

OFFERING FROM THE RIVER

CHRIS RUDD

AN important and unique hoard of eight late Iron Age currency bars, found in a river near Cambridge, has recently been published (Chris Rudd list 50, April 2000). Cast in iron sometime around 200–20 BC, possibly by a blacksmith of the Ececi Tribe of East Anglia, these eight bars are known as the “Bay-Leaf Type”. Though opinion is divided as to their precise usage, some leading archaeologists and Celtic numismatists believe that these Bay-Leaf bars and other similar cast-iron bars probably had some kind of monetary function prior to the Roman invasion of Britain.

It is only by great good fortune that this hoard survived 2,000 years of concealment and remained intact after its discovery. The story begins seven or eight years ago when Bourn Brook, a small tributary of the river Cam, near Grantchester, Cambridgeshire, was being dredged. The mechanical dredger scooped up the eight bars and deposited them with the river-silt on the bank of Bourn Brook, and continued dredging.

Later that day in 1992 or 1993 a man took his dog for a walk along the bank of the river. He spotted the iron bars lying in the silt and, thinking that they were the tops of ornamental garden railings, collected them together and staggered home with them hoping perhaps that they would one day prove useful in his own garden. Luckily that day never dawned. The rusty bars, heavily encrusted with hardened river sediment, lay undisturbed on the floor of his garage for seven years. Quite by chance they came to the attention of a local antiquities dealer who ensured that they were properly recorded by the Fitzwilliam Museum and by the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.



The Grantchester hoard may have been a ritual deposit.

Prior to the cleaning and conservation of the Grantchester hoard, as it is now called, I examined the eight bars myself and discovered impressions in the hardened sediment which indicated that they had been carefully stacked one on top of another and tied in a bundle, before being deposited in Bourn Brook 2,000 years ago. It is likely that this was a ritual deposit and that the bars were placed in the river for religious reasons.

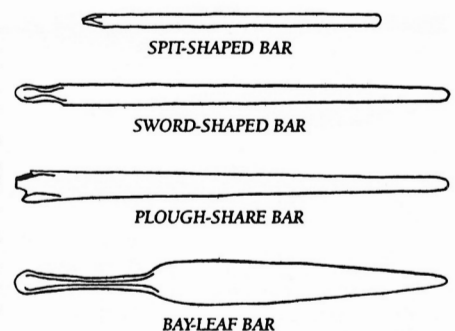
Four main types

Dr Philip de Jersey, who manages the Celtic Coin Index at the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford, has studied photographs of the Grantchester hoard and writes: “Currency bars are thin, elongated iron objects. They appear to date to the middle Iron Age and perhaps the early part of the late Iron Age, between about 200 BC and the end of the first century BC. There are several distinct classes, although the boundaries between the classes are not always clear.” Derek Allen, writing in 1967, provided the first comprehensive study of the modern era. He based his classification on the pioneering work of Reginald Smith (1905), dividing them into three main classes: sword-shaped bars, spit-shaped bars and plough-share bars. A fourth class of miscellaneous “others” is also important, since it includes bars almost identical to the eight Grantchester bars.

The various types of bar are best described by pictures, not words. As one would expect, the sword-shaped bar is just that, tapering to a blunt point and with a “hilt”, sometimes pinched, at the opposite end. The spit-shaped bar is narrower, and not necessarily tapered; the socket is very different to the sword-shaped type, being formed by hammering out the last few centimetres of the bar and folding each side inwards, possibly to enclose a wooden handle. The third type, the plough-share bar, is wider than the previous types; the “handle” end has raised flanges on each side, but these are not folded over on as the spit-shaped type.

There appear to be distinct regional variations in the distribution of each type of currency bar. The spit-shaped bars are concentrated in the Severn valley, while the sword-shaped bars occupy a much larger area, from the south coast up to the Midlands, but still quite clearly defined. The plough-share bars, lack a coherent focus.

Allen’s fourth category included a number of more problematic pieces, among which are two bars virtually identical to those illustrated above. He suggested that they could have been used for ploughing, and evidently felt that they were not true



Types of Iron Age bar, Scale 1:10.

currency bars. This opinion is substantially reiterated in the most recent major contribution to the topic, by Richard Hingley (1990), who omits these "bay-leaf" bars entirely. On the other hand, the

comprehensive study by Rees (1979) of prehistoric and Romano-British agricultural implements—including plough-shares—also omits these particular bars. So are they currency bars or not? Their length, and the details of the hilts, suggest that they are. Very few late Iron Age or Romano-British plough-shares reach the length of these pieces, and nor do they have the same style of hilt.

How were they used?

