

A WANDERING SOLDIER'S GRAVE IN CORINTH

(PLATES 110–113)

DURING its long history Corinth was an irresistible magnet for invaders; extensive periods of peace and stability were rare, for the city's obvious advantages were attractions too profitable to resist.

One of the most turbulent periods was that which coincided with the decline of the Roman empire, when northern tribes, driven from their homes by tribes from still farther north, descended upon Corinth, destroying much of the city. There had been attacks and looting in earlier times, but the late sixth and early seventh centuries provided the final stroke, with the result that revival under Byzantine rule came only much later. The events of this period have been the subject of discussion and controversy for a good many years. R. L. Scranton's volume on the mediaeval architecture¹ tells some of the story but not all of it; it is unlikely that we shall ever know all the facts definitely.

Here we can offer only a small and baffling addition to the evidence of this troubled age—the burial of a soldier, excavated in 1938 but published only now, for the simple reason that thirty-five years of research have resulted in comparatively little understanding of the curious assemblage of objects which the grave contained.² Eventually all finds must be published, whether well understood or not, and the opportunity to offer this slight contribution in honor of the archaeologist who taught so many of us at Corinth seems an appropriate occasion.

Before describing the excavation of the grave and its contents, it is well to recall the background of the problem with which it is connected. An article published in 1937, describing a number of objects from graves which had been inserted in post-Roman times into a tower of the Acrocorinth fortifications, as well as similar objects from the lower city, was the first attempt, as far as I know, to discuss Corinthian finds

¹ Robert L. Scranton, *Corinth*, XVI, *Mediaeval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth*, Princeton, 1957, pp. 29 ff.

² Throughout these years the burial has been discussed, personally and in correspondence, with many individuals, and it would be futile to attempt to list them, as some would surely be inadvertently omitted. Specific indebtedness will be mentioned in the relevant places. In general, however, I wish to thank the successive directors of the American School of Classical Studies (1938–74) for permission to publish the grave, and for their great patience as well. The present director of the Corinth Excavations, Charles K. Williams, has been most encouraging and helpful; I am greatly indebted to him. The drawings of Figures 1 and 5 were made shortly after the grave was excavated, by the late G. V. Peschke. Drawings showing the details of the sword's construction were recently made by Mr. Jörg Schmeisser. The photographs are by various individuals whom I cannot identify with certainty.

of this period.³ Material of the same period was later found in tombs in the former Roman forum, published in the volume of *Minor Objects*, though not as grave groups, since the format did not permit this arrangement.⁴ All the so-called minor finds discovered until the summer of 1938 were included in that volume, but in November of that year a chance find revealed a most unusual burial.

In the colonnade of the South Stoa, about six meters north of Shop XXXI, a rectangular tomb, with walls and cover composed of marble slabs obviously taken from the Roman pavement, was discovered.⁵ In the earth above the grave was found

³ G. R. Davidson, "The Avar Invasion of Corinth," *Hesperia*, VI, 1937, pp. 227-239, with a "Supplementary Note" by Tibor Horváth, *op. cit.*, pp. 239-240. The ascription of these finds to the Avars was believed by many, eventually including the author, to be incorrect, but the scholars who published their reasons for thinking so do not all have the same basis for their arguments. Opinions concerning the matter are so numerous and based on such diverse sources that it is next to impossible to assemble all the published material and to discover who the invading tribes actually were. To summarize briefly some of the publications: Hans Zeiss, "Avarenfunde in Korinth?," *Serta Hoffleriana*, Zagreb, 1940, pp. 95-99) asserted that the Corinth finds were insufficient evidence for an Avar invasion and, moreover, claimed that the objects described in the *Hesperia* article were derived from Byzantine prototypes. This view is also held by others, notably Prof. Joachim Werner ("Byzantinische Gürtelschnallen des 6. und 7. Jahrhunderts aus der Sammlung Diergardt," *Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*, I, 1955, pp. 36-48, and other publications), while still other scholars disagree with this theory. I myself find it impossible to accept, in view of the enormous quantity of buckles and weapons of these types which have been found in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea areas, and the relatively small number found in Greece. The literary source quoted in the *Hesperia* article was dismissed as unreliable by Prof. Kenneth Setton ("The Bulgars in the Balkans and the Occupation of Corinth in the Seventh Century," *Speculum*, XXV, 1950, pp. 502-543) who quoted a huge number of sources relative to the whole subject. He attempted to prove that the buckles found at Corinth were those of Bulgars. Prof. Peter Charanis attacked Setton's theory ("On the Capture of Corinth by the Onogurs and its Recapture by the Byzantines," *Speculum*, XXVII, 1952, pp. 343-350), defending the literary sources which Setton had denigrated, while the latter wrote a refutation of Charanis' article in the same issue of *Speculum* ("The Emperor Constans II and the Capture of Corinth by the Onogur Bulgars," pp. 351-362). Setton's theory that the buckles are "Bulgaric" seems to me neither to be proved nor disproved. (A note in *Corinth*, XII, pp. 5-6, in which I discussed Setton's theory and argued against it has been largely unnoticed by subsequent writers.) D. I. Pallas later asserted ("Αἱ 'βαρβαρικαὶ' πόρπαι τῆς Κορίνθου," *Ἑλληνικά, Παράρτημα* No. 7, 1954, pp. 340-396) that the buckles in question, and others of different types, are Byzantine, of the twelfth century. This is impossible and completely contrary to the chronological evidence. The question of what tribes invaded Corinth at exactly what time, and how long they stayed there, has never been generally agreed upon. For the present it seems best to omit mention of literary sources and to describe only artifacts, with parallels insofar as they are available.

