

Felmersham and Ostia: A Metalwork Comparison

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The drawing by the late Mr C.E. Freeman of the fish-head spout from Felmersham has graced the cover of the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal* since its inception in 1962. The piece itself was briefly noted in our volume two¹ when the interpretation, first proposed by Sir Cyril Fox,² that it served as the mouth of a shallow bowl at a spring-head was accepted.³ Since 1964, further examination of the piece and the publication of the late Iron Age burial from Welwyn Garden City⁴ with its wine strainer has permitted a reinterpretation of the function of this masterwork⁵ of Celtic art. The suggestion was made in 1970 that the fish-head spout, together with fragments of a bronze bowl and the bronze segmental plate from the Felmersham Bridge finds, was part of a wine strainer⁶ similar in form to that found at Welwyn Garden City⁷ and one exported to Poland and discovered at Łeg Piekarski.⁸

It has become increasingly recognised since then that it is more probable that the finds from Felmersham Bridge represent a burial⁹ rather than a hoard as was first suggested: indeed the reported "cavity in the gravel, several feet deep with a filling of distinctive colour"¹⁰ reported by the workmen when the pieces were found in January 1942 suggests a vault of the Welwyn-Type burials which are such a feature of the archaeology of the late pre-Roman Iron Age of the south Midlands.¹¹ When the suggestion of a burial as the interpretation to be placed on the finds from Felmersham Bridge was first made by Professor J.V.S. Megaw in 1971,¹² attention was focused on the contents of the group rather than the context of the find; therefore the suggestion of a burial receives more powerful support.

What Megaw also noted was a stylistic comparison between "south-eastern British workshops and contemporary Italian and provincial Roman metalwork associated with drinking and the feast" but he was unable to find "any real continental counterparts" to such pieces as those from Felmersham Bridge, Welwyn Garden City and Łeg Piekarski. This note seeks to point to one such

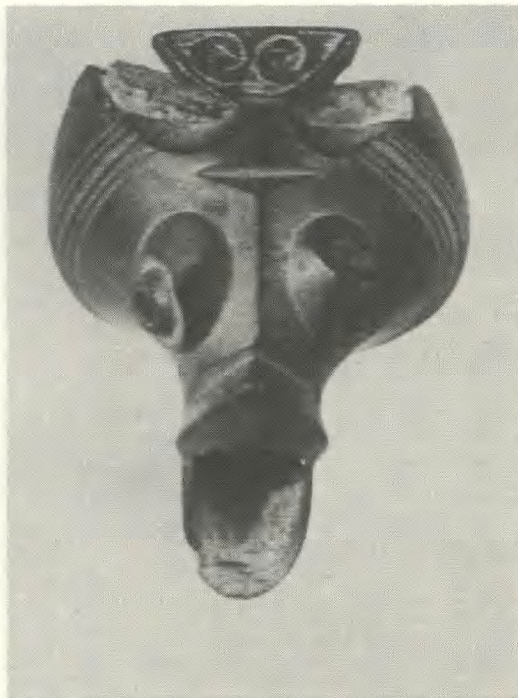
counterpart and to extend the discussion to other pieces of late Iron Age metalwork and their continental and classical comparanda.

The piece from Felmersham Bridge is a spout in the form of a fish-head; Łeg Piekarski is in the form of a boar; and that from Welwyn Garden City is not of a zoomorphic form; but there is also an example in the form of an ox-head from Kirmington, Lincs., which is the most recently published, but differs somewhat from the Łeg Piekarski and Felmersham Bridge pieces in both its form and in its stylistic achievement. As Megaw has concluded, that from Welwyn Garden City is an "import embellished by its local native owners" but both the Felmersham Bridge and Łeg Piekarski finds are of pieces worthy of the designation "masterwork".

Both in fact exhibit a great deal more realism and a great deal more life than the classical piece to which this note draws attention. This is a bronze spout now in the Musée Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Parc du Cinquantenaire, Bruxelles,¹³ which is part of the Ravenstein collection, gathered in Italy in the late nineteenth century, and possibly from Ostia in so far as a provenience is available. No further details of its discovery are, unfortunately, known. The bronze is in the form of a bull-head with an open mouth (pl. 1 a-b) and is 62mm in length and has a maximum width of 68mm. The back, abutting the now missing bowl, is of wide curvature in the horizontal plane, but almost straight in the vertical. The piece would have been fixed under the rim of a bowl as the rear portion of the top is undecorated and shows signs of friction with another piece of metal. Two small stops, also functioning as ears, would have helped to keep the piece in position. A feathered ridge forms the centre line of the top of the head and joins the heavy double feathered ridges which constitute the eyebrows of the beast. The eyes are small protruding pinnacles without a great deal of detail, and the snout is a raised nostril delineated by incised lines. There is an opening beneath this, but the sides of the head are plain except for a double ridged line which goes round the back of



