

A Concentration of Bronze-Age Metalwork from the River Thames at Sandford-on-Thames

Much British Bronze-Age metalwork, including a high proportion of all the known weaponry of the period, comes from rivers and other wet places. The Thames has been a particularly prolific source of such finds. It is now widely accepted that this material is the result of deliberate deposition of valuable items for 'ritual' reasons, rather than of accidental loss.¹ The distribution of finds of Bronze-Age metalwork suggests that certain locations were particularly favoured, over long periods of time, as places at which such deposition took place.²

This note concerns the material from what seems to be one such location: the Thames at Sandford-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. The Bronze-Age metalwork from this place will be described, and the significance of this body of material, and of this location as a place of deliberate deposition, will be discussed.

THE MATERIAL

Eight pieces of Bronze-Age weaponry have been recovered from Sandford-on-Thames. Five were found at various times in the nineteenth century, the other three in 1972 and 1973. All have been published previously, but the significance of the material as a group has not hitherto been considered. Six of the pieces are known to have come from the river, and it seems likely that the remaining two pieces were from a former channel of the Thames.

The pieces will be listed in chronological order (starting with those of the early Bronze Age, c.1650–1500 BC). Detailed descriptions are not given, as these already have been published elsewhere, notably in volumes of the *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* series. The published references for each piece are given below.

1. Dagger (Reading Museum, 1975.135.1)
Found in dredging operations in the River Thames at Sandford in 1973.
Gerloff's Type Camerton dagger of the Camerton-Snowhill series.³

¹ For example, R. Bradley, *The Passage of Arms. An Archaeological Analysis of Prehistoric Hoard and Votive Deposits*, 2nd edn (1998). A number of people have kindly assisted me with this note. Richard Bradley read and commented on a draft, and encouraged me to publish it. Gary Lock also provided comment on my draft. Ben Roberts (then of the British Museum), Angela Houghton (Reading Museum) and Alison Roberts (Ashmolean Museum) provided information on objects in their respective collections. Allyson Barnes of the Environment Agency assisted with my enquiry about dredging, and also supplied borehole information for Sandford Lock from the Agency's archives. Brigitte Badelt of Franz Steiner Verlag kindly gave permission to reproduce illustrations from several *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* volumes. I am very grateful indeed to all for their help.

² S. Needham and C. Burgess, 'The Later Bronze Age in the Lower Thames Valley: The Metalwork Evidence', in J. Barrett and R. Bradley (eds.), *Settlement and Society in the British Later Bronze Age*, BAR BS, 83 (1980), pp. 437–69. See also F. Pryor, *The Flag Fen Basin; Archaeology and Environment of a Fenland Landscape* (2001).

³ S. Gerloff, *The Early Bronze Age Daggers in Great Britain and a Reconsideration of the Wessex Culture*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde Abteilung VI, Band 2* (1975), p. 246, no. 162B and plate 59, H.

