

Later Prehistoric Finds Group

Object Datasheet No. 2

Dot Boughton PhD



A short guide to Early Iron Age Socketed Axes in Britain (c.800–600 BC)

Introduction

Socketed axes are one of the most characteristic artefact types of the British Late Bronze Age (c. 1000–800 BC) and Early Iron Age (c.800–600 BC) and their number exceeds that of other artefact types such as swords, spearheads, other tools and ornaments. Socketed axes occur singly and as part of metalwork hoards, but the number of socketed axes from hoards easily outnumber single finds. In the Early Iron Age, socketed axes from hoards outnumber single finds 4:1. Early Iron Age socketed axes are made from different copper-alloys or iron and can be divided into 11 easily recognisable types.

Material, Shape and Decoration

Early Iron Age axes may be made from cast copper-alloy or wrought iron. Iron socketed axes are very rare as they do not survive well in the ground. All socketed axes are wedge-shaped, have one or two mouth mouldings and a small side loop. Generally, Early Iron Age axes (both bronze and iron) display the same overall shape, but bronze specimens may be decorated with ribs, ribs-and-pellets or, occasionally, more elaborate ornament with added herring-bone or circllet-ornaments.

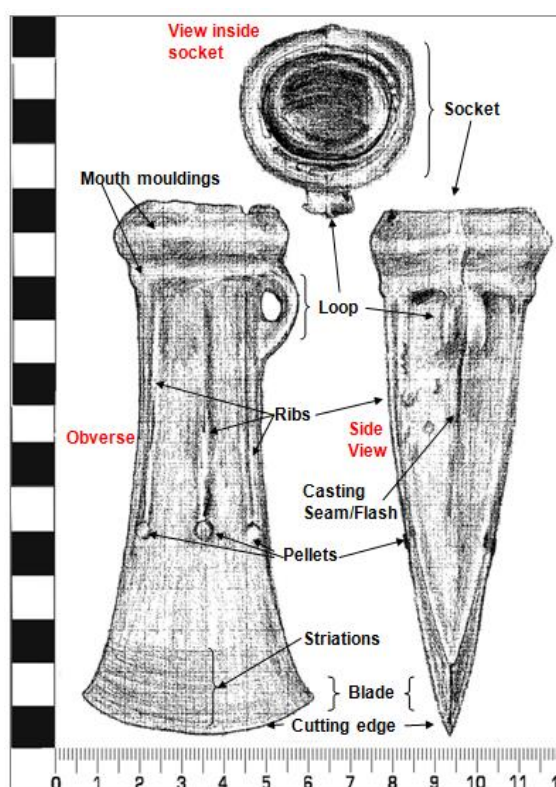


Fig. 1: Socketed axes: descriptive terminology (axe: 'Scotland', National Museums Scotland: NMS:X.DE24)

References:

- Boughton, D. 2012: 'Hindon, Wiltshire'. [Treasure Report for 2012T46](#). Department of Portable Antiquities & Treasure. London.
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- O'Connor, B. 2007: 'Llyn Fawr Metalwork in Britain: A Review'. In: Haselgrove, C. and Pope, R. [The earlier Iron Age in Britain and the Near Continent](#). Oxford.
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- Savory, H.N. 1980: [Guide Catalogue of the Bronze Age Collections \(National Museum of Wales\)](#). Cardiff.

Early Iron Age socketed axes are often either very large and heavy (c. 12-13cm in length, weighing c. 400g) or small, light and thinly cast (c. 10cm in length, weighing c. 100-150g). In contrast, Late Bronze Age axes normally weigh between 200-300g and are c. 10-11cm long.

Dating

These socketed axes are part of the Llyn Fawr metalworking assemblage (O'Connor 1980; O'Connor 2007). Sompting, Hindon, Blandford and Armorican types have been found in association with very early wrought iron artefacts such as spearheads and sickles at, for example, Hindon (Wiltshire, PAS reference: WILT-9439A7) and Llyn Fawr (Glamorgan), which strongly suggests an Early Iron Age date (Savory 1976; Savory 1980; Boughton 2012).

Distribution

Early Iron Age socketed axes are known from all British regions, but most of them have been found in East Anglia, Cornwall, Southern England and Central London.