⁴ Gladys R. Davidson, *Corinth*, XII, *The Minor Objects*, Princeton, 1952. The objects found in the graves are treated under categories of "buckles," "weapons," etc. Werner's criticism (*Byz. Zeitschrift*, XLIX, 1956, pp. 141-142) of the failure to conduct a stratified excavation at Corinth, with exact dates arrived at by this means, is only partially justifiable, as Corinth's stratification, especially in the later periods, when each succeeding occupant dug pits through earlier structures, makes dating by ideal methods next to impossible. It is true, however, that a publication of the post-Roman and Byzantine burials as grave groups might solve problems which are still highly controversial.

⁵ Corinth notebook 183, November 1938, p. 85.

a bronze coin of Manuel I (1143-1180), obviously without significance for the date of the grave below. The tomb was oriented east-west; one long slab formed the north side and two shorter ones the south, with smaller slabs at east and west ends. The cover was composed of similar slabs (Pl. 110, a) and, as the photograph shows, it had been somewhat damaged, so that earth had sifted in and filled the grave. The interior measurements of the tomb were: length *ca.* 1.82 m.; width 0.60-0.69 m. The depth was *ca.* 0.55 m. to the floor, which was made of packed mud and smoothed against the marble slabs, thus forming rounded corners. The skeleton lay on its back with the head to the west; the bones were in poor condition, especially the skull, which was too badly smashed for reconstruction (Pl. 110, b).⁶ The skeleton fitted the length of the tomb exactly; we can assume that the man was about 1.80 m. in height.

The objects which were immediately visible once the earth had been cleared from above the skeleton (Pl. 110, b) are: a long sword lying along the south side of the grave, beside the skeleton, a clay jar, half fallen over, at the side of the right ankle bone, some object grasped in the right hand, and a buckle just beside the lowest vertebra, which can be discerned with some difficulty. All these objects, as well as others not visible in this photograph, are described below.

1. Clay jar (C-38-546). Pl. 110, c.

H. 0.12 m.; diam. rim 0.087 m.; diam. base 0.075 m.

Thickness at rim *ca.* 0.007; the walls thicken toward the bottom.

Handmade, of coarse dark clay with large stone particles (limestone, flint and others) embedded in the fabric. The color is dull black at the top, shading irregularly toward dull reddish brown on the lower sides and bottom. The body is cracked in many places, apparently during firing, or possibly from later burning; otherwise it is intact. The rim is rounded off in irregular fashion and slightly chipped. The bottom is flat except for an irregular indentation in the center. The flat portion is full of small pits and scratches, as if the pot had been set on a pebbly surface before firing. The black surface of the bottom looks as though the jar had been set on coals, perhaps to heat the contents, or possibly this was the result of firing.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of jars similar

to this have been found in Hungary and adjacent areas. The oldest source, J. Hampel, *Alterthümer des frühen Mittelalters in Ungarn*, II, Braunschweig, 1905, p. 133, pl. 109, shows such jars from the cemetery of Nemesvölgy, made of black clay burned in an open fire. He says (*op. cit.*, I, p. 141) that they are handmade, badly fired, that the date is uncertain and no development can be traced, but that they probably do not date before the sixth century after Christ. In *op. cit.*, II, p. 133, Hampel mentions another similar jar found at the feet of a skeleton. Near the jar or in it were found bones of fowls; in one was the lower jaw of a dog. Later finds have multiplied this kind of vessel a thousandfold. Tibor Horváth, in "Die Avarischen Gräberfelder von Üllő und Kiskőrös," *Archaeologia Hungarica*, XIX, 1935, shows dozens of these on pls. 20, 39, 40 and 42. They also appear in Yugoslavia: see Zdenko Vinski, "Gibt es frühslawische Keramik aus der Zeit der südslawischen Landnahme?,"

⁶ The physical anthropologist Dr. J. Lawrence Angel, who happened to be at Corinth at the time, determined that the deceased was male, and made an excellent reconstruction of one hand of the skeleton (Pl. 113, c), but he could not restore or measure the skull.

Archaeologia Jugoslavica, I, 1954, pp. 71-74 and fig. B. The jar, shown both in photo and profile, seems very like ours. The provenience is Bakar; the jar is said to be in the Zagreb Museum. Although smaller than ours (H. 0.085 m.), the description of the clay and the general appearance are very similar. Late sixth or early seventh century is the date assigned, as it is by others.

In all of Greece, however, the only jar of this kind was the one found at Corinth, until, during the construction of a new museum at Olympia a dozen or so years ago, a grave was uncovered which contained four jars of the same kind. In them Dr. N. Yalouris, the excavator, remarks (*Ἀρχ. Δελτ.*, XVII, 1961/2, *Χρονικά*, p. 107 and pl. 117) that there were ashes of the deceased, and he further informed me verbally, in 1974, that each of the four jars contained a cremation burial and that each jar stood in the midst of a burned area. Objects found with the burials were iron knives and rings, an iron light-striker with a piece of flint, small glass counters and an iron hook. Yalouris assumed these objects to be Slavic and assigned a date similar to that of the Corinth burial. The Olympia jars must of course be much larger than ours, and the method of burial is obviously quite different; nevertheless the shape and fabric of the jars are certainly related to the Corinth vessel.

