

## A LA TÈNE I DAGGER FROM THE RIVER THAMES AT WINDSOR, BERKSHIRE

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### SUMMARY

*A La Tène dagger was one of three objects found in the river Thames at Windsor in the late 1970s, by divers. The size and shape of the dagger suggests it was made in the 5–4th centuries BC and although not common in Britain, there is a concentration of finds in the west London reaches of the river Thames.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s when John Lofting and two friends were diving in the River Thames at Windsor Bridge, they retrieved three antiquities. The friends each kept one object. One was described as being a stone axe, a second as a bronze axe, and the third, which is the subject of this present note, was thought to be an iron spearhead and was retained by Mr Lofting. In 1999 he was reminded of this find when he was involved in making a video of the archaeological excavations at Perry Oaks, Heathrow for the British Airways Authority. He brought the find to the excavation.

It is likely that the first find was a Neolithic stone axe, many of which have been retrieved from the River Thames (Adkins and Jackson 1978), and that the second was a Bronze Age axe, which are also relatively frequent finds from the river (Needham and Burgess 1980). The iron 'spear head' was scanned on-site at Perry Oaks and the image was e-mailed to the author who identified it as being an Iron Age dagger. In January 2000 Mr Lofting brought the dagger to the offices of Wessex Archaeology where it was x-rayed and drawn (Fig. 1). The dagger remains in private possession but the drawing and x-rays are deposited with Reading Museum.

### DESCRIPTION

In order to preserve the dagger Mr Lofting coated it with black paint, and this currently obscures the surface. The x-rays have not, however, revealed any significant additional

information. The overall length is 320mm with the tang, which is 65mm long and rectangular in section. The blade is 255mm long and up to 30mm wide, with a pronounced median ridge. The shoulders are rounded and the blade tapers to a point only in the last third of its length. The distinction between a dagger and a short sword is a matter of degree, but Jope considered that the division between them is when a blade is more than 250–300mm long (Jope 1961, 308; 1983). The relatively small size of the weapon suggests that it falls within the La Tène I period, which dates, broadly speaking, to the 5 – 4th centuries BC. The bell-shaped (or campanulate) shoulders of the weapon recall those of some of the earlier Hallstatt D daggers. This suggests that the Windsor dagger lies relatively early within La Tène I. The shortness of the dagger, also hints at this, aligning it to the smaller Hallstatt daggers rather than to La Tène swords which became progressively longer (Stead 1995, 62-3, fig. 18). The now lost handle was presumably of wood or bone. The scabbard, which has left no trace on the dagger, is likely to have had a copper alloy front plate and an annular chape. The back plate may have been of iron.

Daggers and short swords do occur occasionally later in the Iron Age (eg Jope 1961, 339–41, nos 34–8, fig. 14, 37–8; Stead 1991, 71, 205, fig. 55, R153, 197, fig. 108, R87; Cotton and Wood 1996, 24–5, fig. 11, 33) but these are less

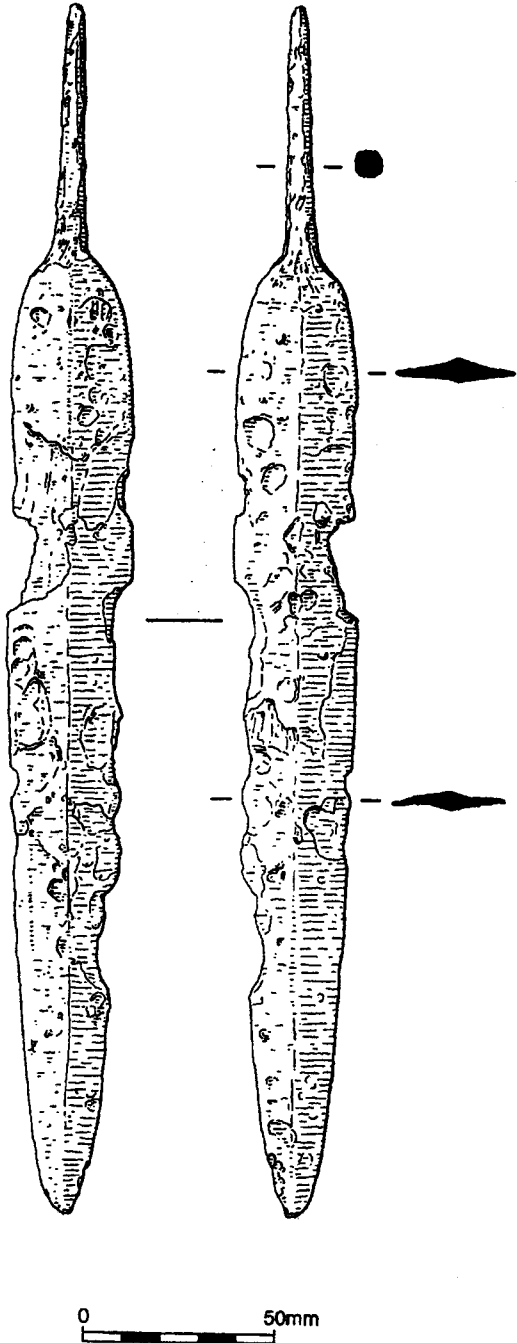


Figure 1. La Tène dagger from the River Thames at Windsor

frequent and in view of the number of La Tène swords and daggers found in the Thames (below) a La Tène I date for the Windsor dagger is considered to be most likely.

### CONTEXT

La Tène I daggers and swords are not common finds in Britain, but there is a distinct concentration of finds from the west London reaches of the River Thames (Jope 1961, 320-5, fig. 10). Some finds occur in burials in Yorkshire (Stead 1991, 64-74) but most of the others are also from watery contexts, such as the River Witham, Lincolnshire, or an old course of the River Nene, Cambridgeshire (Fitzpatrick 1984; 179-81; Stead 1984), where they are likely to have been deposited as votive offerings. Scabbards for daggers, which the Windsor find is likely to have had, have been found in the Thames at Richmond, Battersea, and at Hammersmith (Jope 1961, nos 16 ( 333, figs. 5; 12) 17 ( 335, fig. 4), 23 ( 337, fig. 9, p. xxi, d-e) and 24 ( 337, fig. 9).

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/Although Windsor lies at the western edge of the currently recorded distribution of La Tène swords and scabbards from the Thames, this distribution may be a product of the intensity of both dredging and the redeposition of excavated material in the London reaches of the Thames (Fitzpatrick 1984, 179-81; Cotton and Wood 1996, 28-9). Other finds of Iron Age metalwork from the Thames at or near to Windsor include a La Tène I scabbard, also with rounded shoulders, which is recorded as having been found between Philpotts and Victoria Bridge (Jope 1961, 336, no. 20, fig. 4), a bridle bit from Old Windsor which is slightly further to the east (Barber and Megaw 1963; Paulk 1984, 36, fig. C19) and a spearhead which may have come from Old Windsor and which was identified as being Iron Age in date (Lawrence 1929, 74).

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