

# Fourth Century Roman Military Knives

By Stephen Atkinson

To follow up from the Seax debate which was conducted via the e-group, I have put together two short papers the first details a number of knives from northern Europe within the borders of the empire. The second paper will concentrate on the finds from the Germanic world and chart their development into the Seax of the Merovingian and Viking age.

Lankhills is the only large late Roman cemetery to be excavated in Britain; the site was in use as a cemetery for almost the entirety of the fourth century. 451 graves were excavated in the course of five years between 1967 and 1972.

Interestingly A total of seven knives of a very characteristic type were excavated from the cemetery in the majority of examples they were found alongside supposed military items such as belts and crossbow brooches.

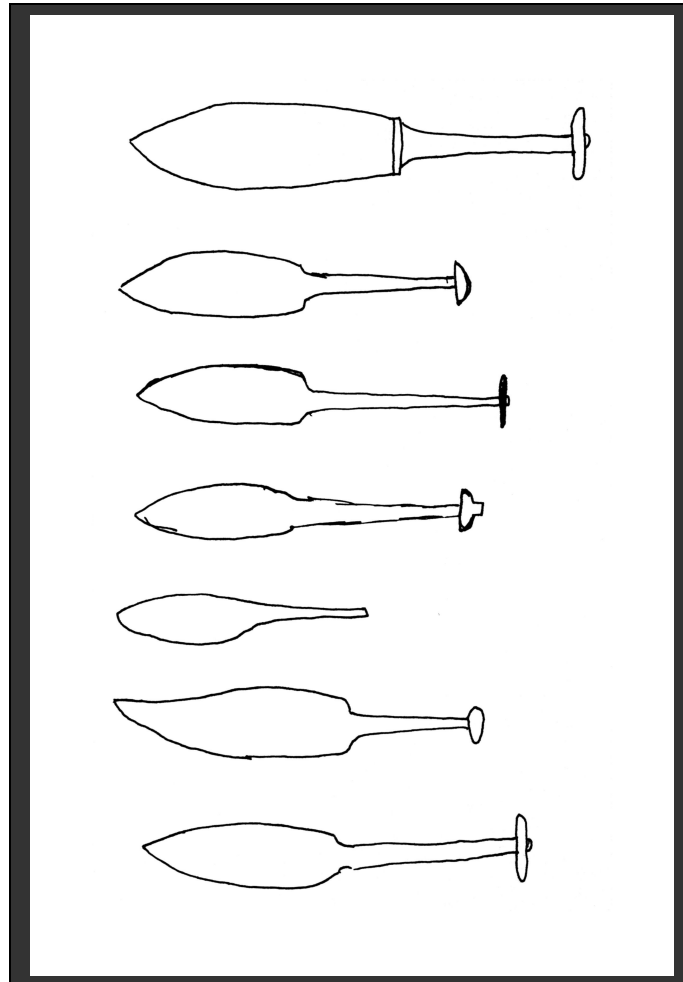
The Lankhills examples (see fig 1.) associated finds and dates.

1. Grave 37 dated 350-370 associated finds: Dolphin buckle, strap end.
2. Grave 55 dated 350-370; associated finds: whetstone.
3. Grave 81 dated 350-370 associated finds: crossbow brooch, buckle and strap end silver plate.
4. Grave 106 dated 350-370/90 associated finds: crossbow brooch, 2 buckles and 2 strap ends.
5. Grave 283 dated 390-410 associated finds: whetstone, two buckles, possible bone handle.
6. Grave 443 dated 350-370 associated finds: Dolphin buckle, four bronze rings.
7. Grave 418 dated 370-410 no other associated finds.<sup>1</sup>

	Blade Length (mm)	Blade width (mm)
<b>G 37</b>	140	50
<b>G55</b>	90	30
<b>G81</b>	90	32
<b>G106</b>	85	30
<b>G283</b>	70	30
<b>G418</b>	120	32
<b>G443</b>	110	36

<sup>1</sup> Clarke, G. (et.al.) **The Roman cemetery at Lankhills**. Oxford :Clarendon Press, 1979. p.

The knives from Lankhills all have blades which can be described as flame or leaf shaped, both sides of the blade are curved and the tang is attached centrally. The blades of the Lankhills sample range from 70mm – 140mm in length, and 30mm-50mm in width. Providing us with an average size blade 10.7cm of long by 3.4cm wide



**Figure 1. Suggested reconstruction of Lankhills blade shapes (from top down grave 37, 55, and 81,106,283,418).**

Parallel continental examples of this type of knife include finds from North East France and the Rhineland they are also found in Southern Bavaria, Austria and Hungary. Possible examples are known from another six British finds. The chronological distribution appears to be confined to the fourth century, based on their non appearance in Anglo Saxon and Continental fifth century sites. <sup>2</sup>

For a direct continental comparison the Late Roman cemetery at Oudenberg (which has a very similar of chronology to Lankhills) dated 340-405 provides similar material<sup>3</sup>. Oudenberg contained 17 military knives the majority associated with other supposed military equipment (Buckles and Crossbow brooches). It is

<sup>2</sup> Clarke, G. (et.al.) **The Roman cemetery at Lankhills**. Oxford :Clarendon Press, 1979. p 250

worth noting that Grave 3 which contained a knife of this type also contained the notable chip carved belt set with the large square buckle ( Which Raymond produces a replica of and a few of us wear).

Oudenburg examples (see fig 2.) associated finds.

Grave 1 associated finds buckle, crossbow brooch, and pottery.

Grave 3 associated finds chip carved belt buckle strap end, stiffeners and hanger, pottery.