2. Bronze buckle (MF 8382). Pl. 110, e.
L. 0.062 m.

The buckle is cast in one piece, the tongue hammered separately. In comparison with other buckles of the same period, it is not particularly well made. The buckle proper is oval, with a depression for the tongue to rest in. The buckle-plate has at the top a number of horizontal ridges, below these two kidney-shaped holes, another series of ridges below these, and two circular holes near the bottom, with a small triangular hole below in the center (one side of this broken). At the lower end is a deep circular groove. From the back of the

buckle protrude two pierced horizontal projections for attachment to the belt.

Although the buckle does not strike one as unusual for the period, only one exact parallel has been noted thus far. This is a bronze buckle found in the German excavations at Pergamon (Pl. 110, d); I owe knowledge of it to Prof. Joachim Werner. Dr. Schmaltz of the German Institute in Athens kindly furnished new photographs, and Dr. W. Radt of the German Institute in Istanbul gave permission to publish it here. The connection with Pergamon is hard to account for, and this is not the only Pergamene parallel (cf. the sword hilt described below). The buckle was not found in a grave, but on the Demeter Terrace (inv. no. 304, 1909).

3. Iron knife (MF 8462). Pl. 111, a.
L. 0.155 m., L. of blade 0.105 m., L. of haft 0.045 m.

Much corroded, with pointed end and narrow haft for insertion into a handle. The knife was found lying under the left hand of the skeleton, but it did not seem to have been held in the hand. It may have been attached to a sheath suspended from the belt.

Similar knives have been found in other graves at Corinth (see *Corinth*, XII, nos. 1567-1573. All except no. 1570 were found in seventh-century or later contexts. No. 1570 came from a fourth-century context.). The type obviously continued for a long time. In Hungary similar knives have been found in many graves, e.g. T. Horváth, *op. cit.* in *Archaeologia Hungarica*, XIX, 1935, pl. XII, no. 18 and p. 28 (Grave 183)—man's grave. The ornaments and buckles in this grave are unlike ours.

4. Iron pin (MF 8464). Pl. 111, b.
P.L. of rod 0.047 m.

Rod rather corroded and apparently broken off at both ends. Attached to it was a rough piece of amber (Max. dim. 0.022 m.). Whether these two objects belong together is questionable. They lay next to the knife, below the left hand. The purpose is unknown, and apparently