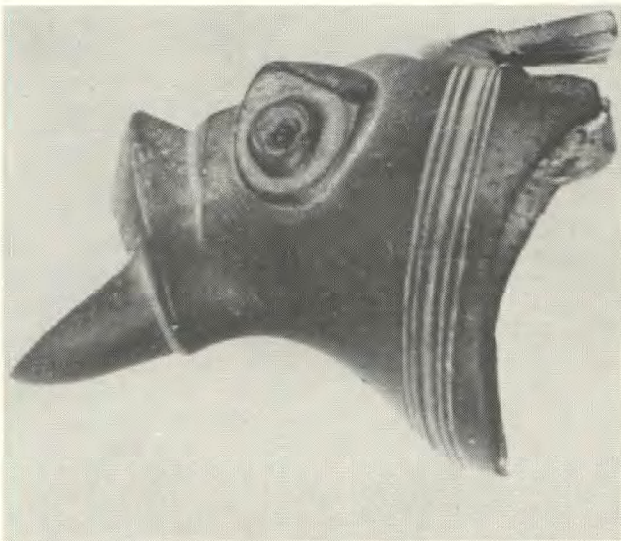
A



C



B



D

Pl 1 Animal-head spouts from bronze bowls:

- A Ostia, looking from above,
- B Ostia, looking at left side,
- C Felmersham, looking from above,
- D Felmersham, looking at right side.

[Photographs: A, B, Musees Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Bruxelles; C, D, Bedford Museum]

the beast's head and joins it formally to the plate holding the device to the side of the bowl.

While the actual beast is different: bull instead of fish; and the artistic achievement is much less; the whole of the Ostia piece conveys a similarity of function to the Felmersham Bridge fish-head spout. The similarity of function: the use of an animal head on a wine strainer, may be matched by a wider comparison of the classical influences on the Celtic world in the artistic endeavour. For Felmersham it is a superiority of tone, but this is not always the case. The range of such pieces is wide, and the late Iron Age burials of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire possess other pieces which have ultimate classical prototypes.

The Felmersham Bridge finds themselves include two items beyond the fish-head spout which link the barbarian with the classical world. That the bronze bucket-escutcheons in the form of cow-heads might ultimately be linked to a classical progenitor is not perhaps unlikely, but three pieces of ribbon mounting¹⁴ may be variously interpreted. In the second vault at Stanfordsbury there is a range of decorated metalwork and box fittings and it seems probable that these should be connected.¹⁵ Though it is almost certain that the present reconstruction of the ornamented bronze pieces of the Stanfordsbury plate is in error,¹⁶ their function as the decoration of a bronze-bound wooden box of which other fittings have survived is not in doubt. The Felmersham pieces could have been another such box with a plain band. However, there is an alternative suggestion which compares the Felmersham Bridge pieces with a piece now in a private collection in Massachusetts.¹⁷ This and further comparative pieces were the bronze facings to leather belts, but its width is 105mm compared with 44mm for the Felmersham Bridge mountings. They are fastened with elaborate clasps in the form of an insect such as a grasshopper but with equine heads and protruding tongues forming the hooks. The piece has three pairs of holes with raised edges to hold the hooks. Small holes are clearly visible along the edges of the Goodman belt and no such holes can be detected on the Felmersham Bridge pieces, which may well argue against the close affiliation of one piece with the other. Also no trace is reported of an elaborate clasp by the original finders of the Felmersham Bridge fragments. Watson's interpretation of pieces implied a flat surface for attachment with iron nails,

surely of very short shank, and assumed a box. The Goodman belt and its parallels from Canosa and elsewhere, while of a much earlier date, might offer a potential alternative suggestion.

The suggestion of a classical prototype for the cow-heads¹⁸ might seem almost an anathema to some used to the insularity of Celtic art, but the relative simplicity of the Felmersham Bridge heads should not blind the viewer to the magnificence of the ultimate Hellenistic and Greek models: one in the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, retains curls of hair, slit not circular eyes, a wide mouth and paired nostrils, and exhibits a greater ferocity than its Celtic descendants.¹⁹ This beast was possibly from a chariot fitting but itself harks back to Urartean examples on cauldrons.

The ancient world had long tentacles, perhaps of tenuous links, but more close in their comparison are spiral bracelets. In the Snailwell burial, like that from Felmersham Bridge, an outlier of the Welwyn-type burials, is a bracelet ending in two ram-serpent heads.²¹ Yet these hark back to Graeco-Roman examples and ultimately to ones from Thebes.²²

The Mediterranean is a long way from the valley of the rivers of the Wash: 1800km at least. The world of classical Greece and Rome even further; but artistic expression and cultural interchange are not dependent on distance alone. With distance and hence with time, these influences may become diluted or changed but they are nevertheless present.²³

