



## African & Oceanic Art, Antiquities and Natural History (598)

Tue, 5th May 2020, Live Online

### Lot 99

**Estimate:** £4000 - £6000 + Fees

#### **ANCIENT CELTIC SHIELD WESTERN EUROPE, 5TH CENTURY B.C.**

hammered sheet bronze, of circular form with an outer border of small raised dots, moving inwards a series of concentric ridges to a central dome and large bronze rivet projecting from the centre, pierced with multiple perforations, raised on a bespoke mount

40.6cm diameter

Provenance:

Private collection, Switzerland, acquired after 1990

Bonhams, New Bond Street, London. Antiquities, 1st May 2013, Lot 240

Private collection, United Kingdom

Note:

This shield is the work of a master metalsmith active at some point in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. producing arms and armour for the elite of society. Of circular form and produced from a single sheet of bronze; the design features a series of concentric bands rising into a domed boss at the centre decorated with a repoussé border of small dots. Its design suggests an origin in Ireland or perhaps the British Isles, indeed a similar example can be found in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, no. IA:1872.15.

As an actual defensive weapon, it is wholly impractical for use in battle. A sword or spear would comfortably punch through the sheet bronze and research shows that whilst the vast majority of shields found dating to this period are constructed from metal, actual shields used in combat would have most commonly been formed of bark or hide.

Instead, this piece was created as a work of art, to be worn and displayed on particular occasions, festivals and religious events. In a society where worked metal remained a highly valuable commodity, the shining polished bronze would have dazzled and impressed. The individual who owned this shield would have been of chiefly rank, their status demonstrated by their ability to commission and own prized objects such as this.

The most important aspect of this shield though is not its original design, but the series of diamond shaped perforations which are visibly present across the entire body. These are spear marks - but as previously mentioned this was not an object to be used in combat. In order to understand what is going on here we must look into ritual practices that there were written about in contemporary Roman sources and have been attested by modern archaeologists.

The ancient Celts were a polytheistic society, their deities, much like those of the Mediterranean, required constant appeasement through sacrifice and gift giving. This gifts provided to the gods needed to be items of the highest value possible to society, so metalwork; with its rarity, beauty and

complex production was often selected.

A number of studies have demonstrated that the deposition of artefacts in sites linked to water; rivers, lakes and springs - was a particularly widespread custom amongst the Celts in the Bronze and Iron Ages. In fact, we continue this practice today when we throw coins into wells to make a wish. In short, water was seen as a threshold or gateway to the divine world where the gifts could be received and prayers answered. However, before the object could be given, first it had to be broken or "killed". Swords would be bent, razors or shears blunted and shields pierced. To explain this practice, one theory contends that the gift could not be given until the "power" of the object was broken and its spirit removed. A more modern parallel would be the Polynesian concept of *mana*, the life force that permeates not only people, but objects. Any article worn or owned by an individual can become imbued with *mana* through their accomplishments and personality.

In this context, ancient Celtic shields such as the present example such would have been seen as personal to such an intense extent that it is hard to comprehend. They were not simply the property of an individual, they were an indivisible part of them. As such, this remarkable shield is a window into both ancient Celtic craftsmanship and ritual practice more than 2,500 years ago.