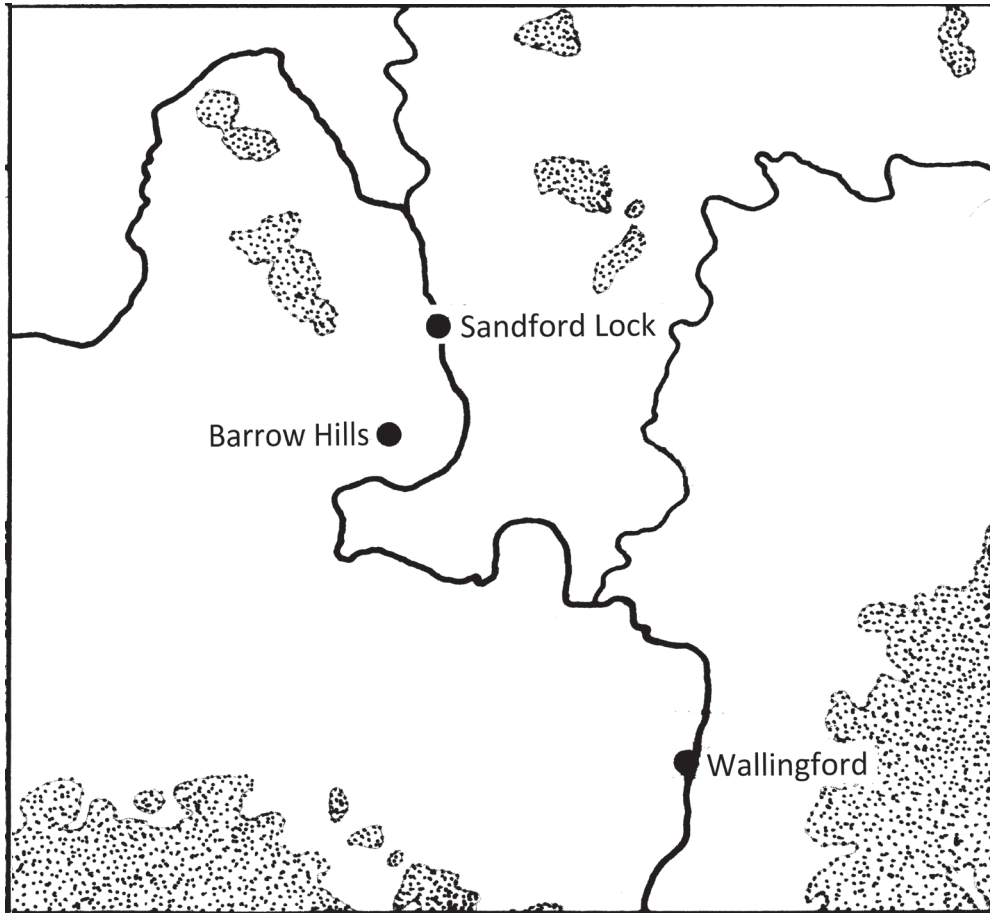


Fig. 1. Location of Sandford Lock and other key sites mentioned in the text.

2. Dagger (Location uncertain – previously Reading Museum)
Found in dredging operations in the River Thames at Sandford in 1973.
Gerloff's Type Camerton of the Camerton-Snowshill series.⁴
The current location of this piece is uncertain. Gerloff lists it as 'Thames River Authority (at present in Reading Mus.)' but it does not appear to be there now.⁵
3. Rapier (British Museum, WG 1253)
River Thames – 'found during the construction of Sandford Lock' according to British Museum records.
Burgess and Gerloff's Type Appleby, Variant Weybridge.⁶

⁴ Ibid. no. 162A and pl. 59, G.

⁵ Ibid. no. 162A; Angela Houghton, Reading Museum, personal communication.

⁶ J.G. Waller, 'Bronze Implements', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain*, 3 (1874), pp. 230–1; J. Evans, *The Ancient Bronze Implements, Weapons, and Ornaments of Great Britain and Ireland* (1881), p. 248; B.A.V. Trump, 'The Origin and Development of British Middle Bronze Age Rapiers', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 28 (1962), p. 98, no. 230; M.J. Rowlands, *The Production and Distribution of Metalwork in the Middle Bronze Age in Southern Britain*, BAR BS, 31 (1976), p. 417, no. 1879 and plate 48; C.B. Burgess and S. Gerloff, *The Dirks and Rapiers of Great Britain and Ireland*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde Abteilung IV, Band 7* (1981), p. 79, no. 624 and plate 82.

