

ART ANCIENT



BRONZE AGE SWORD

Circa 800-900 BC

Cast, hammered and incised bronze

Length: 71 cm

PROVENANCE

Recovered from the River Saône, near Lyon [according to a handwritten inscription on the hilt].

Collection of Monsieur F. B. (1950-2009), Normandy, France.

Subsequently French art market 2021 and exported under French Cultural Property Passport 233626.

An exceptionally well-preserved Late Bronze Age Atlantic sword of the Saint-Nazaire type featuring finely incised decoration and an expertly cast leaf-shaped blade. Its provenance and golden patina hint to centuries of burial in a riverbed, where it was likely cast as a dedication to the gods.

The sword with elegant, finely incised decorations, near perfect form and a wonderful, golden patina. Subtly leaf-shaped and tapering to a fine point, with tripartite flanged hilt, with straight horns and seven piercings for rivets to fasten a handle, five of which are still present. Five finely incised lines run from the notched ricasso along and around the raised midrib.



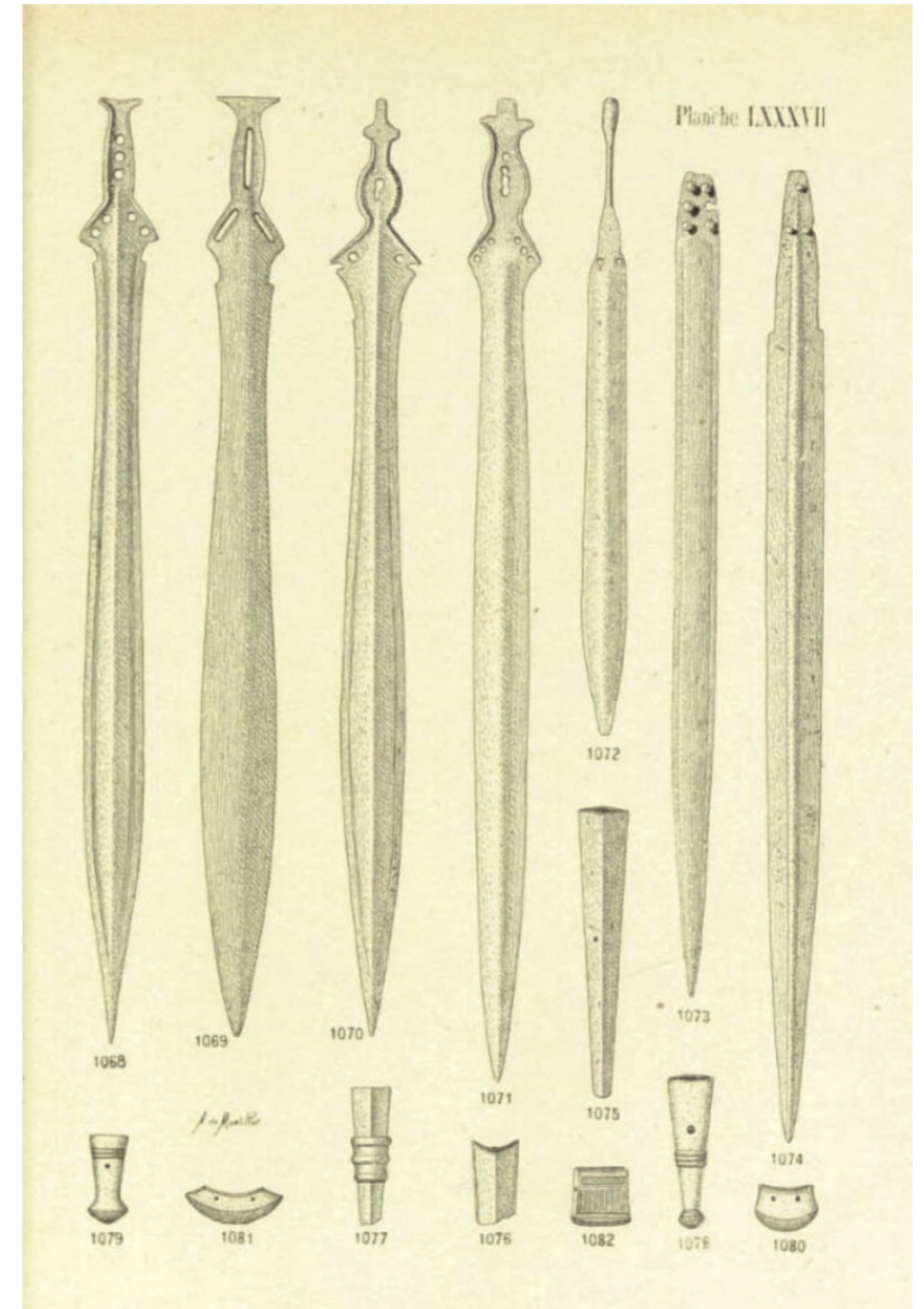


Warfare and Ritual

This sword was most likely recovered from the bed of the River Saône, near Lyon, France, as suggested by the inscription - 'Saône-Près-Lyon' - on the side of the hilt. The recovery of swords from rivers is a strong reminder of their past spiritual significance. The cult of the waters was particularly prominent during the Bronze Age, and it is highly probable that the present sword was deposited as a ritual offering to the river in which it was recovered, millennia later. The River Saône in particular is a very rich ground for the discovery of Bronze Age artefacts, and notably of Late Bronze Age swords. The retrieval of several Atlantic swords from the Saône, such as the present example, illustrates the numerous contacts and exchanges which must have taken place between Atlantic and Continental cultures at the time.

The development of bronzesmithing in Europe coincided with the emergence of a new warrior elite, known to us today from their elaborate burials, and who presided over a network of competing chiefdoms. These masterfully crafted swords served to demonstrate their rank, and illustrate to us that this was a profoundly warlike culture, in which combat ability was highly prized. Indeed, recent studies investigating the use-wear on weapons such as this, seem to suggest that Bronze Age swordsmanship was a carefully studied discipline and that warriors of the period were a dedicated and highly trained class within their contemporary society.

1 Map of France, with the location of the River Saône highlighted.



2 Atlantic bronze sword of the Saint-Nazaire type, Late Bronze Age, plate LXXXVII, Fig. 1068, in Musée préhistorique, Gabriel and Adrien de Mortillet (Paris, 1903).

'The weapons of the bronze age, the beauty of which arrests the attention of the most careless observer... stamps the ancient bronze workers not only as skilled mechanics, but as art workmen.'

Robert Day, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 1895.