Grave 14 associated finds buckle, crossbow brooch, and antler comb.

Grave 29 associated finds buckle and crossbow brooch.

Grave 34 associated finds, crossbow brooch, and pottery.

Grave 53 no associated finds.

Grave 59 associated finds buckle and crossbow brooch.

Grave 72 associated finds buckle, crossbow brooch, and pottery.

Grave 68 associated finds buckle.

Grave 87 associated finds pottery.

Grave 104 associated finds belt buckle strap end, stiffeners and hanger, pottery.

Grave 111 associated finds buckle small shears and crossbow brooch.

Grave 122 associated finds buckle small shears and axe

Grave 129 associated finds buckle, strap end, stiffeners, small shears and spear.

Grave 162 glass vessel.

Grave 172 associated finds buckle and crossbow brooch.

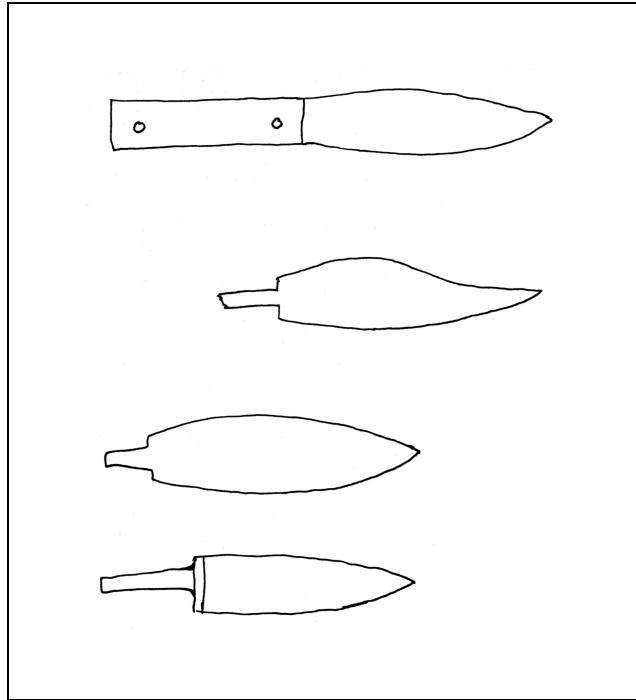
Grave 209 no associated finds.

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<sup>3</sup> Merterns J. Oudenburg and the northern sector of the continental Litus Saxonicum. In The Saxon shore edited by Johnston. D. E. London :Council for British Archaeology. 1977.

	<b>Blade Length (mm)</b>	<b>Blade width (mm)</b>
<b>Grave 1</b>	111	30
<b>Grave 3</b>	120	33
<b>Grave 14</b>	147	36
<b>Grave 29</b>	117	24
<b>Grave 34</b>	135	36
<b>Grave 53</b>	93	30
<b>Grave 59</b>	84	36
<b>Grave 72</b>	102	30
<b>Grave 68</b>	84	33
<b>Grave 87</b>	144	33
<b>Grave 104</b>	120	36
<b>Grave 111</b>	150	42
<b>Grave 122</b>	99	24
<b>Grave 129</b>	162	39
<b>Grave 162</b>	90	36
<b>Grave 172</b>	156	36
<b>Grave 209</b>	126	45

On average the Oudenberg blades tend to be proportionally longer and narrower than the Lankhills examples with an average length of 12cm with a width of 3.4cm.



**Figure 2 Suggested reconstructions of some Oudenburg blade shapes (from top down grave 1, 3, 104, 122).**

## ***Discussion***

I have not had the opportunity to look at examples from Britain let alone the remainder of the empire I will based on the sample provided attempt to put forward a speculative interpretation.

The context which these blades are found in does suggest a military association either by associated grave goods and/or in the case of Oudenburg their proximity to a military site.

Examining the knives as weapons, whilst the blades are not particularly long, they are very wide in proportion to the blade and have a heavy back, it could be expected that a blade of these dimensions would produce a large wound cavity which would cause rapid blood loss, even if it failed to penetrate vital organs (Similar principle to the gladius or pugio).

In common with all supposed 'fighting knives' the actual usage of these weapons must be the subject of some speculation. As the effectiveness of any fighting knife in open combat would be marginal, the use of the weapon as a sidearm would therefore be limited; they could be a last resort weapon, however it is questionable whether blade of this size is not going to have sufficient mass or

profile to penetrate armour. For finishing of wounded opponents, again possible but a spear or sword would be more effective (and cleaner).

A more practical role may be as a personal defence/close protection weapon; carried by soldiers when off duty, or in a situation where the carrying of larger weapons would be impractical or inappropriate; an instrument of violence in a civil rather than military context.

It is of course entirely probable that these weapons were employed in any number of non combat functions, such as butchery, splitting wood and other camp tasks that a large heavy blade is suited for.

Its worth considering that while these graves contain items associated with soldiers (such as belts and crossbow brooches), this should not necessarily conclude that the occupants of the graves are soldiers; it is possible that the occupants could have been retainers of local magnates, civilian officials or even retired soldiers. In the latter case perhaps the knife is a symbolic retirement weapon; think of the old British commissioned officer with his old service revolver, except here he is buried with it.

As these items are excavated from a funereal context it may be that these are items particularly associated with the burial rites of a particular ethnic group rather than social group.

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I appreciate I have only touched the surface of this subject and would be pleased to know how anyone else would interpret these items and discuss the subject further via the e-group. If anyone is interested a replica of any of these knives can be produced.

I will follow up with future article detailing contemporary finds of "Military knives" from the contemporary Germanic world.