

Later Prehistoric Finds Group

Object Datasheet No.6

Iron Age and Roman-era Vehicle Terrets (Western and Central Britain)



Anna Lewis PhD

Terrets, or rein-guides, were used with chariots and other vehicles to prevent the reins becoming tangled. These small rings, usually made of copper-alloy, were manufactured in sets of four or five, and were fixed across the yoke of a pair of ponies: probably tied in place or slotted into sockets. The reins were attached to the bridle bits and fed back through the terrets to the hands of the driver.

The 'D-shaped' terret series is unique to Britain. While plain round iron rings functioned as terrets in the Middle Iron Age, the stylistically-innovative D-shaped series emerged around the third century BC, and developed throughout the Mid-Late Iron Age and into the Roman period. From the mid-first century AD, Continental-influenced forms also became widespread in Britain. The D-shaped series continued to evolve until chariotry fell into decline around the end of the first century AD. Continental-influenced forms, perhaps used with different kinds of vehicle, remained in use for much of the Roman era.

copper-alloy D-shaped terrets are frequently embellished with colourful enamels, and 'triple projections' become common: projecting decorative elements such as wings (transverse or parallel to the ring), platforms or knobs, set in three places around the ring.

Another relatively common form is the 'crescentic' terret. This distinctive type has a flattened, broadened ring, embellished on both faces with enamelled curvilinear designs.

Continental-influenced forms tend to be plainer. The most common varieties are dropped-bar terrets (a plain, round ring above a small attachment loop) and skirted terrets, in which the ring sits upon a curving shelf or skirt, shielding the attachment loop or an iron shank. Plain shanked terrets, with no skirt, are less common, as are 'massive' terrets: these possess a tapering ring, often heavily-set, and a sturdy hollow base concealing a small attachment bar.



Fig.1 Simple D-shaped terret with horizontal attachment bar, collar-form terminals and minimal moulding around the ring. Somerset Heritage Centre, E8. Photograph by Anna Lewis, courtesy of South West Heritage Trust (Museums Service)

Form

In its basic form, the D-shaped terret has a curved ring and a flat attachment bar set between two terminals. The bar can be vertically- or horizontally-set, the terminals collar-form (slanted or upright) or bell-form (with hollowed undersides). In the simplest varieties, the ring is plain or with minimal decorative moulding. Early variants include 'studded' (known only from East Yorkshire), 'ribbed' and 'lipped' terrets, in which the ring often comprises a copper-alloy sheath around an iron core. From the early first century AD,

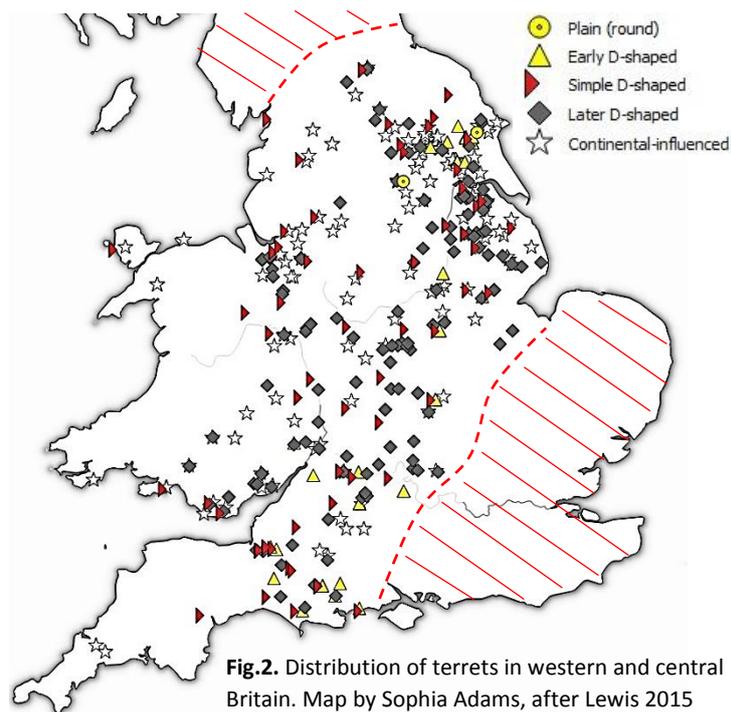


Fig.2. Distribution of terrets in western and central Britain. Map by Sophia Adams, after Lewis 2015

Distribution

This short guide concentrates on western and central Britain, although there is a high concentration of terrets in south-east England. A similar range of terrets is found across wider Britain with some local stylistic trends, particularly for triple-projection varieties.

Distribution patterns generally reflect trends in excavation and metal-detection. However, finds in the study region point broadly to an emphasis on East

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Yorkshire and Wessex for earlier terret forms. Later D-shaped varieties are more widespread, although still scarce in the north-west and far south-west of England, and all but the south-east of Wales. Simple terrets are found across much of England, but only in the far south and north of Wales. Of the later forms, the distribution of dropped-bar terrets is heavily weighted towards northern England, while skirted terrets are found more widely. Massive terrets have a focus in and around North Wales but are nonetheless rare.

Dating

The following dates are based on secure evidence for manufacture or deposition in the study area, where that exists. Less secure evidence points to a longer currency for some types.

Plain round terrets: C5th – mid-C2nd BC

Early D-shaped terrets (studded, ribbed, lipped, lobed): mid-C3rd – C2nd BC

Simple D-shaped terrets: mid-C3rd BC – late C1st AD

Terrets with triple projections: mid-C1st – C2nd AD

Crescentic terrets: likely contemporary with triple-projection forms, but no secure dating evidence exists in the study area

Dropped-bar terrets: mid-late C1st AD

Skirted terrets: mid-C1st – mid-C2nd AD

Massive terrets: a later form, but no secure dating evidence in the study area

Plain shanked terrets: mid-late C1st AD.

References

Foster, J. 1980. *The Iron Age Moulds from Gussage All Saints*. British Museum Occasional Paper 12. London: British Museum Press.

Lewis, A. 2015. *Iron Age and Roman-Era Vehicle Terrets from Western and Central Britain*. PhD thesis, University of Leicester

Palk, N. 1992. *Metal Horse Harness of the British and Irish Iron Ages*. PhD thesis, University of Oxford.



Drawings by Stephen Lewis

Typology

Top row: simple and early D-shaped terrets. **L-R:** simple, studded, ribbed, lipped, lobed.

Middle row: later D-shaped terrets. **L-R:** terrets with triple projections (transverse wings, parallel wings, platforms, knobs), crescentic.

Bottom row: Continental-influenced or imported terrets forms. **L-R:** dropped-bar, skirted, massive.