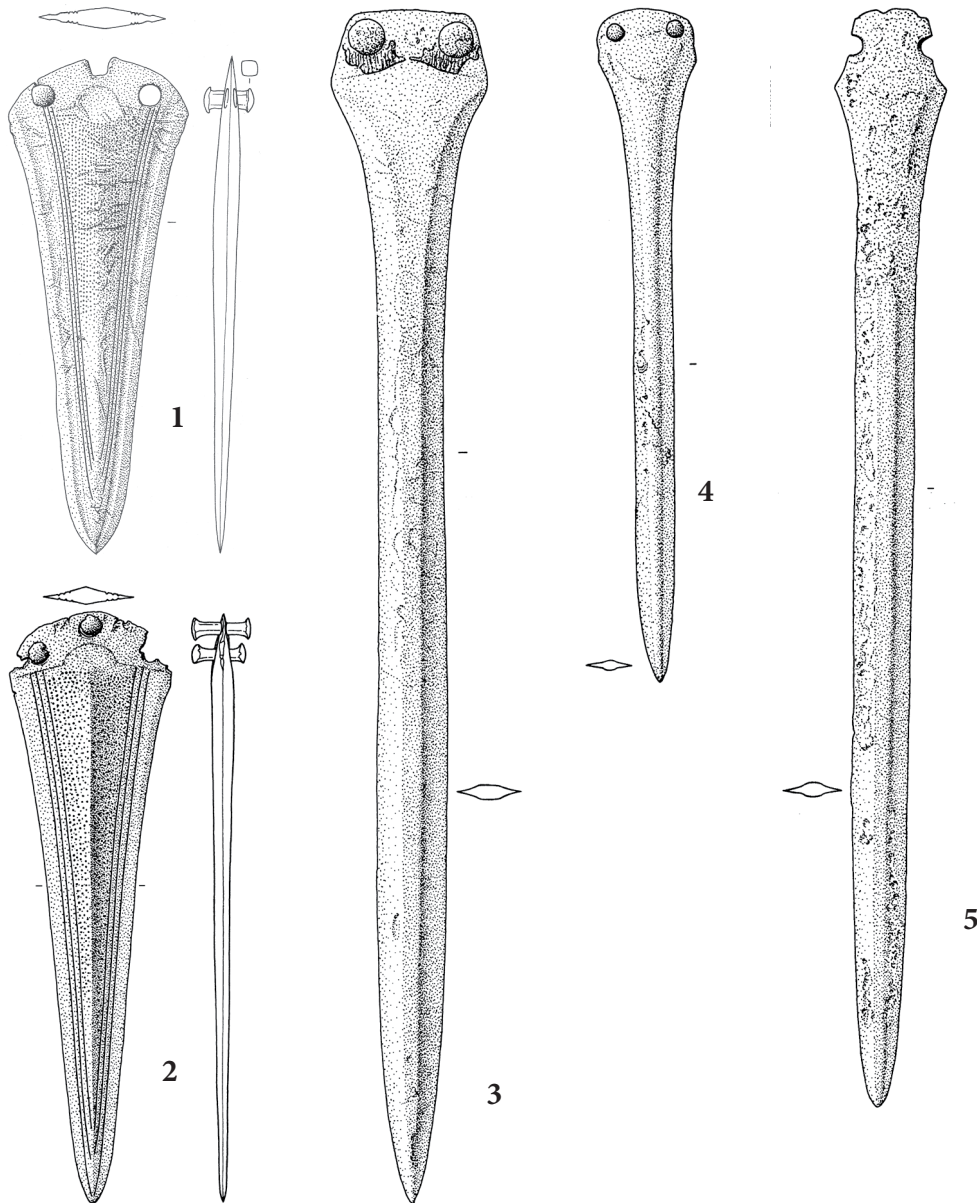


Fig. 2. Items 1 to 5 (2:5 scale). Reproduced from *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* volumes, by kind permission of Frank Steiner Verlag. See footnotes for sources of individual illustrations.

4. Rapier (British Museum, WG 1693)
River Thames, Sandford.
Burgess and Gerloff's Type Appleby, Variant Weybridge.⁷

⁷ VCH Oxon. 1, p. 247; Evans, *Ancient Bronze Implements*, p. 248 (Evans give the length as 17½ inches, but this appears to be an error); Trump, 'Rapiers', p. 98, no. 231; Rowlands, *Metalwork*, p. 417, no. 1880; Burgess and Gerloff, *Dirks and Rapiers*, p. 80, no. 634 and plate 83.

