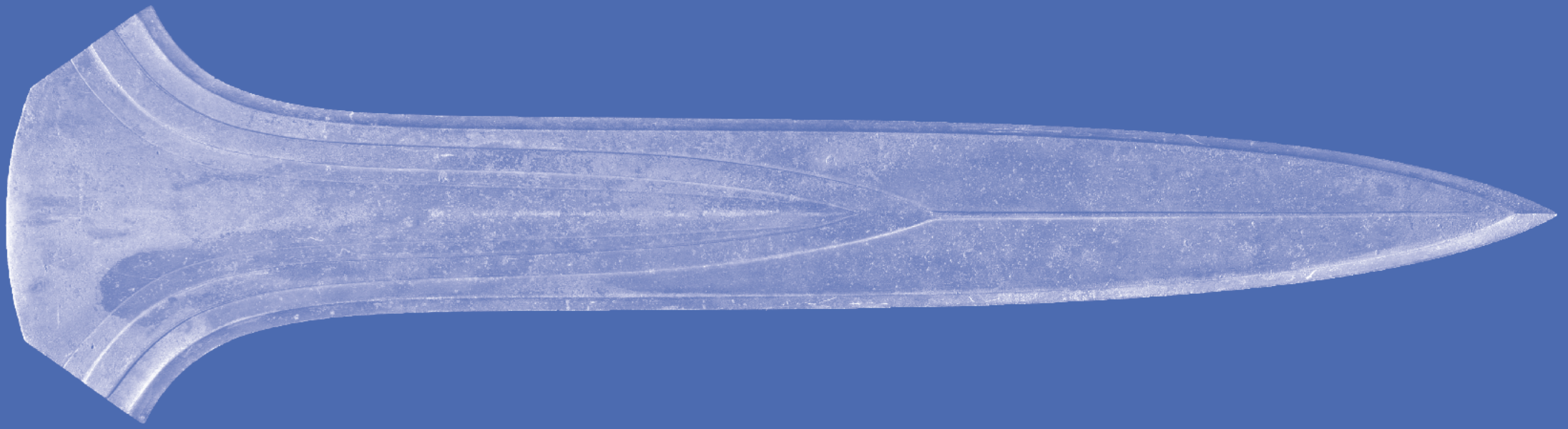

The Ommerschans sword or dirk.

SIZE MATTERS:

THE OMMERSCHANS HOARD AND SOME THOUGHTS ON THE AGGRANDIZED DIRKS OF THE PLOUGRESCANT-OMMERSCHANS TYPE

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In 1896, a farm labourer found a spectacular Bronze Age hoard in the peatlands north of Ommen (Overijssel, the Netherlands). The hoard consisted of small tools of bronze and stone and one giant bronze dirk or sword. The objects remained in private possession of the landowner and despite an earlier publication, were only acquired by the National Museum of Antiquities at auction in 2017 and are currently studied. Meanwhile it is known that the sword is part of a rare group of aggrandized Bronze Age dirks or swords of the Plougrescant-Ommerschans type – objects that were simply too large, heavy and unwieldy to use, but that represent the epitome of craftsmanship at the time. Because of their larger-than-life size they can be interpreted as distinctly symbolic objects. Also, we know they were deposited in wet contexts. This makes them ideally suited to cast an important light on Bronze Age practices with distinctly ritual and social connotations.

Bronze Age; Ommerschans; aggrandized; sword; dirk; deposition; ritual.

INTRODUCTION

On 5 July 2017, at around 2 p.m. the hammer falls at Christie's in London. Lot 144, the Ommerschans hoard, 121 years after its discovery finally comes into public possession.

The hoard with the stunning and perfectly preserved sword (Fig. 1), is one of the most enigmatic finds in Dutch prehistory and perhaps the most stunning object of the somewhat meagre (in terms of 'bling') Dutch Bronze Age. Its loss and covert existence in private possession has been termed 'The tragedy of Ommerschans' (Fontijn, 2001, p. 277). Why is it that an object of peculiar proportions and with an appealing design and symmetry still speaks to our imagination, captures attention and sparks discussion? These are perhaps not directly academic questions, but they are at the core of what is at stake here, why aspects of size, symmetry, craft and design invoke an idea of purpose and stir emotion, in the 21st century, but even more meaningfully in the Bronze Age.

For the Ommerschans sword part of the answer lies in the fact that it belongs to an exclusive group of only six swords or daggers of this aggrandized type, two of which were found in the Netherlands, two in France and two in the UK. In a period where mass-production of similar objects becomes part of everyday life, this rarity in combination with the larger-than-life execution is meaningful. Yet at the same time, the members of this group are also very much alike creating the idea of a connected group or family. The Ommerschans sword in particular may throw more light on the meaning of this group of objects at is the only 'member' that was actually documented as part of a hoard. The various aspects of this hoard, the characteristics of the objects and the ways these connect with similar or comparative finds is part of a recent study and synthesis (Amkreutz & Fontijn, 2024). In this contribution we will describe the Ommerschans hoard and the other members of the group and briefly discuss the potential implications of these enigmatic giant dirks.

