

## NOTES

### A ROMAN CLASP-KNIFE FROM SAUNDERTON

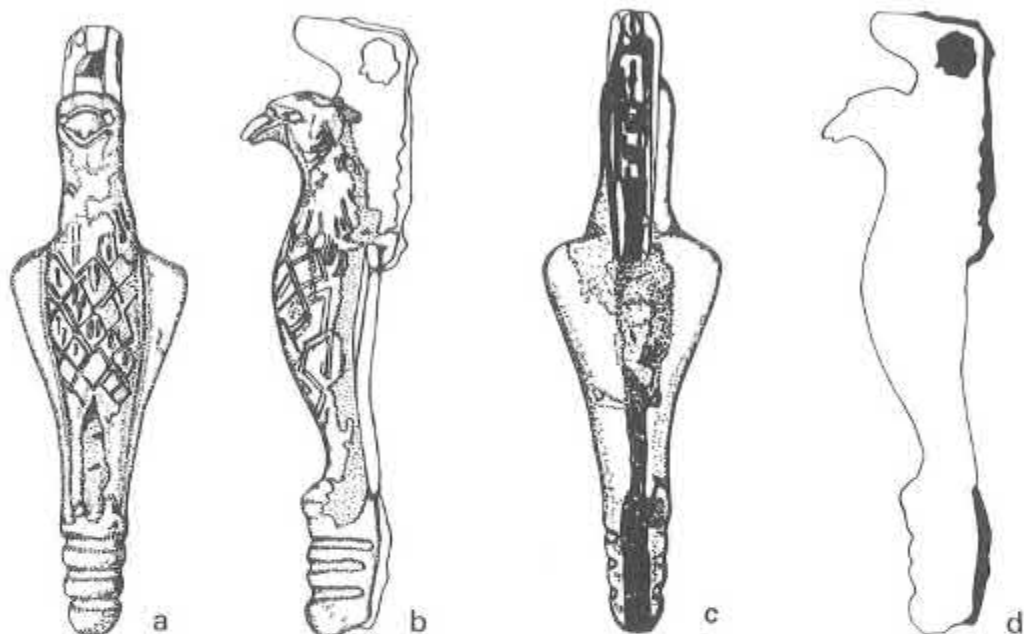


Fig. 1: Roman clasp-knife from Saunderton, a-d. Scale 1:1

A Roman clasp-knife was found by Messrs D Channels and R Piercey with a metal detector at Saunderton in 1998 and brought to the writer's notice. It consists of two parts: a copper alloy handle and an iron blade, and even in its corroded condition is still a fine piece of modelling. It was examined in its 'as found' condition and remains in private hands. Precise details of the find-spot, which has yielded other Romano-British finds, are omitted here to avoid illicit interference.

The handle is cast in one piece and takes the form of an erect bird with folded wings standing upon a baluster-shaped plinth (fig. 1a). A channel which houses the knife blade runs the length of

the bird's back and continues in a bar-shaped spur which projects over the bird's head (figs. 1b and c).

The bird is effectively modelled with eye sockets, a curved beak and chest plumage indicated by incised lozenges and vertical strokes. The feet are only vestigially indicated, although this area has suffered corrosion damage. The head is skewed slightly to the bird's right, particularly when viewed from the back. Microscopic examination demonstrated that no inlays were present. The copper alloy has a dull, mid-green patina. The creature has the appearance of a bird of prey, most probably an eagle.

The iron knife blade is still embedded in its channel and would have pivoted on an iron rivet at the angle with the spur. Unfortunately, it was not possible to obtain an X-radiograph, but the iron visible to the naked eye is indicated in solid black on figs. 1c and 1d.

This style of clasp-knife is classified as the 'table-leg' type, as can be seen from its profile (fig. 1b). There are various designs in this type, most usually that of a leonine pedestal. They were known throughout the Roman world, with examples from Rome, Germany and Egypt (Jackson

1994).<sup>1</sup> Besides housing blades with a general use, such clasp-knife handles also held surgical scalpels and toilet razors. The date range is given as 2nd to 4th centuries AD.

Grateful thanks to Ralph Jackson of the British Museum for his comments, and to Mr Piercey for reporting the find.

*Linda Babb*

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Jackson, R. 1994, 'Exhibits at Ballots' *Antiq J* 74, 325-32