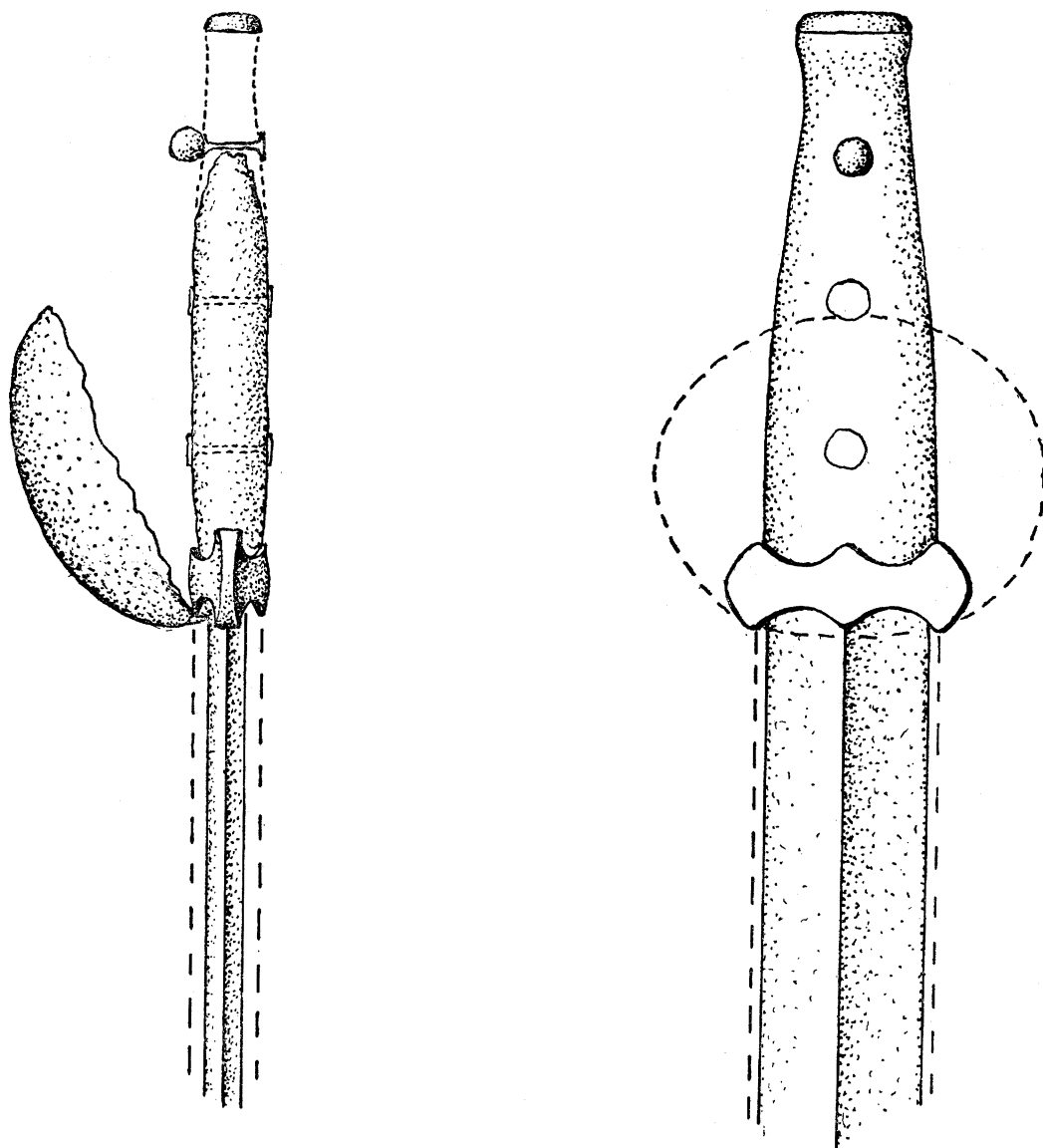


FIG. 1. Drawing of Sword Hilt and Part of Blade (Restored).

two such objects in conjunction have not been noted in other graves.

5. Iron light-striker and flint (MF 8463).

Pl. 111, c.

P.L. of iron 0.061 m.

The iron is badly corroded and both ends are broken off. Attached to it is a piece of black flint (L. 0.032 m.), rather shapeless, but the combination makes it obvious that this was once the usual type of light-striker, as shown on Plate 111, d. This example was found at Tiszabura, Hungary, and is published in *Archaeologiai Értesítő*, 1934, p. 142, fig. 103 (photograph courtesy of Dr. Tibor Horváth). Although of a later period (1050-1100), it is probably what the badly corroded Corinth object once looked like. As mentioned above, a similar light-striker was also found at Olympia ('*Αρχ. Δελτ.*, XVII, 1961/2, *Χρονικά*, pl. 117, no. 11). The light-striker at Corinth lay in the vicinity of the waist, near the fragment with amber attached.

After the bones had been removed, numerous bits of iron sheathing were found under them in the region of the hips and slightly above them (Pl. 111, f). These were first thought to be the trimming of a baldric, but since they did not extend as far as the shoulders it seems more likely that they were from the trimming of a leather cuirass.

6. Iron Sword (MF 8461).

L. 0.91 m., P.L. of hilt 0.105 m.

The two-edged sword lay along the right side of the skeleton (Pl. 111, g). Also to be seen is the impression of a knuckle-guard, consisting of a lump of earth which had formed inside the guard, and traces of one edge of the latter visible on the wall of the tomb (Pl. 111, e). It is probable, since nothing but the lump of earth is preserved, that the guard was not of metal, but more likely of leather. When found, the sword, within its scabbard, was encrusted with earth and the iron had oxidized to a great extent (Pl. 112, a, b). Figure 1, a schematic drawing, was made shortly after the grave was found, when many details could

not yet be seen. The restored drawing does show, however, the essential features—the double-edged blade (with the central ridge rather too sharply indicated: see Figure 2), the parts of the hilt, and the earth mold of the knuckle-guard. The hilt consists of a bronze cross-guard (L. 0.062 m., Th. 0.021 m.), and above it the grip, the central part of which, as was later discovered, is of iron, an extension of the blade. Around the iron tang, which is 0.006 m. thick just above the cross-guard and tapers to 0.001 m. at the preserved top, was added a handle, probably of wood (now permeated with iron oxide). The whole was fastened together by two bronze rivets (D. 0.009 m.) which have their heads flush with the surface on one side, and on the other side end in an iron strip which runs the length of the grip. Above the two rivets was a bronze pin or nail (L. 0.029 m.) with a heavy spherical head pierced by a small hole, and its circular stem projecting through the grip (not preserved at this point). At the top of the grip is an oval bone button (L. 0.032 m., Th. 0.005 m.) pierced by two holes (D. 0.004 m.) somewhat unevenly placed, and with a sign engraved on the beveled top (Fig. 3). The bottom is flat. Although the exact length of the grip is uncertain, the restoration in Figure 1 seems to offer a plausible length. Exactly how the hilt was formed cannot be determined without the use of X-rays or other mechanical equipment, which has not been available to us. It is possible that the handle was made by the "Sandwich" method (as shown in R. Ewart Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry*, New York, 1965, p. 129, fig. 109); this involves fitting together two curved lengths of wood or other material around the tang and then fastening them by binding or some other method. The sword of which Oakeshott shows a diagram is much later in date, but at all periods, he observes (*op. cit.*, p. 129), "The basic ironwork of a sword needed certain perishable fittings to make it into a serviceable weapon."