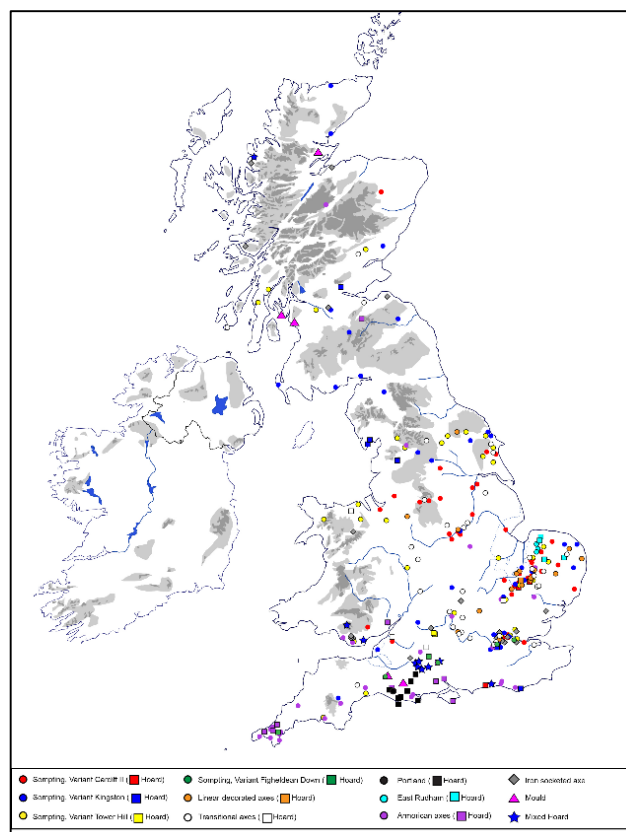


Fig. 2: Early Iron Age axe distribution (©Dot Boughton), NB: Blandford type axes are not mapped separately; they are normally found in association with Portland type axes.

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Fig. 3 The four variants of Type Sompting Axes

1. **V Tower Hill:** Wedge-shaped, widely splayed crescent-shaped cutting edge, back-to-front socket, very often plain
2. **V Kingston:** Wedge-shaped, widely splayed crescent-shaped cutting edge, back-to front socket, often decorated
3. **V Cardiff II:** Parallel sides, narrow crescent-shaped cutting edge, square socket, rib-and-pellet or rib-and-circlet decor
4. **V Figheledean Down:** Parallel sides, narrow straight cutting edge, square socket, often simply ribbed (three/four ribs)



Fig. 4 Transitional and Early Iron Age axes

5. Late Bronze Age – Early Iron Age **Transitional** socketed axe: medium-size and weight: similar to Late Bronze Age socketed axes. Often signs of wear/use, narrow crescent-shaped cutting edge, round or square socket, rib-and-pellet decoration.
6. **Armorican** type socketed axe: usually medium size, but longish body, often heavy due to high lead-content, parallel sides and very narrow blade, almost *never* worked, often clay core still inside and in *as-cast* condition with casting seams/flashes still prominent.
7. **Iron socketed axe**, made from wrought iron, very flaky surface, always undecorated.
8. **Linear-decorated** axe: Related to Type East Rudham, but heavier with signs of wear (East Anglia).
Very thinly cast socketed axes, often with very shiny silvery surface and unworked:
9. **Type Portland:** Wedge-shaped, round/oval socket, as-cast condition, rib-and-pellet decoration (mainly from Dorset)
10. **Type Blandford:** Wedge-shaped, round/oval socket, as-cast condition, linear-decorated (mainly from Dorset).
11. **Type Hindon:** Wedge-shaped, round/oval socket, not very pronounced mouth moulding, plain (mainly Wiltshire).
12. **Type East Rudham:** Wedge-shaped, oval socket, pronounced mouth moulding, linear-decorated (mainly Norfolk).

SOURCES: 1. Skelmore Heads Hoard, Urswick, Cumbria PAS: HAMP-5723E3; 2. Ulverston Hoard, Furness, Cumbria PAS: LANCUM-3F7550; 3. Cardiff II (Leckwith) Hoard, Glamorgan; 4. Salisbury Hoard, Wiltshire; 5. Llyn Fawr Hoard, Glamorgan; 6. New Forest Hoard, Hants; 7. Traprain Law, Midlothian, Scotland. National Museum of Antiquities; 8. nr. Cambridge @Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge; 9. Blandford Hoard, Dorset; 10. Hindon Hoard, Wiltshire @Salisbury Museum; 11. Cringleford Hoard, Norfolk. Norwich Castle Museum: 1997.708.2; 12. Langton Matravers Hoard, Dorset.

1-2: CCBY; 3, 5-7: ©National Museum of Wales; 4, 6, 9, 12: ©Trustees of the British Museum.

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Roberts, B.W., Boughton, D., Dinwiddy, M., Doshi, N., Fitzpatrick, A.P., Hook, D., Meeks, N., Mongiatti, A., Woodward, A. and Woodward, P. 2001. 'Collapsing Commodities or Lavish Offerings? Understanding large-scale metalwork deposition at Langton Matravers, Dorset'. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 34 (4).

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