Fig. 1a–b. Front and back of the Ommerschans sword or dirk. The sword measures 68.3 cm in length.

Fig. 2. The Ommerschans hoard as it was preserved shortly after its discovery. Note the small bronze and stone objects that have been nailed on the wooden plank.

DISCOVERY

A newspaper clipping from the *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant* of 12 May 1896 reports the discovery of a copper sword near the Ommerschans, north of Ommen in the province of Overijssel. Because there was no date on the sword or the 'ornaments, flints, etc.' found with it, it was not known whether the piece was related to this 17th century fortification. The sword was found by the 21-year-old forester or farmer Geert Remmelts, who was cutting heather to make brooms, or (illegally) cutting peat. He had to hand over the documents to his employer, an industrialist and large landowner, who placed them in the care of his forester and gamekeeper. This man, Alexander Seemann, nailed the sword and other finds to a birch plank, to be hung like a trophy on the wall of the forester's house on the Junne estate (Fig. 2).

On May 24, 1927, curator and director of the National Museum of Antiquities J. H. Holwerda, together with the mayor, visited some sites in the municipality and the forester. Holwerda directly writes a note on the find speaking of an 'extraordinarily important bronze object' and documents that it was said to have been positioned on some wooden posts under a layer of peat, together with other finds. He also immediately contacts the family to see whether it is possible to acquire the find. This is to no avail and he is only offered the opportunity to study the hoard, which takes place in the summer of 1927. At the National Museum of Antiquities, Holwerda has a plaster copy made of the sword and photographs of all the finds. For the next 90 years these would be the most important documents as the hoard traveled with the owners to Germany. Except for a publication in 1961 based on drawings made by a visiting student (Butler & Bakker, 1961) no archaeologist ever studied or saw the finds again and all efforts for acquisition were fruitless.

Change came with the 2016 exhibition on Swords ('Cutting Edge Past'), the National Museum of Antiquities hosted in 2016. One of the elements of the exhibition was a shrine-like display bringing together all of the meanwhile six swords of this type that, because of their similarity, were probably all made in a brief period in the same place. Unfortunately, the family could not agree on a loan and the plaster copy was used, but it did lead to their decision to bring the finds to auction. With the aid of national funding bodies such as the *Vereniging Rembrandt* and the *Mondriaanstichting* the museum succeeded in acquiring the hoard, finally making it available to the general public and scientific investigation (see Amkreutz & Fontijn, 2018, pp. 2–3).

THE OMMERSCHANS HOARD AND ITS PLACE OF DISCOVERY

The bronze 'sabre' Geert Remmelts discovered in 1896 was in fact a sword, or rather an aggrandized version of a dirk (see below) dating to the Middle Bronze Age. The Ommerschans dirk measures 68.3 cm and weighs almost 3 kg. It is clearly too large and heavy for use and there are no rivets or other means of attachment present on the trapezoidal, slightly rounded hilt. The pointed ogival blade is demarcated by a flattened, angular rib, accompanied by an engraved line running to the tip and forming a dagger-like motif. From the tip of the motif a rounded centre rib runs to the actual point of the blade. The blade shows no signs of any use and no obvious casting roughness of seams and is almost perfectly preserved.

Only after the sword was studied anew since its acquisition by the museum, we observed a row of small markings on the outer beveled edge on either and both sides of the sword, running up to halfway from the hilt. Furthermore, there are distinct patches and zones in the patination on one side of the sword. These may relate to the other objects in the hoard that presumably lay on top of the blade (Bakker, 2004; Butler & Bakker, 1961). Clearly the sword is a magnificent object requiring in depth know-how of bronze casting and displaying a high degree of craftsmanship. Costly, both in terms of material used as well as time and energy. This makes it stand out all the more from the other finds that were discovered with it (Fig. 3). These consist of a range of bronze objects including chisels, needles, fragments of what may have been a file, scrap metal, a piece of re-used decorated bracelet and a Sicilian razor of Pantalica type (e.g. Butler & Bakker, 1961, pp. 197–201; Fontijn, 2001, pp. 265–266). Additionally, there is a set of stone objects consisting of two highly polished flint pieces, an amphibolite-like miniature adze or chisel and two coarse-grained facetted grinding stones. An original 1927 photograph documents a bronze wire spiral and another piece of flint that are meanwhile lost.