The scabbard is also preserved to a certain extent. It appears to have been made of wood

encased in cloth and leather. (The wood was identified by Mr. B. Francis Kukachka of the Forest Products Laboratory, United States Department of Agriculture, as willow.) Mr. Kukachka observed that this fact would be of little help "because the willow group occurs throughout the northern hemisphere, and specific identification which might give some clue

S. Katzev. After further study by Charles Williams and Jörg Schmeisser, it proved possible for the latter to make drawings (Fig. 4) showing the actual construction of the hilt. It was found that a thin strip of bronze was applied around the sword at the point of transition between blade and tang; then the cast bronze cross-guard was slipped down over

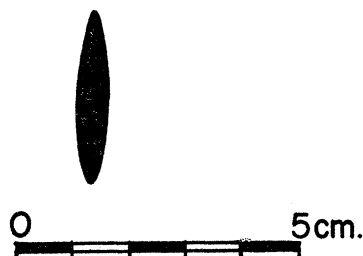


FIG. 2. Cross-Section through Lower Part of Sword Blade.

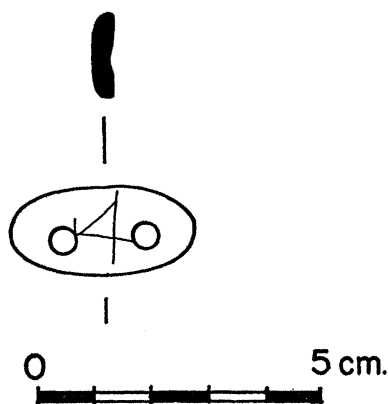


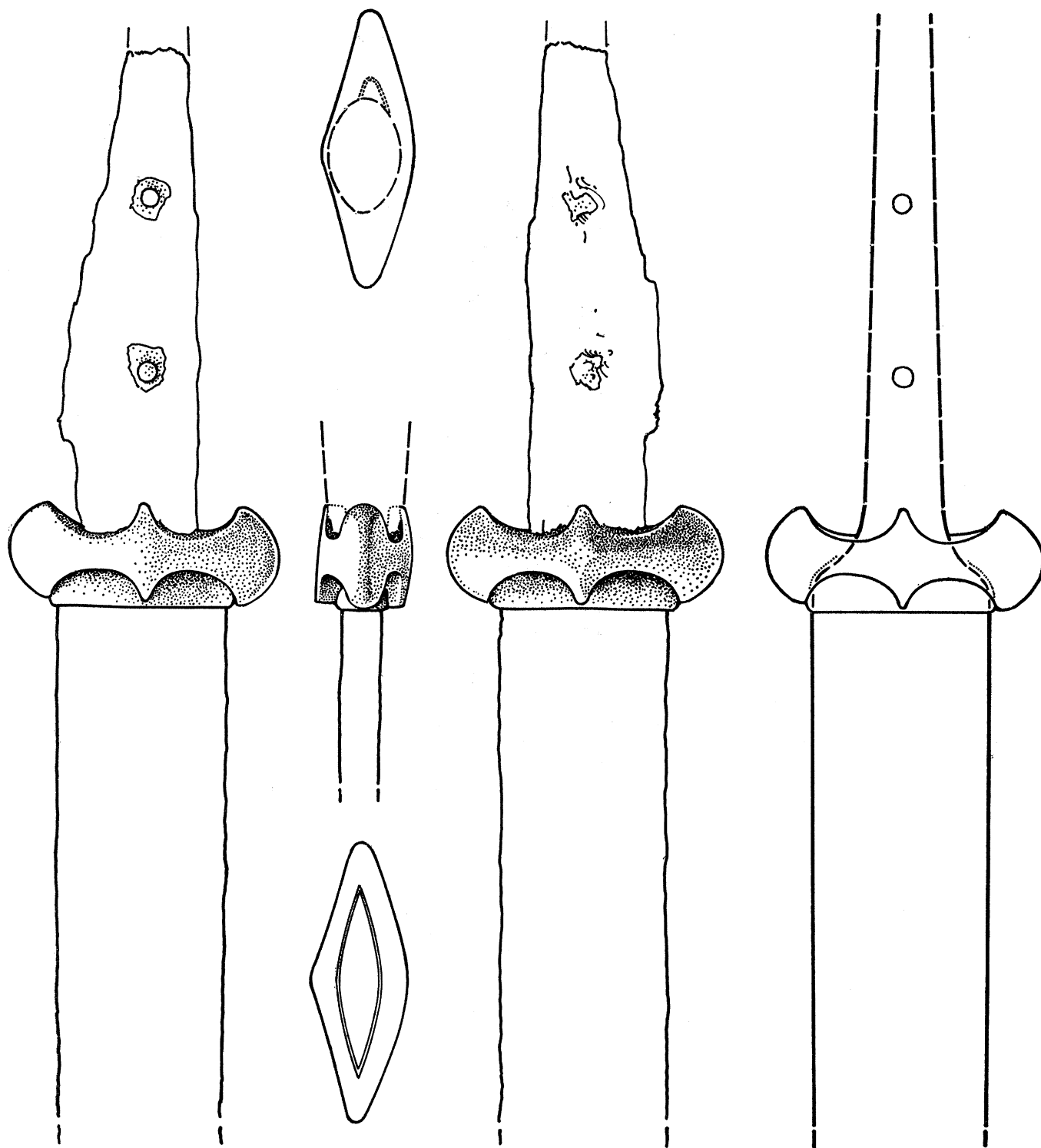
FIG. 3. Button at Top of Hilt, Showing Incised Sign.

as to the region of origin is not possible" (letter of November 21, 1960).

