



Spearhead

On display

Title/Description: Spearhead

Born: 1600 - 1899

Object Type: spear

Materials: Bronze

Measurements: h. 746 mm

Accession Number: 1020

Historic Period: 17th-19th century

Production Place: Java

This finely forged sinuous plain iron spearhead has a pronounced midrib and circular-section tang. The good condition and relative lack of corrosion of this blade suggests that it is not of great antiquity and that it has not been buried in the ground but has been kept in an armoury or as *apusaka* (heirloom) piece. The form of the spearhead closely matches the wavy design of later Javanese and Malay krisses (daggers) of the 17th to 19th centuries.

Although iron seems to have come into use in Indonesia not much later than bronze, and perhaps just before the beginning of the Christian Era, very little archaeological iron has been excavated and/or reported and analysed. However, Java is better supplied with iron than with copper or other non-ferrous metal ores, and it has been found in the slab graves on the Pasemah Plateau of southern Sumatra, in similar graves around Gunung Kidul in Java, in jar burials in Java and Sumatra and with carved stone sarcophagi in Central Java and Bali. A major problem is survival. Iron deteriorates much faster than bronze, and once excavated is rapidly reduced to rust.

Archaeological examples of iron weapons such as those found at Gunung Kidul by van der Hoop (1935), or even those illustrated on Central Javanese monuments of the classical period (8th to 10th century), include only straight-bladed weapons. The sinuous '*naga*' form is generally thought to have developed in the later part of the Majapahit period (15th century). The carved stone decorative panel illustrating a blacksmith's workshop at Candi Sukuh in Central Java (Fontein, 1990:175-6) provides a major source of information for Javanese ironworking in the early fifteenth century. Among the craftsman's products displayed in low relief on the back wall is a sinuous curved blade, broader, but not unlike this example. Some rather similar spearheads, probably of eighteenth to nineteenth century date, are illustrated by Jasper and Piringade (1930: pls. 4-5).

The absence of pattern welding and the use of *pamor*, a naturally nickel-rich iron from Sulawesi (Bronson, 1987), together with the lack of silver or gold inlay as are found on 18th to early 20th century kris blades, suggests that the spearhead was intended for use rather than for display; nevertheless, the strong form and simplicity of texture make a powerful impression.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).