NOTES

- 1 W.H. Manning, 'The Felmersham Fish-head Spout', *Beds. Arch. J.* 2, 1964, 74.
- 2 W. Watson, 'Belgic Bronzes and Pottery found at Felmersham-on-Ouse, Bedfordshire', *Ant. J.* 29, 1949, 51 with fig 8 first notes the view given greater expression by C. Fox, *Pattern and Purpose*, 1958, 80, fig 49, pl 46a-b, with illustrations derived from Watson. 1949, 41-42 and fig 4 with pl 5a.
- 3 The idea of a spout at a well-head is not in itself far-fetched, as Watson, *loc. cit.*, observed "lion-headed spouts were ornaments of the Greek well-house".
- 4 I.M. Stead, 'A La Tene III Burial at Welwyn Garden City', *Archaeologia* 101, 1967, 1-62.
- 5 This term seems much more preferable to the use of the word "masterpiece" which has a precise meaning as the piece produced by an apprentice at the end of his period of apprenticeship before being admitted to the ranks of the master craftsmen of his trade and upon the successful com-

- pletion of which depended the subsequent admission.
- 6 D.H. Kennett, 'The Felmersham fish-head spout: a suggested reconstruction', *Ant. J.* 50, 1970, 86-88.
- 7 Stead, 1967, 23-25, pl 5, fig 12.
- 8 J.V.S. Megaw, 'A British Bronze Bowl of the Belgic Iron Age from Poland', *Ant. J.* 43, 1963, 27-37.
- 9 J.V.S. Megaw, 'The Felmersham fish-head spout', *Ant. J.* 51, 1971, 299-300; the burial suggestion was independently arrived at by D.H. Kennett in an unpublished note which space did not permit to be added to F.W. Kuhlicke, 'Postscript on the Iron Age finds from Felmersham Bridge', *Beds. Arch. J.* 4, 1969, 81-82; see also A.H. Simco, 'The Iron Age in the Bedford Region', *Beds. Arch. J.* 8, 1973, 10-11.
- 10 Watson, 1949, 37.
- 11 Stead, 1967, 44-60 with literature there cited.
- 12 Megaw, 1971, 299; from hence also the quotations in the next paragraph.
- 13 Section des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines, accession number R.1346, usually on public exhibition.
- 14 Watson, 1949, 46-47, pl 6a, lower items; Simco, 1973, 11, suggests a bucket.
- 15 H. Dryden, 'Roman and Romano-British Remains at and near Shefford', *Pub. Camb. Ant. Soc.* 1, 10, 1845, 18; conveniently C. Fox, *The Archaeology of the Cambridge Region, 1923/1948*, 99-100 for a general account, and 105 with pl 18, 4 for the bindings.
- 16 This conclusion has been noted independently by J. Dyer and M.G. Spratling; I am grateful to Mr Dyer and Dr Spratling for their comments.
- 17 J.A. Scott in D.G. Mitten and S.F. Doeringer (eds.), *Master Bronzes from the Classical World*, 1967, 197, no. 202, with literature there cited, especially G.M.A. Richter, *Greek, Etruscan and Roman Bronzes*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1915, 422- , and P. Jacobsthal, *Early Celtic Art*, 1944, 146 with pl 258d: 1a and 260e.
- 18 Watson, 1949, 39-41, fig 2, pl 5c-d; Fox, 1958, 73, fig 46, pl 46c-d reproduces Watson's figures and photographs. See also C.F.C. Hawkes, 'Bronze-workers, Cauldrons and Bucket-animals in Iron Age and Roman Britain', in W.F. Grimes, (ed.), *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and Beyond*, 1951, 171-199, and I.M. Stead, 'The Reconstruction of Iron Age Buckets from Aylesford and Baldock', *British Museum Quarterly*, 35, 1971 250-282 for a more recent consideration.
- 19 D.G. Mitten in Mitten and Doeringer (eds), 1967, 141, no 145, citing D.G. Mitten, *Fogg Art Museum Acquisitions 1965*, 136-140.
- 20 P. Amandry, *The Aegean and the Near East: Studies presented to Hetty Goldman*, 1957, 236-261.
- 21 Conveniently Fox, 1958, 81 and pl 53b; the initial publication is T.C. Lethbridge, 'Burial of an Iron Age warrior at Snailwell', *Proc. Camb. Ant. Soc.* 47, 1953, 25-37; for an excellent detail photograph see Megaw, 1963, pl 15c.
- 22 M. Comstock and C. Vermeule, *Greek, Etruscan and Roman Bronzes in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, 1971, 201-203, esp. no. 256 and 262.
- 23 Note completed 17 June 1975; it represents ideas first crystallised on seeing the Ostia piece in Bruxelles, 27-29 May 1974; my warmest thanks are due to Dr J. Baulty and Mme C. Skinkel-Taupin of the Musées Royaux, Bruxelles, for their help at the museum and to those who took part in the III^e Colloque International des Bronzes Antiques for their stimulating comments; at Bedford my thanks are due to Mr. F.W. Kuhlicke, Mr. J. Turner and Miss J.M. Hassall for permitting me to re-examine the Felmersham bronzes, at various dates between June 1964 and 1975.

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