After preliminary study the sword was sent to Nauplion, where the restorer Mr. Ch. Deila-kis removed the earth which still remained on it and consolidated its various elements (Pl. 112, c, d, e). He observed that he thought the tang and the blade were a single piece of iron, but there was no definite confirmation of this until recently when an investigation into the construction of the sword was undertaken by Mr. C. K. Williams, Miss S. Bouzaki, technician at the Corinth Excavations, and Mrs.

the tang and fitted into place over the bronze strip. After that the revetment was riveted into place to form the grip. In Figure 4 are shown, left to right: one side of the sword hilt (as in Pl. 112, e); side view with sections of grip above, blade below; other side of sword hilt (as in Pl. 112, d); schematic drawing showing construction of hilt.

Some years ago Professor Werner called my attention to two unpublished bronze cross-guards similar to ours, which were found at Pergamon (Pl. 112, f, g, h). Neither has a significant provenience nor does any other part



0 5 10 cm
J. S. 1974

FIG. 4. Hilt of Sword Showing Junction with Blade.

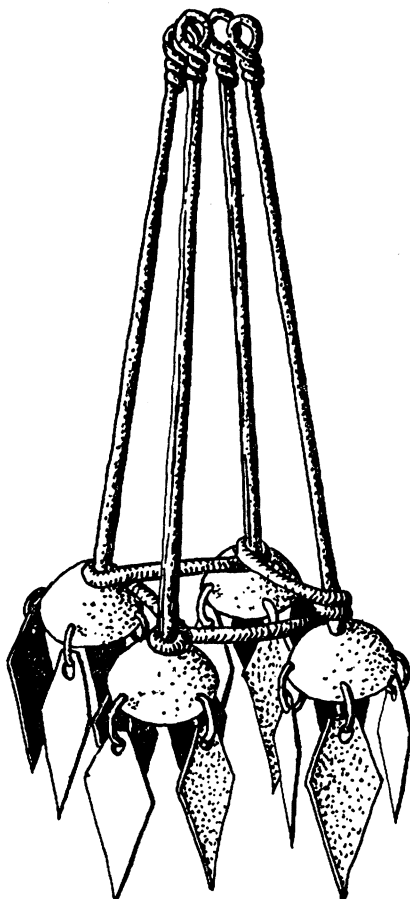


FIG. 5. Silver and Bronze Trinket, Restored Drawing (Actual Size).

of either sword remain (they are published here by courtesy of Dr. Radt from photographs supplied by Dr. Schmaltz). More recently Professor Werner noted a sword from an inhumation grave at Aradac (Banat) in northeastern Yugoslavia (Šandor Nad, *La nécropole de Měcka*, in *Inventaria Archaeologica, Jugoslavia*, Fascicule 17, Belgrade, 1973, Y 164, Tomb no. 85) which appears to be identical with ours, except that the grip is missing. The grave contained, beside the male skeleton lying on its back, a corroded iron light-striker and an iron knife like those in the Corinth grave, but the other objects are different, and appear to show Avar traits. The grave is dated to the first half of the sixth century. Another iron

sword, slightly longer, was found in Hungary: A. Marosi and N. Fettich, *Trouvailles Avars de Dunapentele* (*Archaeologia Hungarica*, XVIII, Budapest, 1963, pp. 10-11 and pl. 1), and though lacking part of the grip, it has a hilt exactly like that of the Corinth weapon, with a strip (in this case of gold) enfolding the sword just below and underneath the cross-guard. Information on this burial is lacking since it was excavated many years earlier and the finds became dispersed. Neither of these swords shows any trace of a knuckle-guard, and although the Hungarian example is called a "saber," implying use by a cavalry soldier, it seems clear that the sword must have belonged to a foot-soldier, since it is double-

bladed and perfectly straight. Swords such as these are so long and heavy that they must be assumed to have been carried by a sling over the shoulder. Naturally, no traces of these remain.

7. Silver and bronze trinket (MF 8465).

Pl. 113.

Total L. *ca.* 0.11 m.

This trinket or pendant was clasped tightly in the dead man's right hand (Pl. 113, a). That fact was obvious even before the crumpled ornament was removed, since the finger bones were stained green from contact with the bronze. Later the bones of the hand were restored by Dr. Angel to their original position (Pl. 113, c) and the object, which had been greatly distorted and damaged (Pl. 113, b), was reconstructed

in a drawing (Fig. 5). It was found to consist of four bronze rods with strips of silver wound around each of them, attached to hollow hemispherical appendages, with silver-covered bronze wire wrapped around the vertical rods to keep them separated. From each hemisphere four leaf-shaped plaques depend, pierced at their uppermost points and attached by rings. Since corrosion both of silver and bronze has spread throughout, it is difficult to tell what parts are of which metal. The suspension loops at the top are the ends of the vertical rods, drawn out thinner. These may be entirely of bronze, but the loops wound around the rods and joining above the hemispheres are covered with silver. The hemispheres may be of bronze, but the sixteen thin leaf-shaped plaques are certainly of silver.

