

The Iron Handle and Bronze Bands from Read's Cavern: A Re-interpretation

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Since the publication of the writer's study of "Tankards and Tankard Handles of the British Early Iron Age"* his attention has been drawn by Professor E. K. Tratman† to an iron handle and bronze bands found in Read's Cavern. The objects were discovered in 1919 during an early examination of the cave, which was then known as the Keltic Cavern, and were published in the first volume of these *Proceedings*.‡ This re-interpretation is offered as the identification of the handle was not possible at the time of its original publication in the absence of comparative material. The bronze bands are included as Professor Tratman has suggested that they may have had a use different from that usually assigned to them.

THE HANDLE

It was originally thought that the handle had been destroyed when the Society's Museum was bombed during the recent war, but it has since been recovered. The drawing (*Fig. 6*) shows its profile which has the arched back typical of the majority of tankard handles.§ Unlike any of the known specimens, however, the terminal disk is turned at right angles under the arch. All the known handles have terminal plates or disks which turn at right angles away from the arch. The majority of orthodox handles also have a pair of disk-terminals, but this one again differs in that it probably had only one. Professor Tratman informs the writer that at the other end to the disk-terminal was "a slight annular depression as if it had fitted into a slot or staple let into the top of the rim". It is possible, in view of its very fragile condition, that this annular depression might have been the result of a breakage and that originally the handle may have had two disk-terminals. There is, however, no evidence of a breakage and it is impossible to verify this latter interpretation.

Apart from this the handle remains unique within the series as a whole, particularly as it is made from iron instead of the more usual bronze. Iron

* *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, XVIII, 1952, 85-102, 239.

† I am indebted to Professor Tratman for his kindness in informing me of these objects, for some unpublished information and suggestions which have been incorporated into the text, and for his assistance in publication.

‡ *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Speleological Society*, I, 1919-22, 13-14, *Plates IX and XI* (lower).

§ Cf. Corcoran, *op. cit.*, *Plate X*.

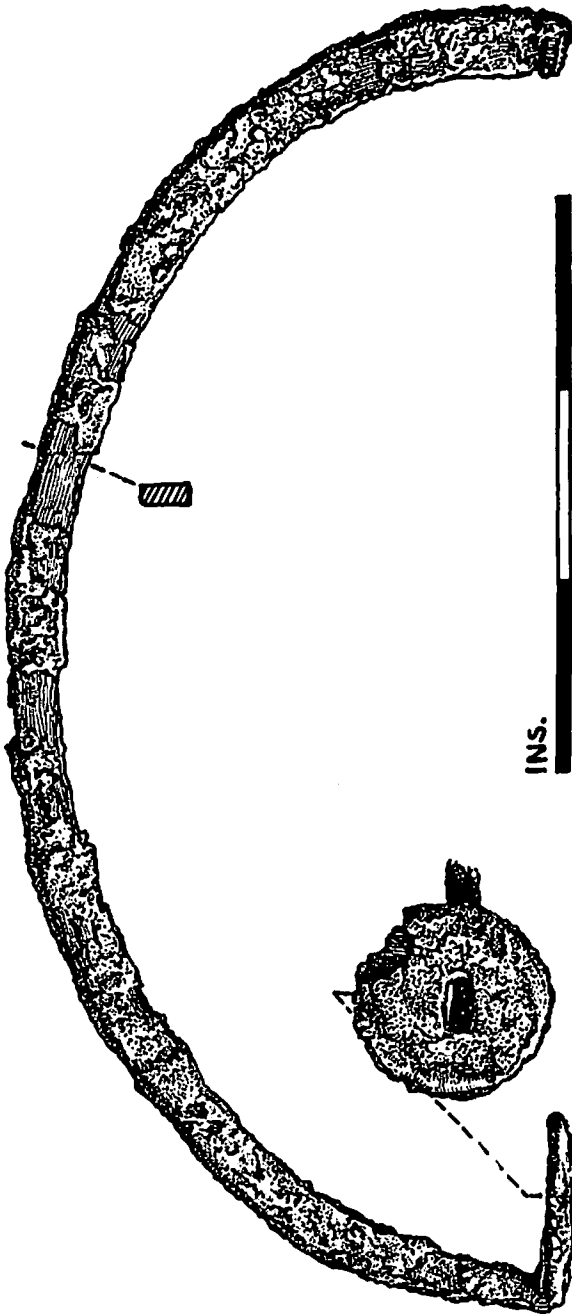


Fig. 6.—Handle from Read's Cavern.

objects frequently do not survive as well as do bronze, and there is the possibility that iron as well as bronze handles existed, but they have not survived. The handle is quite simple in conception and devoid of decoration. Its arch is a plain semi-circle, rectangular in cross-section, and the disk-terminal is circular with an oblong rivet hole. The length of the chord across the arc of the handle is $6\frac{3}{4}$ in. measured from outside. This is much larger than the majority of handles which are normally about three inches across the chord, although their total length may be over 5 in. It has been pointed out that the typical bronze tankard handle was probably not intended to be grasped in the fist in the manner of modern tankards, but that two or three fingers were put through the handle as a safety measure and the vessel grasped in both hands.* The Read's Cavern handle obviously differs a little yet it would fit easily on to the side of a wooden tankard of typical dimensions. In this case the handle could be comfortably grasped in the fist and the inturned disk-terminal would allow more space for the hand. If at one end the handle fitted into the rim it may be assumed that the height of the original tankard was roughly equal to the chord length of the handle, about $6\frac{3}{4}$ in.

