

Penknives from Newstead: writing accessories

In 1981, during a three-months stay in Great Britain, I was able to study some finds from the Roman site of Newstead, housed in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Edinburgh. My visit there was made easier by the kind help of Mrs J. Close-Brooks, then Director of the Museum, and for a few days, J. Tate also accepted to show me the techniques used in the Conservation Laboratories of the Museum. One of my first practical jobs in this matter concerned a knife handle which is now recognized as a penknife.

The cleaning of this object (Curle 1911, pl. LX, 10) clearly showed, with the help of an X-ray (fig 1, 1 & fig 2), that the iron blade had been inserted in the brass handle and then firmly held in place with the help of 3 red copper rivets. As the handle had been sawn to match the exact thickness of the blade, the iron was very precisely inserted in the brass; but, as a consequence, such sawn handles must be very fragile when the object is dismantled.

Parallel traces appearing on the iron blade in the two rectangular hollow windows suggest that these parts were filled with wood inserts, making the handgrip more comfortable as well as producing a nice coloured effect with the brass. It could also have been bone, but such appliquéés were never described on similar archaeological finds, so the most likely material for the appliquéés is wood. The X-ray fluorescence analysis of the metal parts of the handle gave the following results :

	<u>Cu</u>	<u>Sn</u>	<u>Zn</u>
handle	82	1,7	16,4
rivets	99,6	0,4	-

The use of (nearly) pure copper for the rivets is logical when considering the mechanical properties of this metal. But within the type (a short handle followed by volute-shaped appliquéés to protect the finger on the back of the blade), different methods of fastening the handle and blade together were in use on the same site. Another find from Newstead (Curle 1911, pl LX, 12; FRA 276) is a blade, lacking most of the handle (fig 1, 2); the only surviving traces of the fastening system are two volute appliquéés and their three copper rivets. Contrary to the former case, the volutes were not cast with the

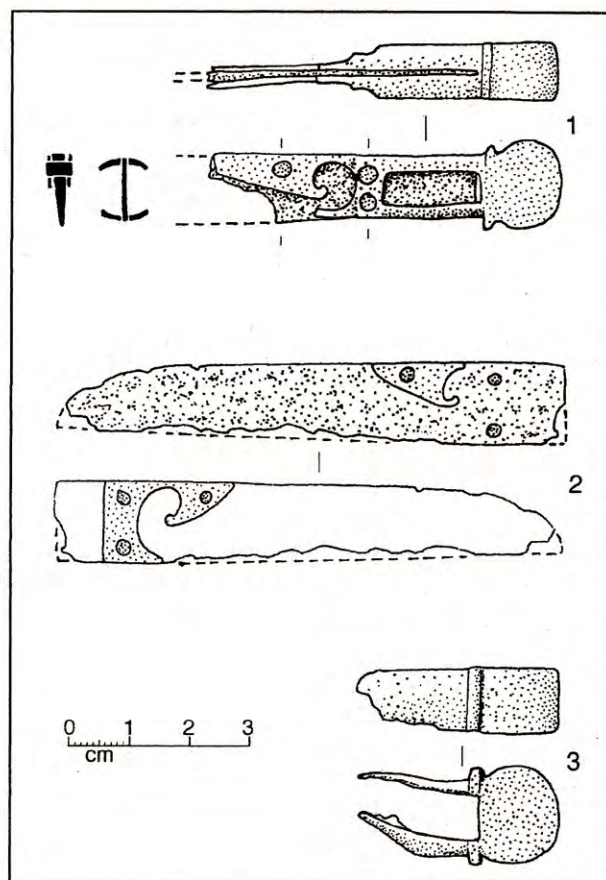


Fig. 1 – Three penknives from Newstead.

handle; one of them is complete and shows a straight edge, perpendicular to the blade. The hidden part of the blade is also shorter than before, and ends at about 10 mm from the rivets.

