Case 27 2013/14: An Iron Age Bronze Mirror

Expert adviser’s statement

Reviewing Committee Secretary’s note: Please note that any illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the Arts Council England Website

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item
Mirrors are first made and used in Britain during the later Iron Age (300 BC – AD 50) and are some of the most recognisable objects from the period. The majority have been found in burials interpreted as the graves of high-status women. The Didcot mirror is made of copper-alloy. It comprises two component parts, a sheet copper-alloy plate and a cast copper-alloy handle. The plate is inscribed on the back with a complex arrangement of Celtic art motifs ordered in a lyre-loop pattern. The motifs are delineated by inscribed lines and in filled using ‘basket-hatching’. The decoration is framed within a series of short, regularly-spaced engraved lines running perpendicular to the plate edge which form a border line. The handle is made of cast copper-alloy and is formed of a simple loop with a central boss at the grip and extending arms. The handle and plate were attached by inserting the plate edge into a groove in each arm. Placed centrally above the arms is a ring of copper-alloy which is secured to the plate by a rivet. The plate is 184mm in diameter and the overall length of the mirror including the handle is 271.5mm. Based on its similarity to a mirror recently discovered near Pegsdon, Bedfordshire, the mirror probably dates to c. 75 – 25 BC (Burleigh & Megaw 2007). It is in overall good condition although some conservation work is visible. Some cracks can be seen on the plate surface and it may have been flattened out by a professional conservator. Based on images of the mirror I have seen taken soon after its discovery (Burleigh & Megaw 2007, Fig. 14; Joy 2010, Fig. A34), the top right hand quarter of the ring above the handle which was originally missing has been restored. The handle loop appears to have broken off close to the grip at some point in the past and it has been re-joined.

2. Context
The mirror was discovered by a metal detector user sometime before 2007. It was reported by the finder to the Finds Liaison Officer for Hertfordshire shortly after its discovery. The finder indicated that it was found in a small area centred on Didcot, Oxfordshire. No further information about its context is known. Based on other discoveries found elsewhere in southern England, the mirror is most likely to have been deposited in a cremation burial, although that would be highly unusual for Oxfordshire. The mirror is recorded in publications by Burleigh and Megaw (2007) and Joy (2010).

3. Waverley criteria
Waverley Criterion (1) is satisfied on the grounds that the Dicot mirror is the only mirror from the Iron Age period to have been discovered in Oxfordshire. It is therefore outstandingly important to the local history of the county.

Waverley Criterion (2) is satisfied because the Didcot mirror is of outstanding aesthetic value. It is an excellent and unusual example of an art style which originated and was developed in southern England during the second and first centuries BC.

Waverley Criterion (3) is also argued on the grounds that the Didcot mirror is of outstanding scholarly significance. It is critical to our understanding of the evolution and development of Iron Age mirrors, a very important Iron Age object type. Mirrors are among a small number of types of
object, alongside display shields and torcs, which define the British Iron Age. Only 17 other complete, decorated mirrors are known from Britain. These are all in national or local museums.

**DETAILED CASE**

**Waverley Criterion (1)** requires a connection with our history and national life such that its departure would be a misfortune. This condition is satisfied on the grounds that the Didcot mirror is outstandingly important to the local history of Oxfordshire because it is the only Iron Age mirror to have been discovered in the county and is a rare example of late Iron Age decorated metalwork from Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire, in particular the Upper Thames Valley, is very rich in Iron Age archaeological remains, especially settlement evidence (Hey 2007), yet there are relatively few graves (Hey et al. 2011, 60-61) and decorated metalwork dating to the later Iron Age is scarce (Garrow 2008, Fig 2.5a).