If we can be satisfied that these are currency bars, the next question we must ask is more complex. How were they used? The traditional view, as espoused by Allen, interprets these items as objects of currency partly because they were sometimes hoarded, as

were other valuable objects including coins, and partly because of a corrupt passage in Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (V, 12, 4), which reads (or appears to read) "For money they use either bronze, or gold coins, or iron ingots of fixed weights". Aside from inherent problems of translation, this passage raises more difficulties. Currency bars are unknown from the southeast of England, the area about which Caesar had first hand knowledge. Furthermore, the notion of "fixed weights" does not stand up to close scrutiny, since there is considerable variation in the dimensions of currency bars, possibly relating to regional traditions.

Although Allen more or less dismissed earlier theories which, building on perceived similarities in weight, attempted to establish a denominational

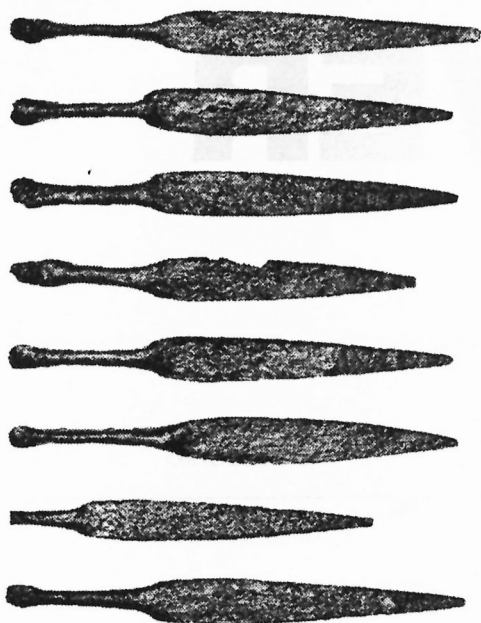
structure for the various types of currency bar, he still felt that "...the concept of making and using sword-shaped bars of a fairly uniform weight was widespread in pre-Belgic Britain" (1967, p/321). Thus he argued that if Caesar's words could be applied to these objects, then they were indeed "a form of iron currency", and "a substitute for money in a context where barter must have been the normal means of exchange".

More recent writers, notably Hingley (1990), have questioned the interpretation of currency bars as purely functional objects, or indeed as a form of currency, not least because of the difficulty of establishing a standard weight for the bars. In addition, Hingley puts forward a couple of convincing arguments for viewing the bars as having an important ritual significance: the fact that they were modelled on items of military and agricultural power and status (the sword and the plough-share), and their deliberate deposition, both of land (where they would rust rapidly and thus were unlikely to be retrieved), and in water (where there is a well-known tradition of votive deposition throughout the Bronze and Iron Age). Unlike Allen, who did not examine this aspect of the subject, Hingley concentrates on the context of deposition of the bars, identifying three types: "Natural", encompassing rivers, rocks, caves and bogs; those related to settlement boundaries; and those which were neither natural nor related to boundaries. He suggests that there are clear regional traditions in the nature of deposition, with a "core" area in which there is a near exclusive association between settlement boundaries, in particular hillfort defences, and deposits of currency bars. This region coincides quite accurately with the territory in which Durotrigan and Dobunnian coinages are found. Around this core are a variety of natural contexts for deposition, including a number of river deposits, notably in the Thames and also several localized traditions, for example at Iron Age temples or in pit alignments.