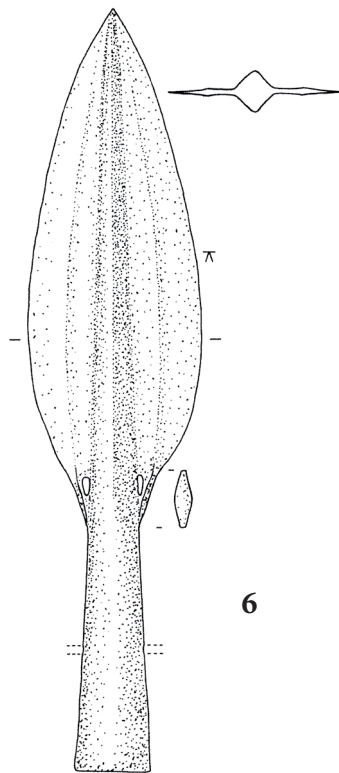


Fig. 3. Item 6 (2:5 scale). Reproduced from *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* volumes, by kind permission of Frank Steiner Verlag. See footnotes for sources of individual illustrations.

5. Rapier (Ashmolean Museum, 1885.508)
Dredged from Sandford Lock in about 1845. Items 5 and 6 are recorded as being found with two later objects (a lead spoon and a steel knife). All were in the hands of two successive private owners, before being given to the Ashmolean Museum in 1885.⁸ The two bronzes were exhibited at the Society of Antiquaries by Arthur Evans in the same year.⁹ Burgess and Gerloff's Type Stuntney.¹⁰
6. Spearhead (Ashmolean Museum, 1885.509)
Dredged from Sandford Lock in about 1845.
A basal-looped spearhead. Davis' Group 8 (Incorporated Basal-Looped), Type 8 C: Leaf.¹¹
7. Sword (British Museum, WG 1252)
From River Thames – 'found during the construction of Sandford Lock' according to British Museum records. Said to have been found with a rapier (BM, WG 1253). Colquhoun and Burgess' 'Early leaf-shaped unclassified'.¹²

⁸ Ashmolean Museum Accession Register, 1885.508 to 1885.511.

⁹ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, 2nd series, 11 (1887), p. 8.

¹⁰ P. Manning and E.T. Leeds, 'An Archaeological Survey of Oxfordshire', *Archaeologia*, 71 (1921), p. 264; *VCH Oxon.* 1, p. 247, plate 8, 2, a; Rowlands, *Metalwork*, p. 417, no. 1881; Burgess and Gerloff, *Dirks and Rapiers*, p. 83, no. 666 and plate 86.

¹¹ *VCH Oxon.* 1, p. 264, plate VI, 3c; Manning and Leeds, 'Oxfordshire', p. 264; Rowlands, *Metalwork*, p. 392, no. 1573, plate 39; M.R. Ehrenberg, *Bronze Age Spearheads from Berks, Bucks and Oxon*, BAR BS, 34 (1977), p. 45, no. 99 and fig. 14; R. Davis, *Basal-Looped Spearheads. Typology, Chronology, Context and Use*, BAR IS, 1497 (2006), p. 152, no. 206; R. Davis, *The Early and Middle Bronze Age Spearheads of Britain*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde Abteilung V, Band 5* (2012), p. 130, no. 801 and plate 52.

¹² Waller, 'Bronze Implements'; Evans, *Ancient Bronze Implements*, p. 284; Rowlands, *Metalwork*, p. 427, no. 1983 and plate 51; I. Colquhoun and C.B. Burgess, *The Swords of Britain*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde Abteilung IV, Band 5* (1988), p. 28, no. 77 and plate 13.

8. Sword (Reading Museum, 1997.105.1)
 Found during the reconstruction of Sandford Lock in 1972.
 Colquhoun and Burgess' Type Wilburton – Variant F.¹³

Additional Pieces

Two further pieces may have come from Sandford Lock. A palstave and a rapier were recovered in 1972 from a heap of dredgings deposited beside the Thames in Radley. The published note on these items suggests that they came from the Thames between Abingdon and Radley.¹⁴ However, the circumstances and dates of discovery of items 1, 2 and 8 show that Sandford Lock was being reconstructed, and dredging taking place here, in 1972 and 1973. It is thus possible that these two items also actually came from Sandford. However, a search of Environment Agency records has not shed any further light on the provenance of the dredgings from which these two pieces came. They will not therefore be considered further here; they do not particularly affect the argument (except that, if the palstave was from Sandford, it would be the only non-weapon item in the group).