Despite all efforts to discover the meaning of this trinket, we know nothing more about it than when it was excavated many years ago. No parallel appears to have been published, nor is this kind of object known to any of the scholars consulted. It has been suggested that it might have been supposed to have magical or ritual significance, but actually there is no evidence to support this conjecture. Only one thing is certain: besides the soldier's clothing, of which nothing remains but a belt buckle, this was the one object which he himself had in his possession before he was laid in the grave. We may assume that the other objects—the sword, light-striker, etc.,—were also his, but we have no proof. We can tell that he was a foot-soldier, as he both lacked the proper kind of weapon for a rider and had no spurs or stirrups. If there was some form of protection for his head, it was probably of leather and hence no longer exists. The sword is uncharacteristic of the Slavic invaders of Greece, while the jar at the foot of the grave is typical for these tribes. The date, late sixth or early seventh century, is fairly certain, since the Roman pavement had not yet been built over, and the paving stones provided the material for making the tomb. It should be remembered that the tomb was carefully constructed, that the deceased was laid out decorously, and that nothing in the assemblage bespeaks haste or carelessness. The destruction of the skull may have been the result of a paving stone having been dropped on it during burial, but this accident does not affect the general impression. Whoever this wandering soldier may have been—and one must assume that he had come from elsewhere, since his equipment is foreign to Corinth—he must have been buried by friends, with honor, and allowed to keep in his hand the bauble which he obviously treasured.

GLADYS DAVIDSON WEINBERG



a. Grave before slabs were removed



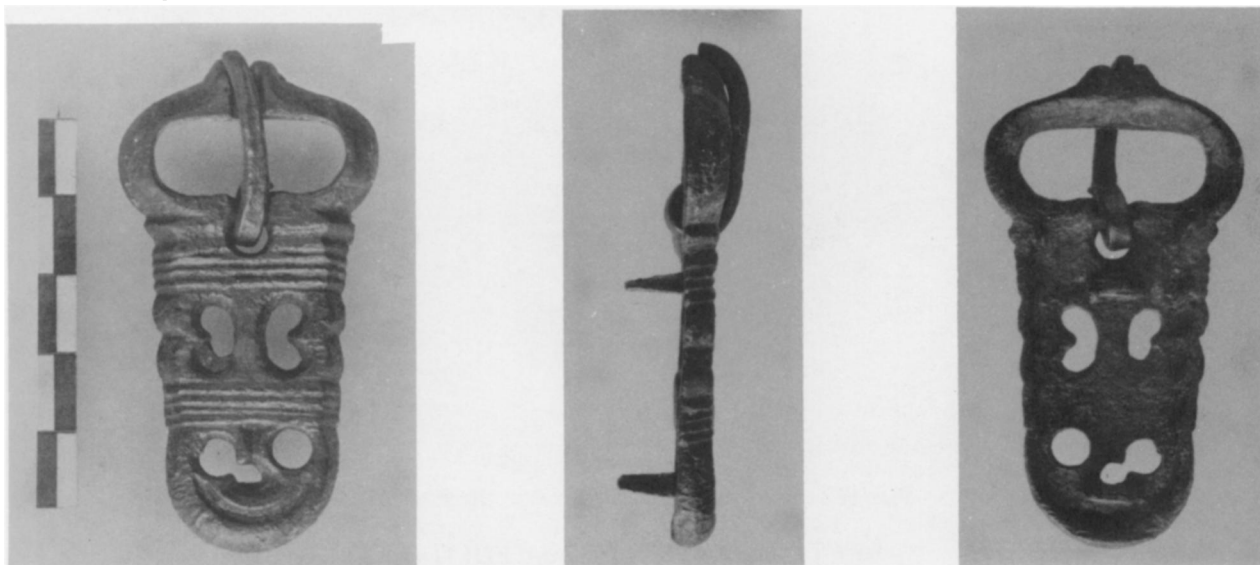
b. Grave opened and cleared



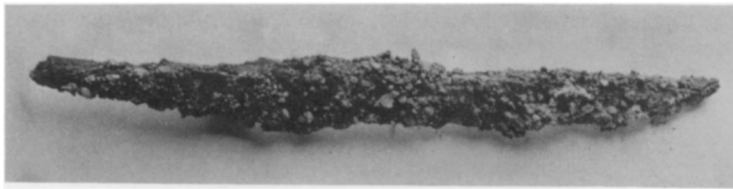
c. Clay jar found in grave



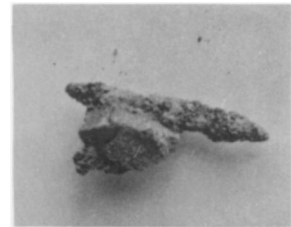
d. Buckle found at Pergamon



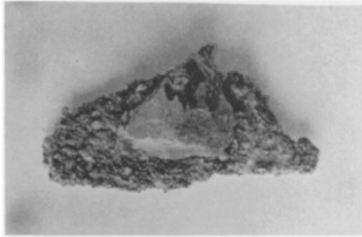
e. The buckle, three views: front, side, and back



