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Some Features of Bronze Swords.

IT is remarkable how many features of interest one will notice in an antique object which he has in his possession, and which he can handle familiarly, as compared with his observation of similar objects in a glass case in a museum. During the summer of 1919 I fortunately became possessed of two bronze swords, one from Co. Derry (see *fig. "A"* in accompanying illustration) and the other from Co. Donegal (see *fig. "B"*).

The former is a beautiful sword, $26\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, and $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches wide at the widest. It was washed or plated with some kind of white metal, which has now worn off except in the grooves, and near the hilt. This appears to be quite a unique feature in bronze swords. The late George Coffey, speaking of the Irish bronze brooches, says "It should be mentioned that some of the brooches were silvered, or coated with a silver-like metal, so that they must have had a bright and plated appearance. This has in most cases been worn away, but careful examination will reveal traces of it in several, especially on the back of the small stout class which were possibly somewhat later, and on which it seems to have been more usual. It is difficult to say to how early a time this method of coating bronze can be put back in Ireland, but it was in common use in the ninth century, as may be seen from many objects in the Danish finds." But it is very improbable that this bronze sword is anything so late as this. The handle was secured by four rivets, two of which are yet in position. It was dug up a year ago from under several feet of peat in a bog near Kilrea. The sword "*B*" was got near Port Noo on the Donegal coast. It measures $21\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, and is $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide where widest. The hilt is $3\frac{1}{4}$ ins. long, but in "*A*" it is $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

On examining the swords my attention was at once arrested by the notches in the blade just below the hilt (*nn* and *n'n'*). I did not remember having ever noticed this before, but on inspecting the bronze swords in the National Museum as well as in the Belfast Museum, and consulting a number of catalogues, I found that the vast majority of bronze swords have such notches.

There are eleven swords in the Belfast collection, and of these, seven are notched. The more primitive bronze swords are flat or nearly so, and have a thick blunt edge. Later on the blade was made very thin at the edges (see section of "*B*"). But in the case of a broad thin sword this rendered the edge weak and very easily turned. The strengthening of the edge was accomplished by grooving or fluting the blade as shown in section of *fig. "A"*. Evidently then the flatter and plainer a bronze sword blade is the earlier it is, and the more deeply and perfectly it is grooved the later the period to which it belongs.

Of the four blades in Belfast having no notches three belong to the early flat type. And of those that are notched the more highly developed blades have also

the most pronounced notches. The notches vary from half an inch to over an inch in length, and the great majority of them are curved or arc-shaped, made by giving this portion of the edge a greater curvature than that of the rest of the blade. In the National Museum there are exposed in the cases over a hundred bronze blades. Strangely enough in this large collection there are none of the very early flat type corresponding to 10-2, 10-3, 6-7, and 105 '06 in Belfast. But there are 31 ungrooved swords of the type of "B," and of these 16 are not notched—that is, more than half. It is quite possible that in some of these instances the notch may have worn away, but there are several of them in an almost perfectly preserved state yet showing no trace whatever of a notch.

Of the grooved swords (type "A") there are 58, and all except four are notched, and as these are worn specimens, it is probable they were also notched originally. In a very few cases the notch is formed by a straight line instead of a curve, yet having but one angle. Nos. 59 and 1900-44 have two angles each. But the largest and most pronounced notch I have ever seen is on the sword "A" illustrated above. It is $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, and quite abnormally deep, and the inner sides of the notch are parallel with the longitudinal axis of the blade.

The general deduction from all this is that the notch was not an original feature of the bronze sword, and that it was devised to meet some need or shortcoming which experience had pointed out.

What was its use or function?

Could it have been for the reception of a guard? The weight of these bronze swords fitted them much better for slashing than for thrusting, though no doubt they were used in both ways. The hand that held the sword was more exposed to danger than any other part of the body, as it stretched so much further forward, and a stroke of the enemy's sword on the hand or knuckles disabled the warrior and left him at the mercy of his foe. Bronze blades were cast flat and could not be furnished with a guard of any size made in the casting. But it would be quite feasible to construct a guard of wood or bone large enough to protect the hand that held the sword. This guard if made in two parts could be firmly braced together after being fixed on to the sword, and the notch would hold the guard in position. Of course very simple ideas often take centuries to germinate, but the need of protecting the hand that wielded the sword seems one that would occur to people less advanced even than the men of the bronze age. The Irish faction fights of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth taught the peasantry the need and utility of such a guard, though they wielded only blackthorns instead of swords, and they made themselves strong wicker-work guards, which completely protected the hand holding the stick.

I give this suggestion the first place as an explanation of the notch. Naturally guards of such perishable materials would now be all decayed.

An official of the National Museum has informed me that it has been suggested that this notch was made to save the wearer from danger in case the blade did not go right home in the wooden scabbards then in use, whenever the scabbards became swollen from dampness. This suggestion I consider weak and improbable.

A piece of ornament on the sword illustrated in *fig. "A"* deserves attention. The ornament may be noticed just inside the notches at *nn*. An enlarged drawing of this ornament is given in *fig. "C."*

I have seen, by the way, almost similar ornament on cinerary urns in County Tyrone, consisting of series of triangles filled with parallel lines. Now this ornament, which is made of very fine lines, is on one side of the blade only. Evidently this part of the blade was intended to be seen outside the scabbard. Yet it is hard to believe that this bold notch an inch and a half long and a quarter of an inch deep was made merely to allow for the blade's not driving home in the scabbard. Despite the ornament it seems peculiarly well fitted for the reception of a guard.

The guards may have been found inconvenient when the sword was worn by the side, and may have been so constructed that they could be easily put on or off as the occasion required, just as the bronze spear-heads were carried in a bag, and only put on the shafts when needed for use. In such a case the ornament on the blade of "A" would not be inconsistent with the use of a guard.

Here I leave the question : some other investigator may be able to throw further light on it.

H. MORRIS.