DISCUSSION

The eight items from Sandford span the period from the Arretton metalworking phase at the end of the early Bronze Age (c.1650–1500 BC) to the Wilburton metalworking phase at the start of the late Bronze Age (c.1140–1020 BC): a period of some five hundred years.

Nature of the Objects

All the items from Sandford are weapons: two daggers, three rapiers, two swords and a basal-looped spearhead. In this, the Sandford finds are representative of finds of Bronze-Age metalwork from the Thames as a whole, which have a marked emphasis on weaponry.¹⁵

The Exact Source/Context of the Finds

All of the items are recorded as coming from in or close to the River Thames. Five of them (numbers 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8) are said to have come from Sandford Lock.

British Museum records state that numbers 3 and 7 were: 'Found during construction of Sandford Lock in 1837; found resting on the chalk beneath 12 feet of gravel about 20 yards from the river bank.' It is clear that these two items are the same as two which were reported to the Anthropological Institute in 1874. These were said to have been 'close to the Isis [Thames], at Sandford, near Oxford, under twelve feet of solid gravel'.¹⁶ The depth at which they were found suggest that they may have come from an in-filled former channel of the Thames. The course of the Thames at Sandford today is complex, and it is likely that there were formerly other channels, now in-filled, within the broad floodplain of the river here. Indeed, borehole logs made immediately adjacent to the present lock chamber in about 1971 record what could be the fill of a former channel or channels ('made ground' and silty or sandy clays with traces of peat) to depths of between 12 and 14 feet below the modern ground surface.¹⁷ Parts of in-filled former river channels have been investigated archaeologically at a number of places along the Thames.¹⁸ Some pieces of Bronze-Age

¹³ Colquhoun and Burgess, *The Swords of Britain*, p. 50, no. 221, plate 35.

¹⁴ R. Thomas, 'Three Bronze Implements from the Thames', *Oxoniensia*, 43 (1978), pp. 246–8.

¹⁵ J. York, 'The Life Cycle of Bronze Age Metalwork from the Thames', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 21 (2002), p. 82, table 1.

¹⁶ Waller, 'Bronze Implements'.

¹⁷ Environment Agency, unpublished engineering drawing, 'Sandford Lock Reconstruction and Channel Diversion. Site Plan. Drawing Number 10700/1, April 1971.'

¹⁸ A.M. Cromarty et al., *Late Bronze Age Ritual and Habitation on a Thames Eyot at Whitecross Farm, Wallingford: The Archaeology of the Wallingford By-Pass 1986–92* (2006).