It is quite clear that the handle from Read's Cavern may be regarded as a tankard handle, but its several unique features render rather more difficult any attempt to place it within the typology proposed in the writer's paper already quoted. Its very simplicity precludes its inclusion within any group other than Group V which consists of sheet bronze or plain moulded handles. It does not fit comfortably even within this group, but its affinities are with these less elaborate handles.† As a whole they may be regarded as later in date than those with La Tène decorative motives, although the inclusion of a simple handle with a group of four decorated handles found in Glamorganshire‡ warns us against too hasty an interpretation. The other finds from Read's Cavern suggest a date towards the end of the Iron Age B period for most of the artefacts, before the time of the Roman Invasion, that is the first half of the first century A.D.§ This fits in with the dating of most of the other tankard handles. The apparent simplicity of its design need not demand any later date on stylistic grounds, for within the basic design there was much scope for individuality of which the Read's Cavern handle may be taken as a further example. It adds

* Corcoran, *op. cit.*, 87-88.

† Its closest parallel is with the handle from the Pentuan tankard which will be mentioned below in connexion with the bronze bands.

‡ *Ibid.*, 91.

§ In the third report on Read's Cavern (*op. cit.*, 143) an earlier date than this was proposed, 50 B.C.-A.D. 1, based on a La Tène II-III fibula. The two dates are not incompatible as the earlier date does not allow sufficient time for the fibula to have been in use before it was abandoned. On the other hand, a late first-century date would be possible for the handle.

another find spot to the distribution map and emphasizes the large proportion of these handles which have been found in south-west Britain.

THE BRONZE BANDS

Parts of the four bronze bands are extant but much altered by fire. They were found together towards the south-eastern end of the cave. Their internal diameter is 4.9 in. and from the published photograph it is possible to determine that all four of them were originally double-ribbed.* Sir Cyril Fox, in his Llyn Cerrig Bach report,† refers to them in connexion with similar bands from that site. He compares them with nave-hoops which have been found on other Iron Age sites in Britain. There is no doubt that the bronze bands from Read's Cavern closely resemble those from Llyn Cerrig Bach‡ both in size and manufacture. Sir Cyril interprets them as nave-hoops which were placed on the wooden hubs of the wheels to prevent them from splitting. It is neither intended nor possible to argue against his interpretation, but in the case of Read's Cavern Professor Tratman has offered another suggestion. In a letter to the writer he says, "I wonder whether in those from Read's and also perhaps in some other cases the hub bands, when not directly associated with a chariot, may not really be tankard bands." This is a likely hypothesis.

The tankard from Pentuan, Cornwall,§ has three bronze bands similar to the single-ribbed band from Llyn Cerrig Bach, although the width of the latter is greater in proportion to its diameter. The fact that there are three bands on this tankard is perhaps significant. Fox's nave-bands normally occur in pairs, sometimes in fours, two for each side of the wheel as shown in his reconstruction of a chariot.|| There are no parallels for tankards with four bands although this does not rule out the possibility that they may have existed. The handle may be cited as a parallel, as hitherto iron tankard handles had been unknown. It would be strange that, if the handle and the bands had belonged to the same vessel, the former should have been of iron and the latter of bronze, but it is possible that the handle could have had a bronze plating. It is equally strange that four nave-bands should have been brought into a cavern where there was so little evidence for wheeled vehicles from among the other artefacts. Nave-bands do not seem out of place among the other evidence of chariot trappings at Llyn Cerrig Bach or the Yorkshire chariot burials, but they seem unusual objects

* *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelæological Society*, Vol. 1, Plate IX.

† *A Find of the Early Iron Age from Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey*, 14, 76-77.

‡ *Ibid.*, 13-15, 76, Plates VII and XVIII.

§ Corcoran, *op. cit.*, Plate IX.

|| Fox, *op. cit.*, 26, Fig. 13.

The four from Read's Cavern are really two pairs, one pair is of much thicker metal than the other.

to find in a cave devoid of any other association with chariot fittings, whereas the presence of a handle does suggest the existence of a tankard. The original excavation report pointed out that these finds came from a position in the cave to which, even in prehistoric times, no wheeled vehicle could have been taken. Nevertheless bone "cheek-pieces" were found in this cavern and they suggest that the horse was used as a means of transport, although this need not necessarily imply the use of a wheeled vehicle. The Glastonbury evidence of spoked wheels, however, points to the unequivocal use there of wheeled vehicles.*

The four bands from Read's Cavern were probably never sufficiently strong to have withstood the heavy wear envisaged on a hub, unless they had been used in conjunction with stronger iron bands.† At Llyn Cerrig Bach‡ and in Yorkshire§ similar bronze bands were a decorative covering to a heavier iron band which would have been sufficiently strong to have withstood the strain. Even more suitable were the heavier and wider iron bands from Llyn Cerrig Bach,|| which were also akin to the ribbed bronze nave-bands from the Late Bronze Age hoard at the Heathery Burn Cave.

As can be seen it is not possible to come to any definite conclusion about these bronze bands from Read's Cavern. Their very nature is such that they would have been equally in place on a nave for decorative purposes, or on a tankard, but unless further evidence comes to light Professor Tratman's valuable suggestion can only remain as such.

* Bulleid and Gray, *The Glastonbury Lake Village*, I, 337-340, Figs. 112-113.

† Greenwell remarked that the metal of the Yorkshire bands was so thin that they could only have been ornamental. *British Barrows*, 445.

‡ *Op. cit.*, 76, Plate XII.

§ *Archæologia*, 1906, LX, 279, 285.

|| *Later Prehistoric Antiquities of the British Isles* (British Museum Guide), 32, Plate VI, 21.