in the later 2nd and 3rd centuries for the Greenwich Park chape.



Plate 1 Decorated ivory plaque.

The second object²⁸ consists of an ivory plaque 54 mm long and 26 mm wide (Pl. 1). The front of the plaque depicts a well executed bust of a female holding a floral decorated shield above her head and resting on her shoulders. The reverse is plain and unworked. It is broken and badly chipped below the figure's neck. The identification of the figure is uncertain but is possibly a 'Meanad' of some sort²⁹.

Elaborate ivory carvings such as this are rare in Britain. There are only two comparable finds, both from Caerleon³⁰. The first is in the form of a tragic mask, the second showing a female figure supporting a basket of fruit on the head of a small cupid, probably a Bacchic scene. Although one of the Caerleon pieces has been described as 'from a ladies work basket' the most likely function of these pieces is as mounts on elaborately carved couches, such as those illustrated by Richter³¹ where similar pieces are found inserted into the fulcrum of the couch³². The reverses of the Caerleon and Greenwich Park pieces are plain, and only the Caerleon plaque in the form of a tragic mask with a number of small perforations to receive pins, demonstrates the means of attachment. While there are a small number of carved bone plaques recorded from Britain³³, these are generally of poor quality and there is little from Britain to compare with the wealth of carved bone and ivory material recorded from other provinces³⁴.

The dating of the Greenwich Park plaque is difficult. If it is derived from the fulcrum of a couch, as seems likely, then a date within the early Roman period seems probable.

The two Greenwich Park ivories are rare and important pieces. True ivories³⁵ are uncommon not only in Roman Britain but over much of the Continent as well at this period³⁶, and the discovery of two such exceptional pieces from one site is most unusual. With a small number of exceptions³⁷ Roman ivories are individualistic pieces, perhaps often produced to order. There is no evidence for the manufacture of ivory objects in the Roman period in Britain and there seems

little doubt that both Greenwich Park objects are imports. The importation of ivory into the Roman world from both India and Africa is well recorded³⁸. Although an ivory carvers guild is known from Rome³⁹ this cannot have been the only manufacturing centre and the origin of the Greenwich Park objects must remain uncertain.

NOTES

1. A. D. Webster *Greenwich Park* (1902) 73 where both objects are listed and p. 75 where the plaque is illustrated; cf. also H. Jones 'Roman remains in Greenwich Park' *Home Counties Magazine* 5 (1903) 49-55 and 223-226.
2. Including 400 coins ranging from Claudius to Honorius and fragments of three inscriptions, two in imported marble cf. R.I.B. nos. 37-9.
3. H. Sheldon and B. Yule 'Excavations in Greenwich Park, 1978-9' *London Archaeologist* 3 (1979) 311-317 including summary of earlier work. Additional information on the finds from Mr. H. Sheldon.
4. British Museum Accession Numbers 1906 2-12 9, 10 & 11.
5. e.g. V. E. Nash-Williams 'The Roman legionary fortress at Caerleon. Report on the excavations carried out in the Prysg Field, 1927-29. Pt. II. The Finds (Pot excepted)' *Archaeol. Camb.*, 87 (1932) 48-105, Fig. 43, 1-8 and J. Oldenstein 'Zur Ausrüstung römischer Auxiliareinheiten: Studien zu Beschlägen und Zierat an der Ausrüstung der römischen Auxiliareinheiten des obergermanisch-raetischen Limesgebietes aus dem zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert n.Chr.' *Bericht des Römisch-Germanischen Kommission* 57 (1976) 49-284 taf. 25-8.
6. W. J. Wedlake *The excavation of the shrine of Apollo at Nettleton, Wiltshire, 1956-1971*. Rep. Res. Comm. Soc. Antiq. London 40 (1982) Fig. 52. Although illustrated upside down its function as a chape is discussed, though the author preferred to identify it as a 'belt fitting' (p. 146).
7. L. Berger 'Ausgewählte Neueingänge Römermuseums in Augst' *Römerhaus und Museum Augst, Jahresbericht 1966* (1967) 3-29.
8. H. Chapman 'Two roman scabbard slides from London' *Antiq. J.* 56 (1976) 250-253.
9. Two examples, cf. Chapman *op cit* in note 8, Pl. XLV and T. R. Blurton 'Excavations at Angel Court, Walbrook, 1974' *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 26 (1977) 14-100 Fig. 18, 479.
10. R. E. M. Wheeler 'An Insula of Roman Colchester' *Trans. Essex Archaeol. Soc.* 16, 7-41.
11. Unpublished excavations Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust.
12. Unpublished, Yorkshire Museum. Accession Number D156.
13. Chapman *op cit* in note 8, Pl. XLV.c.
14. The form derives ultimately from western Asiatic slides. Their development is discussed fully in W. Trousdale 'The long sword and scabbard slide in Asia', *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology*, 17, where a number of similar examples are listed from Europe both in and outside the Empire. The writer has recorded additional examples from the north-western provinces at Cologne (unpublished Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne Accession Number 27, 15); Mainz (G. Behrens 'Neue Funde aus dem Kastelle Mainz', *Mainzer Zeitschrift* 7 (1912) 82-109, Abb. 20, 16) and Saalburg (two examples, unpublished Saalburg Kastell). There are further finds from Osijek, Yugoslavia. (Pinterović, D. 'Limestudien in der Baranja und in Slawonien' *Archaeologia Jugoslavica* 9 (1968) 55-82, Taf. VI, 10a) and an unprovenanced example in the Vatican Museum (Accession Number 13094).
15. Other forms of scabbard slides are recorded in bone (e.g. Oldenstein *op cit* in note 5, Taf. 14, 64-5) and, more commonly, in iron cf. H. J. Hundt 'Eiserne römische Schwertriemenhalter' *Saalburg Jahrbuch* 18 (1959/60) 52-66.
16. There is no doubt that the Greenwich Park object is a chape and not part of a composite ivory scabbard, an alternative suggestion. The bottom is sawn flat and finished. There is no indication of further elements being attached above or below.
17. The gap on the Greenwich Park example is only 18 mm, whilst other slides measured show a range from 27 mm to 50 mm.
18. Baron de Loë 'Belgique Ancienne III: La Période Romaine', *Catalogue descriptif et raisonné. Musées royaux d'Art et d'histoire à Bruxelles* (1937) Fig. 44.
19. Trousdale, *op cit* in note 14, 236 and Pl. 18d & 19a-b.
20. Oldenstein, *op cit* in note 5, 120-123.