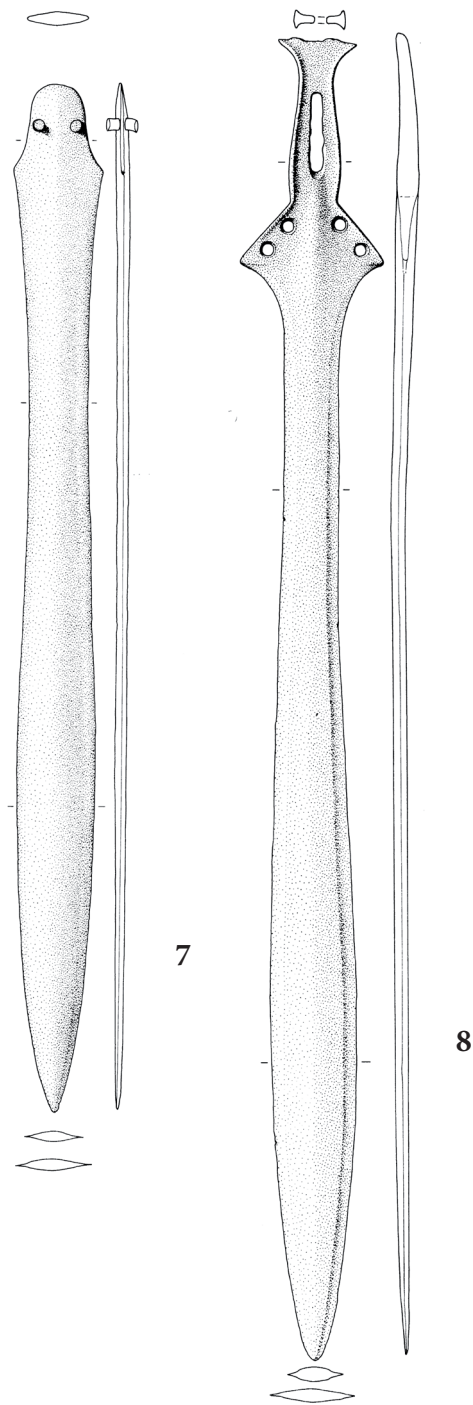


Fig. 4. Items 7 to 8 (1:3 scale). Reproduced from *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* volumes, by kind permission of Franz Steiner Verlag. See footnotes for sources of individual illustrations.

metalwork found in gravel quarrying at Mixnam's Pit in Surrey may have come from an infilled channel of the Thames.¹⁹

The 1874 report came from a Mr John Treacher of Twyford, Berkshire. A John Treacher of Twyford in the nineteenth century was the son of the George Treacher, who was assistant surveyor and (from 1836) General Surveyor of the Thames Navigation Commission.²⁰ The Commission was responsible for the construction of locks, and this is probably how the items came into the hands of the Treacher family. Evans records the items as being in the collection of Canon Greenwell in 1881,²¹ and they were acquired by the British Museum in 1909.

A Genuine Concentration?

It is clearly possible that the appearance of a significant concentration of Bronze-Age metalwork is a result of a bias in recovery, caused by the level of construction work and dredging at or near Sandford Lock. However, there is a reasonable amount of evidence to suggest that the deposition of Bronze-Age metalwork into rivers (and other locations) was concentrated in particular places.²² Some other locations on the Thames which have seen comparable levels of construction work or dredging (such as the stretch of river at Abingdon) have not produced collections of Bronze-Age metalwork. It therefore seems reasonably likely that the collection from Sandford does indicate a real concentration of metalwork deposition here. A similar concentration appears to exist at Wallingford.²³ Both were later (on the evidence of their place-names) fording-places across the river.

There is not a large amount of other Bronze-Age metalwork from the area around Sandford.²⁴ The number and character of the pieces from the Thames at Sandford do make this location stand out in local terms.

Sandford and the Bronze Age of the Upper Thames Valley

The latest item from Sandford dates to the Wilburton phase (the start of the late Bronze Age); material of the succeeding Ewart Park phase is absent. In this, the material from Sandford reflects the position in the upper Thames valley as a whole. Metalwork of the late Bronze Age is relatively sparse in the upper Thames, compared both to material of the middle Bronze Age in the area and to material of the late Bronze Age in the lower parts of the valley.²⁵ There was certainly a decline in the number of late Bronze-Age weapons deposited in the upper Thames valley, relative to the lower Thames valley.²⁶

Earlier suggestions that the upper Thames valley saw little occupation in the late Bronze Age²⁷ need to be modified somewhat in the light of recent work. Late Bronze-Age settlements have been excavated at Eynsham Abbey, Cassington West, Yarnton, Radley and elsewhere.²⁸ A

¹⁹ S. Needham, 'Two Recent British Shield Finds and their Continental Parallels', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 45 (1979), p. 111.

²⁰ Anon, 'Surveying the River Thames: the Treacher Papers', *The Berkshire Echo* [Newsletter of Berkshire Record Office], 40 (2007); Berks RO, D/EX1457 (Treacher Papers).

²¹ Evans, *Ancient Bronze Implements*, pp. 248, 284.

