



Currency Bars and other forms of trade iron

It is unfortunate that the term 'currency bar' was introduced in Britain, since it has a functional implication which cannot really be sustained and which, at best, is only a partial explanation of the use and significance of these bars. The most satisfactory general definition, used by Swedish scholars, that these bars are "iron which has been hammered out into a particular shape but which cannot be interpreted as a utilitarian object".

About 1500 currency bars and other forms of trade iron have been found in Britain, including two double-pointed ingots of continental type. Detailed examination of most of the 400 surviving bars has shown that there are at least 20 distinctive types, which can be distinguished by their dimensions, the shape of the socket and, sometimes, by the welding of the tips. A new class of trade iron has been recognised, consisting of billets with one end forged either to a hook-shape or to a long point.

Although these types still generally fall into the three classes defined by Allen, it is clear that a new terminology is necessary. The type names proposed are based on the sites of the main hoards or individual find spots.

Only about 120 examples are complete enough to measure their length and weight, but it is clear now that the concept of the bars having a limited range of standard weights is no longer tenable. Some 40% of the bars are of the 'sword-shaped' class and about 50% are 'spit-shaped'. These can be subdivided into a number of types which are both chronologically and metallurgically distinctive. There are now some 120 of the long bars with sockets or raised flanges,

classified by Allen as 'plough-share bars'. A few of these may be genuine ploughshares, but those from Llyn Cerrig Bach, which have welded tips, and those from Datchet and Hunsbury, which are very slender, could not possibly have functioned as ploughshares. A recently discovered hoard from Devon of about 100 bars similar to the Datchet type indicates that these, at least, are currency bars.

Some of the bar types are only represented by a small number of finds. However, this would also be the case with the Coffinswell, Meon and Malvern types if there had not been finds of hoards, which account for over 90% of each type.

A high proportion of the bars has been found in hillforts and in settlement ditches and it has been proposed that this was a ritual definition of their boundaries. There are close correlations between the dimensions, the weight, the shape of the bars and their metal composition. This suggests that the bars were regional products smelted from local ores. The most significant distribution is that of the large number of 'spit-shaped' bars which cluster around the Forest of Dean, which is one of the major sources of low phosphorus iron ore in Britain.

A number of sites have a clear evidence for the trade or exchange of bars of different types and metal composition. In particular, both Danebury and Hunsbury have several types of currency bar, hooked billets and evidence for this iron being forged into objects on the sites. Another 12 sites have fragments of currency bars, some with chisel-cut ends, which is clearly a result of bars being used as stock for manufacturing other blade

objects.

The forging of a long flat bar, the thinning and shaping of the socket and the welding of tips are all demonstrations to the eventual user of the quality of the iron.

The consistency of size and weight of each type is a result of the bars being made, probably in a small number of workshops, in a well established and frequently repeated smelting, refining and forging cycle. A picture is emerging of a far more sophisticated, organised and widespread trade in iron, which was a more valuable commodity than has been appreciated.

References

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A. Danebury/Hod Hill type. About 500, several large hoards, many individual finds. From variety of sites in south-central areas. Tapering blades, variety of socket types (long tubes with slack shoulder, short splayed tubes with wider shoulder). 780-850 x 35-45 x 4-5mm; 450-700g. *High P, low C metal.*

B. Beckford type 10, from one hoard. Herefords. Long blades with slight taper, some slightly thicker at end. Parallel sided sockets with wood 800-880 x 30 x 5mm; 600-700g. *Low P, high C metal.*

C. Gretton type. 48 from one hoard and several other sites. Northants. Blades with slight taper. Parallel sockets (mostly damaged). 700-750 x 35-40 x 4-5mm; 700-750g. *High P, high C, variable As metal.*

D. Beanwood type. 5 from one hoard. Dorset. Long tapering blades, long thin tube sockets with wood. c. 850 x 30-40mm.

E. Orion type. 9 from one ?hoard. Northants. Parallel sided blade with welded lip. Small, short socket, with wood. 660-730 x 30 x 4mm; 460-630g. *High P, variable C metal.*

F. Meon type. Over 500, from 3 large hoards and scattered finds. Western and southern areas. Long thin blades, short irregular sockets with wood. 670-750 x 15 x 3mm; 145-165g. *Low P, low C metal.*

G. Ditchers type. 716, from one hoard and other sites. Western-southern areas. As Meon type, but wider and thicker blade. 700-760 x 25-29 x 3-4mm; c.350-400g.

H. Malvern type. Over 300, from 2 hoards and rare scattered finds. Worcs. Short parallel blades, short sockets often pinched and irregular. 525-575 x 19-22 x 3-4mm; 240-300g.

J. Glastonbury type. 1, Somerset. Long thin blade, short socket with slack shoulder. 690 x 25 x 3mm; 238g.

E Coffinswell type. Over 100, from two hoards. Devon. Broad heavy blade, with short round socket. 580-600 x 37-42 x 5-8mm 800-900g. *Moderate P, high As, high C metal.*

L. Maidenhead type. ?10, mainly from river Thames. Thick blades of variable length, some with flanged edges, with short winged sockets. 750-785 x 40 x 6-8mm; 930-1210g.

M. Datchet type. ?6, mainly from river Thames. Shorter, tapering blades, with winged sockets. 540-600 x 44 x 6-8mm; 800-865g. *?moderate P, low C metal.*

N. Llyn Cerrig Bach type. 4, from lake deposit, north Wales. Thick blade with welded tip and winged sockets. 620 x 32 x 7mm; 820g. *?low P metal*

P. Park Farm type. 2. Long thick blades, with heavy sockets. 680 x 40 x 11-15mm; 1036-1451g

Q. Glastonbury rod type. ?4, south-west. Thin rods with tapering socket. 535 x 20 x 8.5mm; 540g.

R. Llanstephan type. 1, S. Wales. Short ovate blade with square edges and long socket. 304 x 55mm; 424g.

S. Ely type. 2, Cambs. Leaf-shaped blade with flanged edges. Long U-shaped sockets. 620 x 54mm; 726g.

T. Brixworth type. ?2, Northants/Oxon. Short lenticular blade with heavy socket. 453 x 36mm; 430g.

U. Meare type. ('hooked billets'). 8, variable types, mainly central-southern sites. Partly forged blooms, with one end drawn down and bent over. 125-165 x 45-70 x 30-50mm; 1200-1640g. *?mod P, low C metal.*

V. Lesser Garth type. ('pointed billets'). 1, south Wales. Partly forged bloom, with one end drawn to long point. 358 x 47 x 31mm; 1405g.

W. Portland 2, Dorset. Continental double pointed ingots (not illustrated). 6.3 - 6.8kg. *Low P, low C metal.*