The meaning of the combination of these finds is tantalizing. On the one hand a pristine symbolic object of European importance, on the other hand a group of at first glance insignificant bronze and stone objects. As a hoard, this combination is unique. Nevertheless, while some of the bronze objects may be classified as scrap metal, most appear to be part of something like a specialized toolkit. This toolkit also comprised the series of potential polishing stones. In any case their co-occurrence seems to be distinct and meaningful.

Fig. 3. The fifteen bronze and stone objects found with, and probably on top of, the Ommerschans dirk. The upper right object is possibly a razor measuring 13.8 x 3.7 cm.

The hoard was found in a former raised bog north of Ommen. According to the newspaper clipping and oral accounts (e.g. Bakker, 2004) the hoard was discovered slightly beneath the surface and the smaller objects were possibly arranged on top of the sword (which might explain some of the patterns in the patination). The hoard itself was supposedly placed on a platform of birchwood posts (ibid.; Butler & Bakker, 1961, p. 193). Both the accounts, the newspaper clipping, and the overall characteristics of the patination argue in favour of the objects being found together. The position of the find is remarkable as well. It was situated in an extensive raised bog area and positioned along what may have been a north-south corridor for transport and interaction between the area of the Vecht and the more densely settled area of the Drenthe moraine plateau further north (e.g. Bakker, 2004; Butler & Bakker, 1961, p. 193). Recent studies (including Van Beek, 2012; Van Beek & Groenewoudt, 2013) have also pointed out the existence of rather long-term and intensive habitation along the banks of the Vecht river. The Ommerschans site may thus have been situated strategically in the middle as a sort of stepping stone in that corridor. This becomes even more enigmatic as it appears the area was distinctly low-lying and flanked to the east by a higher sand ridge (Bakker, 2004, p. 86). Recent research (Bakels, 2024) suggests that the peat formation may have been a distinctive factor in relation to the moment of deposition in this shifting and changing landscape.

MEETING THE FAMILY

As indicated above, the Ommerschans sword is not a unique find. In total we now know of five other comparable swords or dirks found in the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom (Fig. 4). We will now briefly introduce these (Amkreutz & Fontijn, 2017; Amkreutz & Fontijn, 2018)

The other sword that lends its name to the group is the Plougrescant dirk, which was found near Plougrescant in Brittany. It was first described by the renowned French archaeologist Gabriel de Mortillet in 1881, who immediately recognized that he was not dealing with a functional weapon but with a ritual object: *'une simulacre, un objet rituel'*. Unfortunately, little is known about the find circumstances, which is comparable to the other French sword, the one from Beaune in Burgundy. This one was acquired by Reverend William Greenwell (1820–1914). What is noteworthy is that the hilt is of a different shape.

Recent metallurgical analysis demonstrated it was a modern addition (Needham, 1990). The idea is that the object was only partially preserved and completed using a Kimberley dagger, also present in the Greenwell collection, as an example. The Kimberley dagger type appears to be typologically related to the swords (see below). Later on, the sword was obtained by the banker John Pierpont Morgan who donated his collection to the British Museum in 1908.

Moving across the channel, two other family members have been found in Norfolk. The largest (by 2 cm) is the one from Oxborough. It was found in 1988 when a hiker tripped over the protruding hilt of this sword in a forest (Needham, 1990). In the Bronze Age the object was deposited in a peaty area with the tip pushed down in the soft ground. Recently another sword surfaced in Norfolk, the 'Rudham dirk', was ploughed up by a farmer from his field and for years used as a doorstop for the barn. In 2014, it was recognized for what it was and purchased by the Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery. Remarkably the sword was bent and folded in the Bronze Ages.

The other Dutch find is the Jutphaas sword, which was found in 1946 or 1947 near Jutphaas (province of Utrecht) by a dredger extending a harbour into an old stream channel of the Rhine (Butler & Sarfatij, 1970/1971). It hung on a boy's bedroom for years before being recognized as a prehistoric sword and was acquired by the National Museum of Antiquities in 2005. This sword is a lot shorter compared to the other five (42 cm) but is still like the others an unusable weapon. In execution and design it is on all fronts a reduced copy of the others, which, at least visually, matches all proportions. Hence, the bronze smith in charge knew about these pieces and tried to match exactly that shape and proportion.

Fig. 4. The group of Plougrescant-Ommerschans swords. From left to right: Oxborough (Norfolk, England), Collection British Museum; Plougrescant (Brittany, France), Musée d'Archéologie Nationale, Saint-Germain-en-Laye; Rudham (Norfolk, England), Collection Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery; Jutphaas (Utrecht, the Netherlands), Collection Rijksmuseum van Oudheden; Beaune (Burgundy, France), Collection British Museum; Ommerschans plaster copy (Overijssel, the Netherlands), Collection Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.