According to the Celtic Art Database (Gwilt et al. 2007) there are 53 decorated artefacts dating to the Iron Age from Oxfordshire. Of these 26 could be dated and only seven to the later Iron Age. All seven are swords recovered from rivers. One thing we know about the deposition context of the Didcot mirror is that it was not recovered from a river. Mirrors are very rarely recovered from rivers (see Joy 2010) which would also probably exclude the possibility that it was recovered from an ancient river course. This means that the Didcot mirror is the only later Iron Age decorated artefact from Oxfordshire to be recovered from a non-riverine context and is therefore critical evidence to demonstrate that other practices of the disposal of these artefacts were practiced in the county.

The Didcot mirror is therefore outstandingly important to Oxfordshire as it is the only mirror to have been found in the county. It is also a rare example of decorated metalwork dating to the later Iron Age from Oxfordshire and the only dated example that is not a sword.

**Waverley Criterion (2)** requires that the object is of outstanding aesthetic importance. The Didcot mirror fulfils this criterion as it is in overall very good condition, is beautifully decorated and is a rare and unusual example of ‘mirror-style’ art.

The ‘mirror style’ is a recognised style of Celtic Art unique to the later British Iron Age (Stead 1996, 32-35) with close affinities to decoration on other types of contemporary object such as sword scabbards (Joy 2010, Appendix C). The decoration on the Didcot mirror is in the ‘mirror style’ but the manner in which the motifs are arranged is unusual yet highly effective. The pattern of decoration on the Didcot mirror is arranged as a ‘bi-roundel with lyre-loop’ (Burleigh & Megaw 2007, Fig. 11; Joy 2008, Fig. 5.3). This pattern is only seen on one other mirror from Pegsdon, Bedfordshire. The motifs are also combined in interesting ways to produce negative petal motifs within the positive inscribed decoration. This is only paralleled by the decoration on the back of the mirror from Latchmere Green, Hampshire.

In summary, the Didcot mirror is extremely important in terms of understanding the development of the mirror style. The decoration on its plate is arranged in a highly unusual manner that manages at the same time to conform to yet challenge some of the established design rules of the mirror style.

**Waverley Criterion (3)** requires the object in question to be of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history. This condition is satisfied on the grounds that the Didcot mirror is critical to our understanding of a highly recognisable and important artefact type for our interpretation of the history and culture of Iron Age Britain. Mirrors are among a small
number of types of object, alongside display shields and torcs, which define the British Iron Age. Only two have been found outside of Britain and these are likely to have been exports from Britain.

Mirrors from southern England, like the specimen from Didcot, are highly significant for our understanding of the later Iron Age, and particularly of the social changes which occurred in the century before the Roman conquest in AD 43. They are potentially objects of high status, and their manufacture and usage, alongside toilet implements such as tweezers and grinders for cosmetics, demonstrate the importance of personal appearance as a means of social expression during the later Iron Age.

Mirrors are relatively scarce. Only 60 or so are known from the later Iron Age and, due to their fragile nature, only 18 complete, decorated mirrors are known (see Appendix A). The Didcot mirror is the only complete example of the group that I know of to be in private hands. All other complete, decorated mirrors are in museums, both local and national. Mirrors are outstanding examples of Celtic art that I know school parties focus on during museum visits when they learn about the later Iron Age and early Roman periods in the national curriculum.

In summary, the Didcot mirror is highly unusual on two counts: its decoration and the fact it was found in Oxfordshire (see above). The Didcot mirror is therefore of outstanding significance for our understanding of the later Iron Age in Britain, in terms of understanding social change and the development of decorative styles.
References

Appendix A. Complete decorated mirrors
Aston, Hertfordshire
Balmaclellan, Dumfries and Galloway
Birdlip, Gloucestershire
Bromham, Bedfordshire
Bryher, Isles of Scilly
Chesil, Dorset
Chilham Castle, Kent
Desborough, Northamptonshire
Didcot, Oxfordshire
Dorton, Buckinghamshire
Great Chesterford, Essex
Holcombe, Devon
Latchmere Green, Hampshire
Mayer – no recorded findspot
Old Warden I, Bedfordshire
Pegsdon, Bedfordshire
Portesham, Dorset
St. Keverne, Cornwall