²² Needham and Burgess, 'Later Bronze Age in the Lower Thames Valley', pp. 453–6; Pryor, *The Flag Fen Basin*.

²³ R. Thomas, 'Bronze Age Metalwork from the Thames at Wallingford', *Oxoniensia*, 49 (1984), pp. 9–18.

²⁴ Ehrenberg, *Spearheads*, figs. 26 and 27.

²⁵ For example, Ehrenberg, *Spearheads*; R. Thomas, 'The Bronze-Iron Transition in Southern England', in M.-L. Sørensen and R. Thomas (eds.), *The Bronze Age-Iron Age Transition in Europe*, BAR IS, 483 (1989), p. 272.

²⁶ R. Thomas, 'Rise and Fall: The Deposition of Bronze Age Weapons in the Thames Valley and the Fenland', in A.F. Harding (ed.), *Experiment and Design: Archaeological Studies in Honour of John Coles* (1999), pp. 116–22.

²⁷ J. Barrett and R. Bradley, 'The Later Bronze Age in the Thames Valley', in Barrett and Bradley (eds.), *Settlement and Society in the British Later Bronze Age*, p. 259; Thomas, 'Bronze-Iron Transition', p. 279.

²⁸ A. Barclay et al., 'A Prehistoric Enclosure at Eynsham Abbey, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, 66 (2001), pp. 106–62; G. Hey et al., *Yarnton: Neolithic and Bronze Age Settlement and Landscape* (2016), pp. 45–50; A. Mudd, 'The Excavation of a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age Site at Eight Acre Field, Radley', *Oxoniensia*, 60 (1995), pp. 22–65. See also G. Lambrick with M. Robinson, *The Thames through Time: The Archaeology of the*

few sherds of mid to late Bronze-Age pottery were found at Oxford Science Park,²⁹ just over a kilometre from Sandford Lock, and late Bronze-Age material has been found elsewhere on the south-eastern outskirts of Oxford; it has, though, been noted that evidence for activity of this date in Oxford is scant overall.³⁰ It certainly remains true that the intensity of metalwork deposition was much greater in the lower than in the upper Thames valley during the late Bronze Age. The same may be true of settlement activity. The material from Sandford fits this general picture, of a decline in the fortunes of the upper Thames valley, relative to areas further downstream, in the late Bronze Age.

Depositional Contexts and Locations

In Britain generally, the knives and daggers of the early Bronze Age were deposited mainly in graves, whereas the dirks, rapiers and swords of the middle and late Bronze Ages are often found as single objects, frequently in rivers and other wet contexts.³¹

Seen in their local context, the Sandford finds demonstrate this change very clearly. About three kilometres to the south-west of Sandford Lock lies the Neolithic and early Bronze-Age ceremonial complex of Barrow Hills (Radley). This complex includes a series of burials, six of which are furnished with daggers or knives.³² The practice of making burials accompanied by weapons ceased in the Barrow Hills complex at the end of the early Bronze Age. The deposition of weapons into the Thames at Sandford started at about the same time. It is clearly not possible to prove any kind of link, other than geographical proximity and chronological sequence, between these two changes. Nonetheless, the intriguing possibility exists that the Thames at Sandford succeeded the Barrow Hills complex as an important ceremonial location for this part of the Thames valley.

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Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames. The Thames Valley in Late Prehistory: 1500 BC–AD 50, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 29 (2009), pp. 94–101.

²⁹ J. Moore, 'Excavations at Oxford Science Park, Littlemore, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 66 (2001), pp. 167, 184, 216.

³⁰ R. Beckley and D. Radford, 'Oxford Archaeological Resource Assessment 2011. Neolithic and Bronze Age' (2012), p. 25. Available online at: https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/1620/neolithic_to_bronze_age_oxford_4000_-_800_bc, accessed Jan. 2018.

³¹ Bradley, *Passage of Arms*, p. 100 and fig. 20

³² A. Barclay and C. Halpin, *Excavations at Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire. Volume I: The Neolithic and Bronze Age Monument Complex* (1999), pp. 187–8.