Only one end of a third knife handle from Newstead is preserved (fig 1, 3), but clearly the handle was not fixed as on our first example. Thus three objects, apparently belonging to a single type, actually display three different constructions, and this in a limited period of time.

Parallels to each type are numerous, suggesting that those were usual versions of a rather current object. For example, handles with sawn slots for the blade were found in London on the Walbrook site (Bank of England; Museum of London, 13.827) as well as in grave II at Winchester (Biddle 1967) ; in London, right in the middle of the rectangular opening, the iron blade is perforated, probably for the fastening of wooden side-pieces. Another handle, but not sawn, comes from the same area

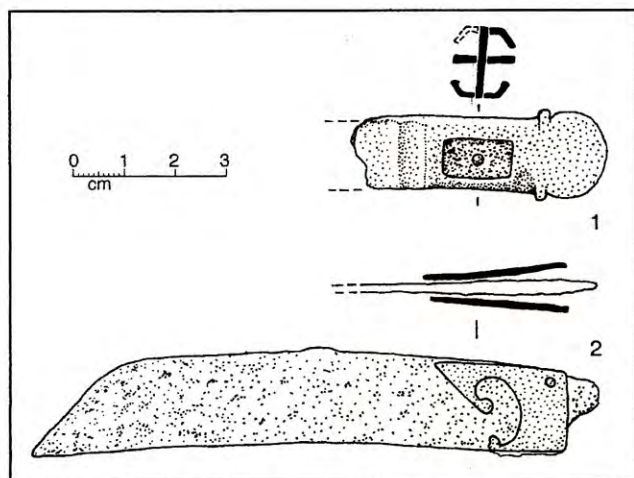


Fig. 2 – Penknives (paralleles to the Newstead finds) from : 1, Vechten (NL) ; 2, Alba (F).

(Tokenhouse Yard, inv. A.28342). The complete knife from Berlingen, tomb 26, with sewn handle, also shows the same feature (Roosens & Lux 1973; Božič 2001, fig 1, 3) and so does a handle from Vechten (fig 2, 1; Rijksmuseum van Oudheiden, VF 760). Two handles with cast appliques and rectangular windows are known in Neuss (*Bonner Jahrb* 111/112, 1904, pl XXXIII, 32, length 71 mm, and 36, length 53 mm, the later with two openings instead of one in the handle).

The second type is also illustrated among the Walbrook finds, with a very well-preserved handle also ending 10 mm behind the rivets (Bank of England, inv. 13696). Other parallels can be mentioned from Gaul (fig 2, 2 : Alba, "La Plaine", excavations J.-C. Béal and A. Buisson 1981), etc... The parallel from Vindonissa, already reproduced by Curle at the beginning of the 20th century (1911, 282, fig 40, left) shows a solid bone handle, probably reproducing the shape of bronze ones. The possibility that some knives of this form may have been fitted with wooden, instead of bone, handles, is still open. I shall not attempt to list more similar finds here, but this short examination shows that a classification of such handles could be made using their construction details. It would be interesting to check whether this difference is linked to chronology or to another aspect of the production.

Lucerna readers will know that the function of such utensils was recently the subject of many discussions; there is good reason to suppose that they were used as penknives, used to sharpen the *calamus* during the writing process, rather than razors as it was

previously supposed (Garbsch 1975, as most later authors). The need for a knife during the process of ink-writing was long ago noticed by authors dealing with this activity (Merten 1987, 311, 315), but it is not until very recently that D Božič (2001) established the true nature of this particular form of knife. This new interpretation (see also Božič & Feugère forthcoming) is based on several sources; first, the presence of such knives on the famous relief of *L Cornelius Atimetus* in Rome, a retailer whose shop offered many writing instruments for sale (Zimmer 1982, 180-182, no 114 ; Božič 2001, 28, fig 2); second, the association of the type with other typical writing utensils in a number of Roman graves of the early Empire.

