

Re: bronze age weapons

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"Hayabusa" <peregrine@xxxxxxxxxxx> schrieb im Newsbeitrag
news:i9f302h0ec6qbui3nt0nqlmdah48clsr12@xxxxxxxxxxx

I am presently reading a popular archaeology book compiled by Göran Burenhult, the English title is "People of the Past" (I bought the German translation which is presently on sale everywhere). There is a second volume on ancient (post-prehistory) civilizations. For me it is nice to read fairly new ideas about ancient people, and archaeology of regions I am quite unfamiliar with, such as SE Asia.

Question here: the weapons of the European bronze age always look very dramatic, exquisitely made, but I do not really recall to have seen a sign of wear in the pictures, nor on the weapons I have seen in museums. The damage there is commonly intentional and was done when these weapons were destroyed and sacrificed to the gods (thrown into the water).

This differs quite a bit from the weapons of the Romans, eg. in the museum of Alesia/France where Caesar's troops broke the back of the free Gauls, and even more for the Viking weapons eg. in Schloss Gottorf in Schleswig which show every sign of heavy use in battle.

There is another difference – the swords from the iron age and later look like industrial ware, done by the hundreds, at relatively low cost, to be used; whereas the weapons from the bronze age are very carefully decorated, they must have been extremely costly even then.

The idea that much of bronze age armour was merely for display is old. But is there actually evidence for bronze age weapons being used in defense or attack? I also keep wondering because the handles of bronze age swords differ from those of medieval swords – the latter are long enough for a tight grip with a strong fist, whereas those from the bronze age are way too short for a male hand.

Comments welcome.

Re: bronze age weapons

Well, at first look the comparison between iron age and bronze age weapons shows clear distinctions. If you look closer, these distinctions become even greater. The first point must be made about the origin of the weapons. While bronze age weapons, especially swords, are mostly found in hoards, iron age swords come from graves and weapons sacrifices.

It has been noted for Scandinavia, that for most of the times weapons from hoards are in mint quality; they had been created for those rituals and have indeed never been used. There are some periods where the supply of metals did not work as smooth as before, and older and used weapons were being offered. So the intent was to offer a sword as a badge of authority, as a symbol, and the finer it looked, the better for those presenting the offering. The normal weapons at that time were spears (with points of metal or bone), axes, clubs, etc. But swords existed and were used.

The only research on signs of use I remember of hand is about early bronze age massive hilted daggers (Vollgriffdolche), which show predominately signs of wear on one side of the upper part of the blade, so it would have been used as a knife, maybe for cutting the throats of animal sacrifices.

From the iron age the mass of the sword comes from burials and weapons

sacrifices, where the fact of the use of the sword was important to denote a warrior or the successful outcome of some military adventure. Marks of use in this instance actually increase the value of the sword. Even though the number of swords known from that period greatly increased, the main weapons were still spears (with points of metal or bone), axes, clubs and heavier knives. There is a paper from Michael Gebuehr analyzing the signs of use on iron age swords to reconstruct the style of fighting.

So most of the bronze age swords that we know of were not used as weapons in the narrow sense of the word, while most of the iron age swords were weapons.

As to the size of the hilt, I have wondered too, if they could have been used successfully. Most of the prehistoric swords I have touched were only big enough to be handled with 3 fingers, so a stout branch would serve me better as a weapon. OTOH they were certainly not made for my hands, and there might have been quite a difference in size between me and bronze or iron age populations.

have fun

Uwe Mueller

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