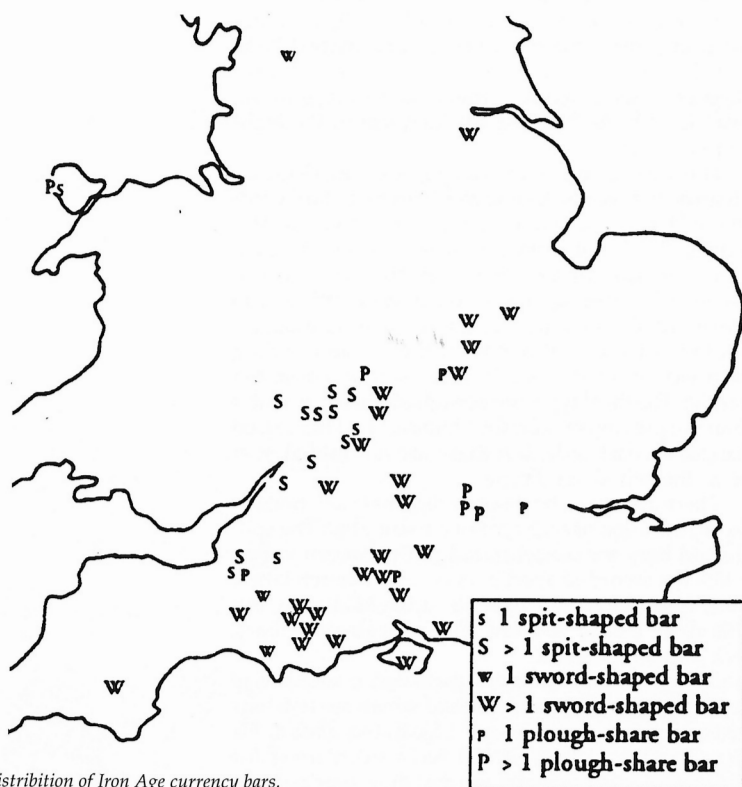
Fertility ritual

It may be possible to incorporate elements of both the functional and ritual explanations into our understanding of currency bars. Despite concentrating on the ritual aspects of their use, Hingley acknowledges that currency bars "may... be regarded as ingots (i.e. functional items) which simultaneously had a ritual function" (p. 104). His succinct explanation of this theory is worth quoting in detail: "Iron is harvested from the ground as nature and converted into tools/weapons representing culture. At an intermediate stage is the currency bar, an iron ingot imbued with symbolism. The symbols inherent in the currency bar reflect agricultural fertility through the plough and military power through the sword. Military might was necessary to provide the context within which the excess agricultural and industrial goods could be produced. The burial of currency bars in significant contexts may, therefore, symbolise the structure of agricultural production and also relations of power within Iron Age societies" (p. 111).

Those currency bars which did not become part of the ritual process were presumably retrieved, melted down and used for the various iron implements vital to this society. But others—including our bay-leaf bars from Grantchester—became part of arguably a more significant process, deposited in important rituals which maintained and strengthened the stability of society. It is very tempting to picture the scene on the banks of the Bourn Brook, more than two-thousand years ago, when a group of eight currency bars resembling plough-shares were tied together and cast into the river. The details of this ceremony are unlikely ever to become clear, but perhaps it expressed thanks for a successful harvest, and ensured agricultural fertility would continue in the coming year.



The Grantchester hoard of Bay-leaf currency bars, made c. 200–20 BC, and dredged from Bourn Brook, near Cambridge, c. 1992–92. Scale 1:10.



The distribution of Iron Age currency bars.

That the Grantchester hoard of currency bars was deposited in a river and not in the ground is consistent with the Celtic belief in the special sanctity of rivers, springs, lakes and wells. Celtic scholar Dr Anne Ross writes: "Springs, wells and rivers are of first and enduring importance as a focal point of Celtic cult practice and ritual. Rivers are important in themselves, being associated in Celtic tradition with fertility and with deities such as the divine mothers and the sacred bulls, concerned with this fundamental aspect of life." Gaul provides numerous examples of the association of divine beings with streams and rivers and with the springs at their source, and it is useful for comparative purposes to consider a few of these. The Celtic mother-goddesses, who frequently also function in the role of war-goddesses and prognosticators, have a widespread association with water. This is due to their own obvious connection with fertility which, in the popular mind, could be likened to the life-giving powers of water which could be witnessed by man himself. So we find, for example, the powerful river Marne taking its name from that of the Gaulish *Matrona* "Divine Mother". No doubt there was at one time occult legend in circulation associating the Mother with the river, which became the physical personification of the goddess, mirroring her own supernatural forces—strength, the powers of destruction, fertility. Another example, drawn from many, is that of the river Seine, sacred to the goddess of the source, *Sequanna*. The temple here was situated at the source of the river, and a bronze recovered from the temple site portrays the goddess drawn along in a vessel consisting of a duck, holding a berry in its bill in the manner of the earlier solar bark representations. The raven-goddess from Gaul, *Nanosueta* "winding River" evinces the duality typical of the Celtic mother-goddesses whose fertile aspects are paralled and

balanced by their corresponding powers of destruction. In Britain the evidence for the veneration of rivers suggests a similar pattern. The names of such rivers as the Dee (*Deva*), the Clyde (*Clota*, cf. Gaulish *Cutoida*), the Severn (*Sabrina*) and perhaps the Warfe (?*Verbeia*) as well as the Braint of Anglesey and the Brent of Middlesex (from *Brigantia*), would apparently reflect the same association of a river with a goddess as is attested for Gaul, and in the case of Ireland, this suggestion is strongly supported by the textural material. Not only do rivers have goddess-names, but Irish cult legends occur which purport to account for the naming of such rivers. For example, two rivers, the Boyne and the Shannon, allegedly owe their origin to the actions of the goddess (Boand, Sinann) who defied the magic powers of a certain well (the Well of Segais, the Well of Coelrind) as a result of which the well rose in anger, mutilating and drowning the goddess and, turning into a mighty river, rushed seawards. "(Pegan *Celtic Britain*, 1967, p. 20–21).

The Grantchester hoard of iron currency bars is important for three reasons: firstly, because it survived as a hoard; secondly, because it provides clear evidence of ritual deposition, possibly as a part of a Druidic ceremony; and, thirdly, because it is of an extremely rare type—only two other Bay-Leaf bars are recorded.

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