When overviewing this group, or family of swords what stands out is that in 200 years of 'documented' archaeological research, six is an extremely low number. In particular for the Bronze Age, when we for the first time see the serial production in large numbers of axes, jewellery and weapons such as swords in their hundreds if not thousands, the rarity of the Plougrescant-Ommerschans swords is striking. At the same time, they probably were highly recognizable and this is further substantiated by the fact that they are almost identical in appearance, regarding shape, proportions and execution meaning we can certainly speak of a strongly related family. It may be stated that while based on small differences in size and execution we can rule out that the same moulds were used, the visual similarity must have been a strong point of attention. Our recent research (Amkreutz & Fontijn, 2024) also suggests that the swords were probably not made by one craftsperson. Rather, it is more likely that several smiths, possibly on both sides of the North Sea, tried to make a sword that looked exactly like the others. Particularly if we consider the detailed similarities between the small Jutphaas version and the big ones, this is an impressive feature in itself. This, added to its impressive distribution over Northwest Europa (there are some 800 km between the find spot of Ommerschans and Plougrescant) makes clear that to Bronze Age communities their meaning as rare and valuable social symbols must have been almost self-evident.

SOME THOUGHTS ON AGGRANDIZED SWORDS

Throughout the earlier part of the Bronze Age, it becomes obvious that magnification was one way to make a statement on the significance of valuables (Fontijn, 2020; Hansen, 2001). Magnification is potentially a powerful way to do so, because it brings to mind a particular object one considers relevant. Enlarging it – to absurd size (in the sense that it makes it practically useless) – can be a way of stating that its relevance was of an 'other-worldly' nature (cf. Fontijn, 2020). Another way to achieve this is by using a rare, unusual material for an object (like silver or gold for what is actually a tool or a weapon). A third approach can be to make the object 'other-worldly' by making it in virtuoso quality (cf. Kuijpers, 2018). Our research so far suggests that in the case of Ommerschans and the other giant swords, all three strategies applied. The object is so enlarged that it is no longer functional (it is not only too large, it is also too heavy: Ommerschans weighs 3 kg!). Scientific analysis also points out that the sword of Ommerschans, as well as others in the group has a tin ratio that is too high for a functional object (Theunissen & Van Os, 2024). Finally, for all swords, but especially for Ommerschans and Jutphaas, the skill to craft it is impressive, even for modern standards.

For these reasons, we think it likely that a sword such as that of Ommerschans was created as an 'other-worldly-object' – an ultimate valuable that could represent a community's most inalienable possession. Godelier (1999), in an anthropological treatise on inalienable objects, claims to have recognized such ultimate objects in many societies. As very rare and very precious things, they are often regarded as objects that stand at the heart of a society's identity. They refer to normal objects that look like them, but which are useable and circulate in some numbers (ibid.; see also Fontijn, 2001; Fontijn, 2020). We assume object such as Ommerschans were at the top of a ranked system of valuables (Fontijn & Amkreutz, 2018).

Ending the life of such an extraordinary object by having it sunk down in a watery landscape may seem odd to us. Yet, this is what happened and provides the sole reason we can still see the object today. From a Bronze Age perspective, we think depositing it in the landscape was not an odd ending at all – rather it was the prescribed, appropriate ending. The majority of Bronze Age metalwork we know today (tens of thousands across Europe), survived the ages precisely because of this. Apparently, from a Bronze Age perspective, this was the best way to render their special nature (see Fontijn, 2020, for a much more extensive discussion). Yet – among the thousands of objects deposited in the Netherlands alone, the Ommerschans hoard still stands out. It was located in a transitory zone – at a cross-road

or connection between lands of what were presumable different social groups. Also, the objects it was associated with are unique in kind and many of them (such as the Pantalica razor) are not known from any adjacent region (as already suggested by Butler & Bakker, 1961).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The Ommerschans hoard which was acquired by the National Museum of Antiquities in 2017 is proving to be one of the most interesting and enigmatic finds of the Dutch Bronze Age. The hoard is of importance as its context is largely known and of the rare group of only six swords of this type it is the only one with accompanying objects. These hold the key, or at least a key for understanding its importance, regional appreciation and particular reason for deposition. The true value however lies in the study of the group as a family. Its individual members are widespread markers of Bronze Age networks and they should be interpreted in the light of the connections they represent, both in space and time. In order to further unravel these questions, the Ommerschans hoard has recently been researched. This involves a detailed analysis of the site and the find, including novel non-destructive techniques such as neutron-tomography and gamma spectrography. Additionally, the other known swords have been reanalyzed by a number of colleagues. The combined results are presented in an edited volume (Amkreutz & Fontijn, 2024).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay is based on our study of the hoard after the museum acquired it, and recently corroborated by a number of scientific studies. These are fully published in Amkreutz & Fontijn (Eds.) 2024. We are grateful to our colleagues Bakels, Theunissen and Van Os for allowing us to briefly mention some of their preliminary results.

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