Among such funerary contexts, of which a complete list still has to be established, let us mention here only some clear cases. A rich grave in Winchester (grave II) produced two such knives as well as a wax-spatula, two iron styli and a bronze seal-box, as well as other objects such as board-game counters (Biddle 1967, fig 9, 20, 21, 26-29, 36-53) ; in London, a grave contained a penknife with two or three styli, a seal-box and two possible copper-alloy pens (seal-box: Holmes 1995, and J Hall, pers comm).

Many more cases appear on the continent. In Grave 26 at Berlingen, a penknife was deposited with an inkwell, a wax-spatula, a stylus, a bone ruler, a compass and a folding rule (Roosens & Lux 1973, fig 14, 16, 10, 20, 37-38). Among the numerous graves from Wederath-Belginum, two of them, containing penknives, are worth reproducing here (fig 3). Tomb 2363 (Cordie-Hackenberg & Haffner 1997, pl 653) had a penknife and a bronze needle, an object which is considered typical of female graves. Such a context is in contradiction with the ancient interpretation of the short knives as razors, but fits with the new idea of a penknife. The second grave, tomb 2448 (*ibid*, pl. 673), shows a penknife with another sewing needle, a possible hair-pin, and three styli.

For a study presented at the EAA congress of Esslingen in September 2001, I made a list of seven early Roman graves which contained both a penknife and an inkwell, both utensils connected with ink-writing. But of course writing on wax was even more frequent, and funerary contexts often associate utensils of the two writing techniques. Four of these graves come from the necropolis of Nijmegen-West (Koster