21. B. Philp *The excavation of the roman forts of the Classis Britannica at Dover 1970–77* Fig. 43, 242, dated c. AD 160–210.
22. Unpublished excavations, Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust, from contexts of the late second or early third centuries.
23. For example the pieces from Caerleon cf. Nash-Williams, *op cit* in note 5.
24. cf. note 1.
25. e.g. H. Schönberger 'The Roman frontier in Germany: An archaeological survey' *J. Roman Stud.* 59 (1969) 144–197.
26. *Op cit* in note 14, 220–223.
27. Chapman *op cit* in note 5, 251.
28. British Museum Accession Number 1906 2–12 8.
29. The identification of the figure is difficult. The alternatives seem to be that either she is a dancer connected with the cult of Atys and Cybele or a 'maenad' associated with the cult of Bacchus as for example on the Great Dish from the Mildenhall Treasure, cf. K.S. Painter *The Mildenhall Treasure. Roman Silver from East Anglia* (1977) Pl. 6. I am grateful to Catherine Johns and Miranda Green for discussing this piece with me.
30. These pieces have been published on a number of occasions e.g. G. C. Boon 'Isca: The Roman Legionary Fortress at Caerleon, Mon.' (1972) Pl. 72.
31. G. M. Richter 'Furniture of Greeks, Etruscans and Romans' (1966) Figs. 530–594.
32. cf. also R.V. Nicholls 'A Roman couch in Cambridge' *Archaeologia* 106 (1979), 1–31 and especially Pl. VIII.
33. e.g. J.M.C. Toynbee 'Art in Britain under the Romans' (1964) 360–3.
34. e.g. L. Marangou 'Bone carvings from Egypt. I: Graeco-Roman period' (1972).
35. Bone and ivory are commonly confused in the literature. 'True elephant ivory is distinguishable by innumerable criss-cross lines 'due to the enormous number of minute tubes of which ivory is composed, . . . starting from the pulp cavity, and radiating outwards in all directions. When fresh the pores are filled with an oily substance, which makes carving easier, and contributes to the beautiful and transparent polish'. T.K. Penniman *Pictures of ivory and other animal teeth, bone and antler* (1952) 13.
36. Of over 16,000 Roman objects of bone, antler and ivory from Britain recorded by the writer less than forty (well under 0.5%) are of ivory. There are no geographical or chronological concentrations. Towns, villas and military sites have all produced occasional finds. A pattern similar to that in Britain appears over most of the north-western provinces.
37. S. Greep 'Two early Roman handles from the Wallbrook, London' *Archaeol. J.* 139 (1982) 91 – 100 for a small group of ivory handles.
38. e.g. J. Thorley 'The development of trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus.' *Greece and Rome* 16, 209–23 for the trade with India.
39. *I.L.S.* 7214.