

A LATE ROMAN FIXED PLATE BUCKLE FROM HIGHDOWN, FERRING, W. SUSSEX (Fig. 2)

In December 1983 a buckle was found on the western slopes of Highdown Hill and brought to Worthing Museum and Art Gallery for identification. It was subsequently donated to the museum and given the accession number 1984/118/1.

Description

The buckle is made of a copper alloy and has a semi-circular loop and a trapezoidal plate which were cast in one piece. The loop is D-shaped in section and ends in a pair of open-mouthed animal heads which face each other across the grooved hinge bar. One head is more worn than the other. The eye on the less worn head is marked with a raised cross. The pin is extant but bent.

The plate is decorated with a recessed border along each edge which encloses a row of raised dots. A back plate is attached to the plate by four rivets. In one corner of the plate there appears to be an extra rivet-hole which does not reach the back plate.

The buckle is well-executed and in good condition. The maximum width of the loop is 47 mm and of the plate 36 mm.

The Site¹

The buckle was said to have been found on the surface of Highdown Hill, but as this area is under turf it was probably, in fact, found with the aid of a metal-detector.

Highdown was first occupied in the late Bronze Age and was the site of a small early Iron Age hillfort which was deserted before the arrival of the Romans. In the 2nd century A.D. a sizeable villa was built on the lower western slopes and continued in use until the mid 4th century. The site is best known for the large and rich Anglo-Saxon cemetery, which was first identified in 1892. Charles Hercules Read directed excavations there in 1893–94 and Dr A. E. Wilson in 1939 and 1947. The finds from the site are in Worthing Museum and Art Gallery. The cemetery contained a mixture of cremations and inhumations. Only limited traces of an associated settlement have been found.²

The early date of the cemetery is indicated by the presence of a number of reused Roman items and by Quoit Brooch Style pieces which probably date to the first half of the 5th century. Among the other finds are several items which strongly resemble material from late Roman workshops in Belgium and NE. France. None of the grave goods can be dated to later than the end of the 6th century.

Identification and Dating of the Buckle

The buckle falls within Hawkes and Dunning's Group IIIB,³ a development of a late Roman type. Earlier examples, Group IIIA, with the plate and loop cast separately, are found in 4th-century contexts on the Continent. Group IIIB buckles first appear in the middle of the 5th century and their continental distribution is centred on the Rhine and Meuse valleys. At Krefeld Gellep and Hailot they are associated with the so-called 'warrior graves'.

In this country only eight IIIB buckles were known before this latest discovery.⁴ Their distribution is confined to Berkshire, Essex, Kent and Sussex with one outlier at Nunburnholme⁵ in Yorkshire. Only four have precise provenances: two, Alfriston grave 14⁶ and Mucking grave 979,⁷ are male burials and a third, from Long Wittenham grave 57,⁸ although identified by the excavators as female, contained only the buckle, a knife and a pot. It too could have been a male burial if the grave goods were the only criteria used for determining the sex. No other buckles of this type have been found at Highdown. Elsewhere in England they occur only in early Anglo-Saxon contexts. None has been found on a Romano-British site.

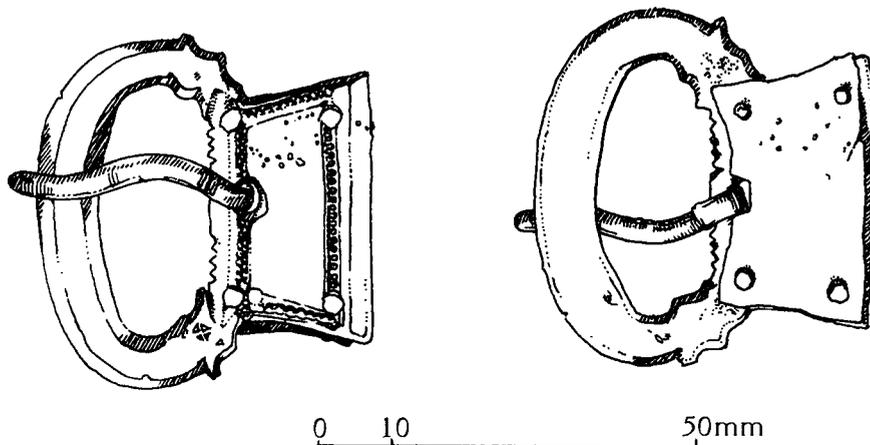


FIG. 2
HIGHDOWN, FERRING, W. SUSSEX
Late Roman fixed plate buckle. Scale 1:1

Böhme⁹ divided this type of buckle into three groups. The buckles from Long Wittenham grave 57, Canterbury Museum unprovenanced and Nunburnholme fall within Böhme's Haillot type. The Highdown buckle can be added to this group. The other five buckles fall within his Krefeld Gellep group. Böhme said that his Trier-Samson group was represented by an unprovenanced buckle in the Ashmolean Museum and by a devolved buckle from Bifrons grave 23. The buckle in the Ashmolean Museum is smaller than the others in this group and does not have a trapezoidal plate. Professor V. I. Evison¹⁰ did not include them in her distribution map of IIIB buckles found in England. She claims that this class of buckle belonged to Germanic people and originated in the Meuse valley, and that the English examples must have been imported. The association with military graves on the Continent adds weight to the theory that they were probably brought to England among the possessions of Germanic mercenaries. The new discovery therefore reinforces the identification of Highdown as a mid 5th-century garrison site.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Linda Stiles for the drawing of the buckle.

SALLY WHITE

NOTES

¹ A summary of the occupation and excavation of Highdown can be found in M. G. Welch, *Highdown and its Saxon cemetery* (Worthing, 1976).

² M. Bell, 'Saxon settlements and buildings in Sussex', in P. Brandon (ed.), *The South Saxons* (Chichester, 1978), 46-47.

³ S. Hawkes and G. C. Dunning, 'Soldiers and Settlers in Britain, fourth to fifth century, with a catalogue of animal ornamented buckles and related belt-fittings', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 5 (1961), 35-39, fig. 20 g and h.

⁴ V. I. Evison, 'Distribution maps and England in the first two phases', in V. I. Evison (ed.), *Angles, Saxons and Jutes* (Oxford, 1981), 131-33, fig. 9.

⁵ B. N. Eagles, *The Anglo-Saxon Settlement of Humberside* (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Brit. Ser. 68, 1979), 61.

⁶ M. G. Welch, *Early Anglo-Saxon Sussex* (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Brit. Ser. 112, 1983), 89, fig. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132, fig. 6c.

⁸ J. Y. Akerman, 'Report on Researches in an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Long Wittenham, Berkshire in 1859', *Archaeologia*, xxxviii (1860), 342, pl. XIX, 10.

⁹ H. W. Böhme, *Germanische Grabfunde des 4. bis 5. Jahrhunderts zwischen unterer Elbe und Loire* (Munich, 1974), 71-73, 368-69, map 16.

¹⁰ Evison, *op. cit.* in note 4, 165, fig. 9.