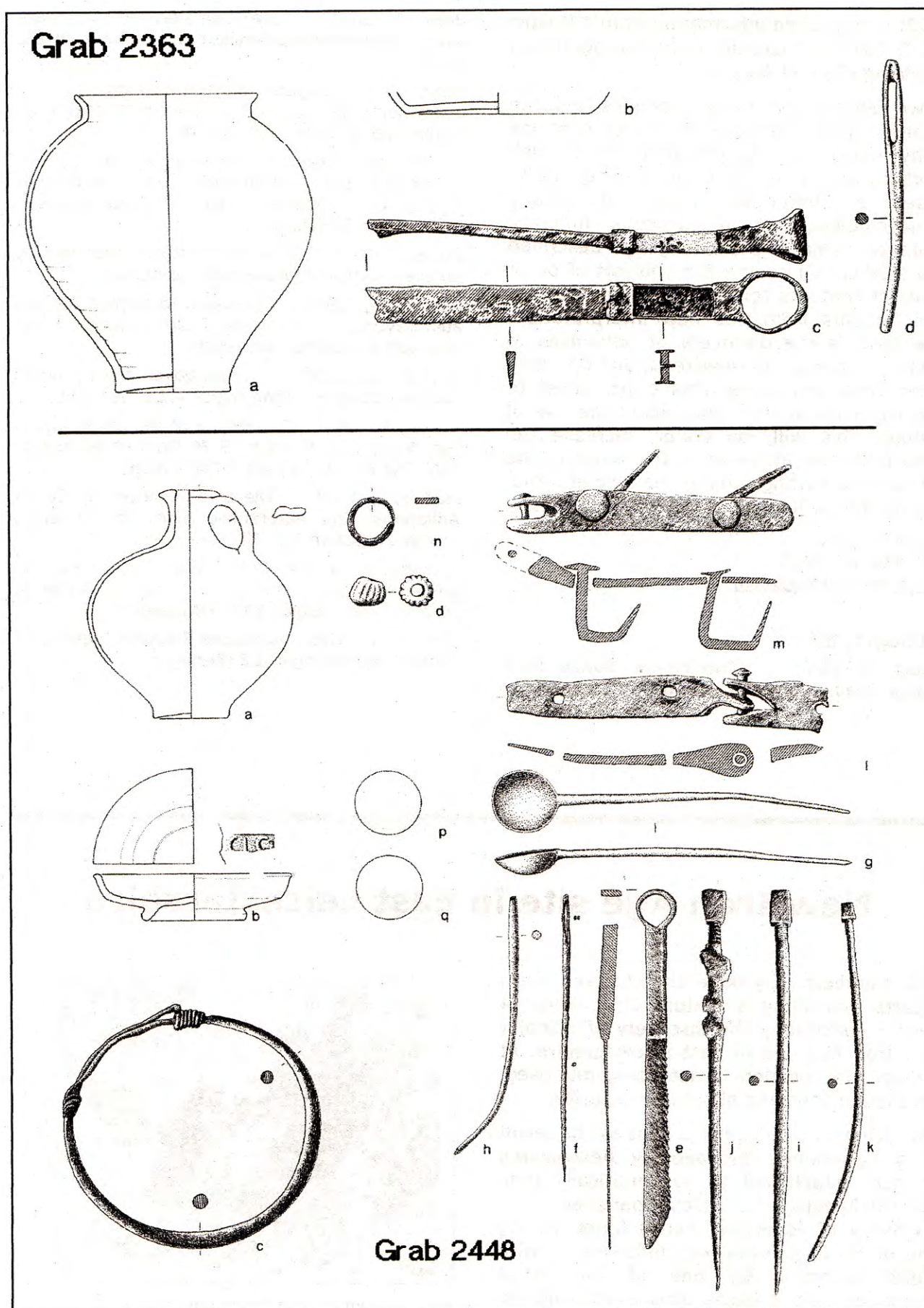


Fig. 3 – Two graves from Wederath-Belgium containing penknives (after Cordie-Hackenberg & Haffner 1997).

1997; unpublished information from A Koster and D Božič, others are from Berlingen (B), Ergolding (D) and Alba (I).

As we can see from these examples (and the archaeological literature no doubt contains many more), the new interpretation of such short knives as writing utensils brings us to quite a different view of many archaeological, and in particular funerary contexts, some of them long ago described and studied. Of course the analysis of other types of contexts containing penknives does also benefit from this new interpretation. One such is the discovery of penknives in military contexts. In Newstead, and on many other sites, penknives should be added to the list of documents illustrating the use of writing. This will, no doubt, increase the importance we attribute to the army in the diffusion of writing among the soldiers and, finally, the civilian society in Roman times.

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New Iron Age site in East Leicestershire

RFG members may have already seen press reports- including a feature on Channel 4 news - concerning the discovery of a major new Iron Age site in East Leicestershire. At present the location is not being disclosed, because of concerns about site security.

The site originally came to light as the result of a Community Archaeology fieldwalking project, established to systematically map the archaeology of local parishes. The discovery of coins and bones found during one of these surveys was followed up with metal detecting by one of the group members, Ken Wallace. This eventually led to the isolation of at least fifteen discrete coin deposits, which were able to be lifted in blocks (although a large number of coins had been scattered in the surface ploughsoil).

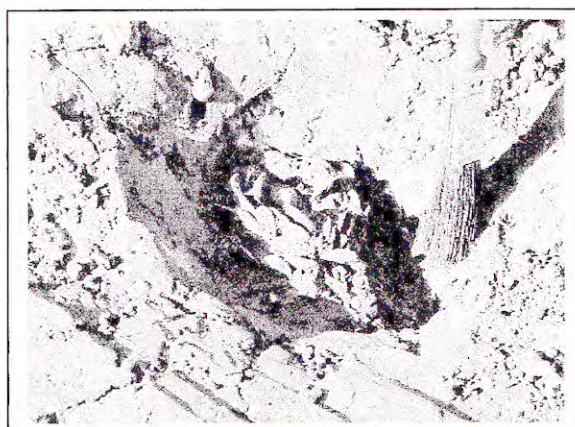


Fig 1. A coin deposit being uncovered.

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