

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 22/89

CONSTRUCTION OF A SWORD HILT FROM
CAISTER-ON-SEA, NORFOLK.

Jacqui Watson

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Summary

Identification of wood preserved by iron corrosion products on a Roman sword thought to be associated with the burial of an auxillary cavalryman, late 3rd or 4th century.

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Construction of sword hilt from Caister-on-Sea, Norfolk.

An iron sword found with a burial of an auxiliary cavalryman dated to the late 3rd or 4th century AD, has traces of wood preserved in the iron corrosion products which correspond to the original grip and guard sections of the hilt. Details of the construction of this portion are illustrated in figure 1.

The guard appears to be made of a piece lime (*Tilia* sp.) approximately 40mm deep, which slots over the iron tang with the wood grain perpendicular to the axis of the tang. It is held firmly in place on one side by an iron plate about 4mm thick and on the other side by a piece of elm (*Ulmus* sp.) or ash (*Fraxinus* sp.). This piece of wood extends into the grip section and appears to be keyed into it. The grip is possibly made from beech (*Fagus* sp.) and the grain follows the same axis as the tang.

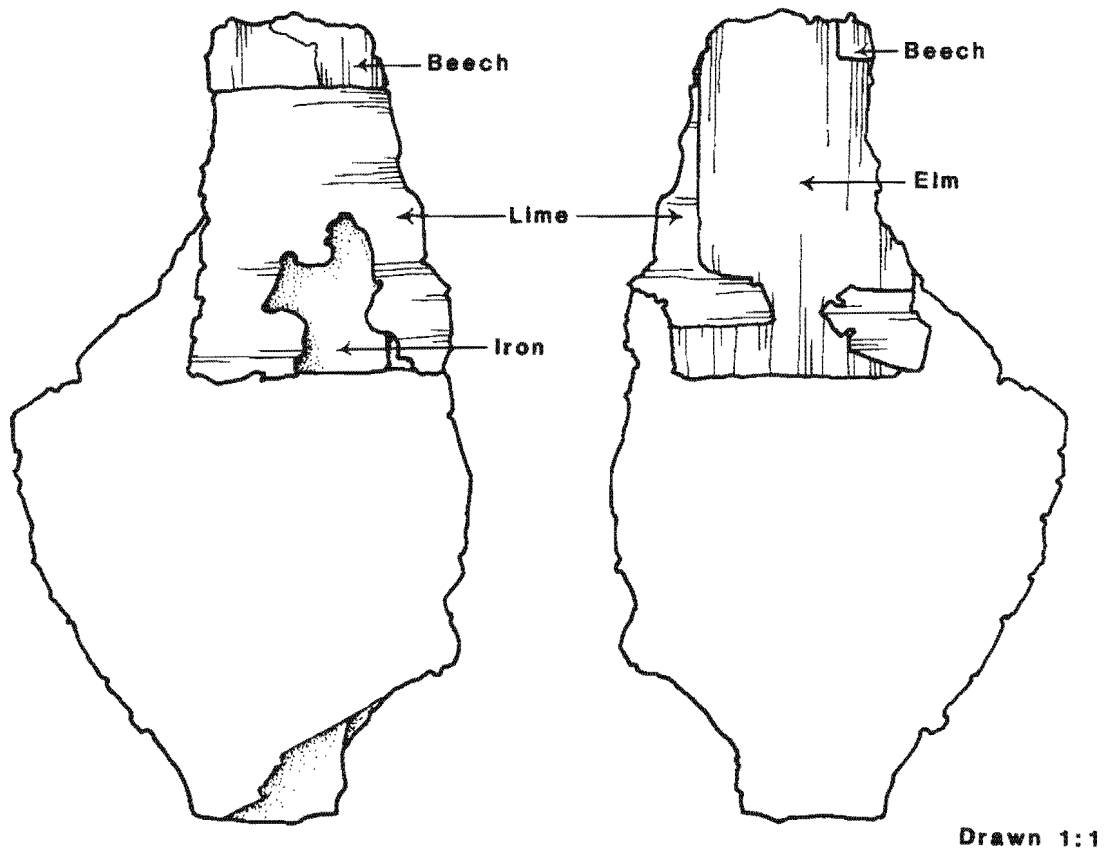


Figure 1. Construction of grip and guard sections of sword hilt.

Also found nearby was a piece of stitched leather with some wood remaining on the inside (figure 2). As the wood was beech, the leather may have originally been used to cover the sword grip.

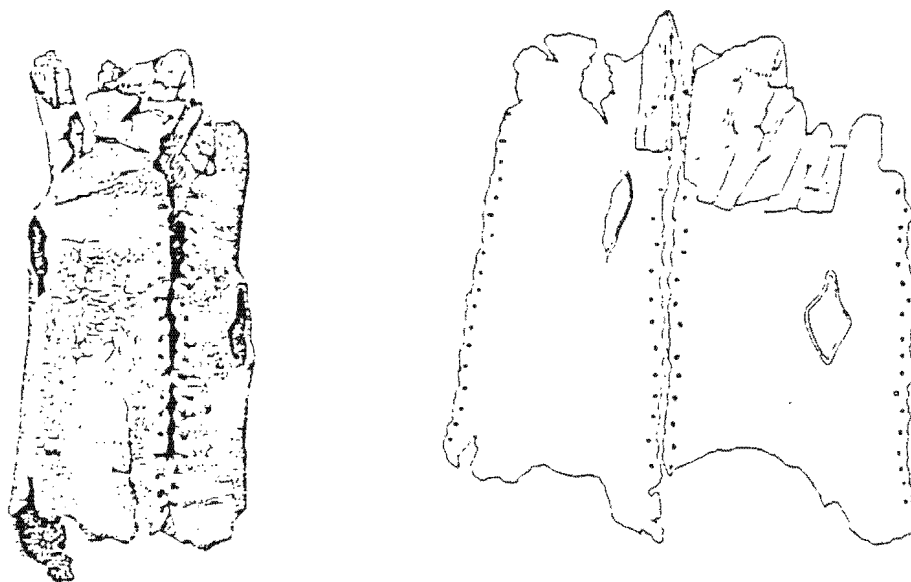


Figure 2. Stitched leather which probably covered grip. Drawn by Norfolk Archaeological Unit.

Few swords of this period have been found in Britain, and this makes it difficult to comment on the hilt construction of this particular item except to say that it is unusual. Most sword hilts are made from one material for all three sections, and the most commonly used are horn, bone or antler, with wood being used only occasionally. The variety of woods used suggest that this is not the original hilt, and that it has been repaired at some stage, maybe even several times. All the wood species represented were available throughout Britain and Europe, and do not give any indication as to where the sword was made or repaired.