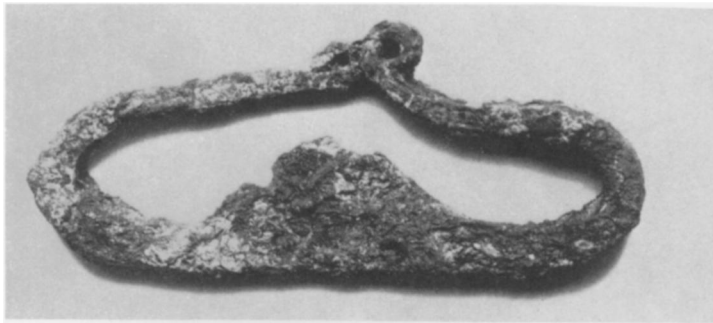
a. Iron knife



b. Iron pin with piece of amber



c. Iron light-striker and flint



d. Complete light-striker from Hungary



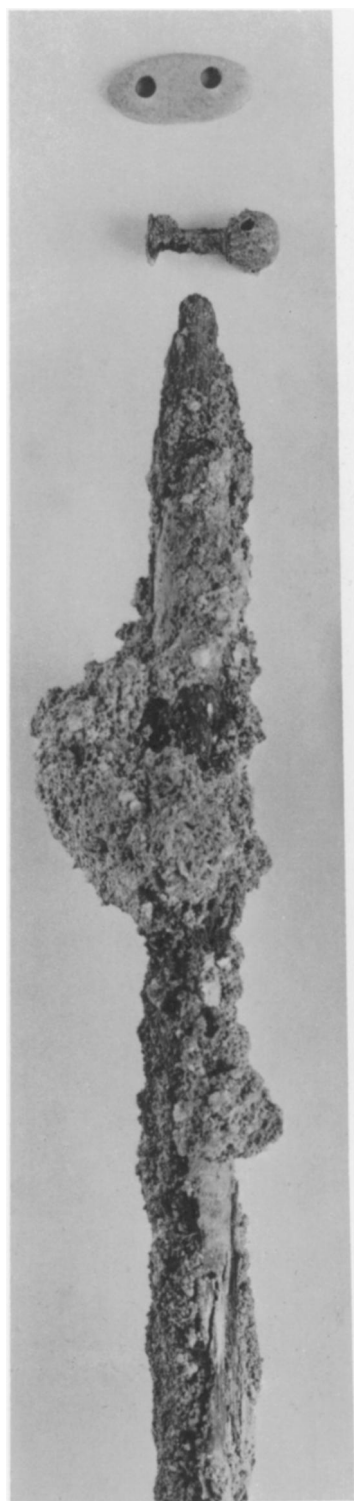
e. Detail showing knuckle-guard



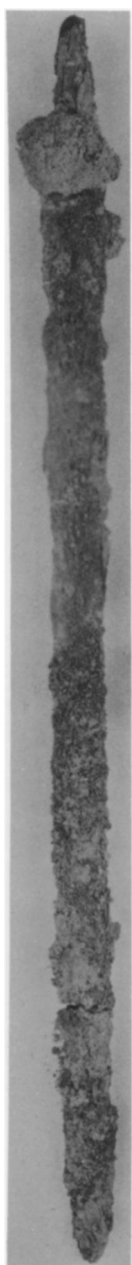
f. Iron remnants beneath vertebrae



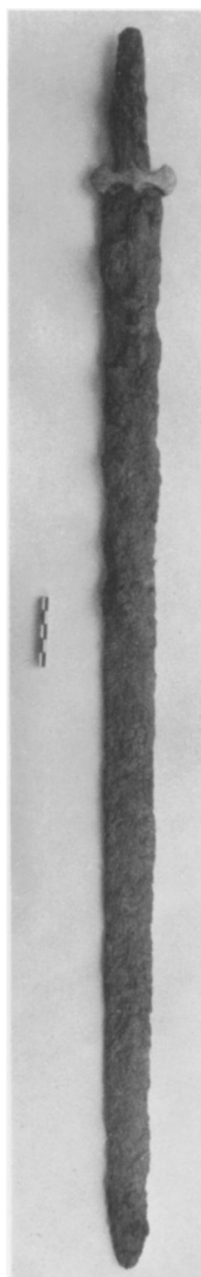
g. Detail of sword and right side of skeleton



a. Detail of sword and knuckle-guard as found



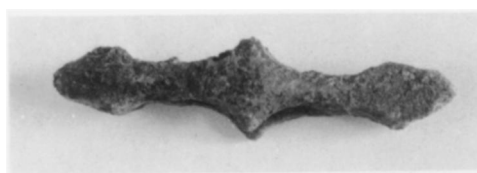
b. Sword, after excavation



c. Sword, after cleaning



d. Detail of sword with button and knob



f. Sword cross-guard from Pergamon



g. Sword cross-guard from Pergamon



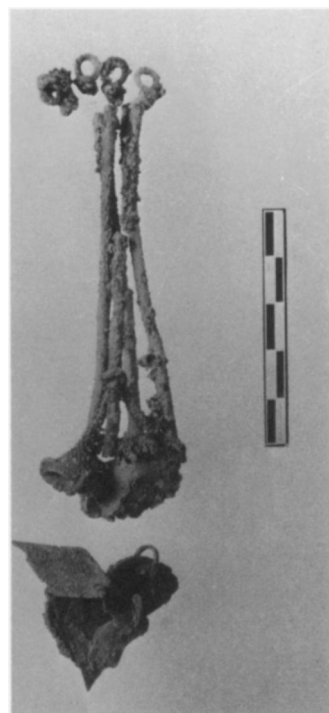
h. View from above of cross-guard at left



e. Reverse of sword-detail



a. Trinket as found in deceased's right hand



b. Silver and bronze trinket as found



c. Hand restored with bones in original position holding trinket