

An Unusual Bronze-Age Socketed Axe from Benson

Socketed axes, or parts of them, are among the most commonly found items of British Bronze-Age metalwork. Significant numbers have been recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS); for example, fourteen whole or fragmentary examples from Oxfordshire (and over 1,000 nationally) are recorded on the PAS database at the time of writing.

This note concerns an Oxfordshire find which is sufficiently unusual to merit being reported on individually. The socketed axe in question (Fig. 1) was found by a metal-detector user on cultivated land in the parish of Benson in September 2006 (SU 6193). It was subsequently recorded by the PAS, and is classified in the PAS database as a palstave (PAS Unique ID: BERK-79C218). The object was returned to its finder after it had been recorded. The description which follows is taken from the PAS website (<https://finds.org.uk>):

The [axe] has a square sectioned socket with a depth of 59.57 mm. The mouth has three moulded transverse ribs; below these ribs there is a single side loop. The side loop is located 12.40 mm from the mouth of the socket, the external width of the loop is: 17.17 mm, internal width: 5.51 mm. Just below the side loop, on the socket, there are two oval depressions, one on each side of the socket. These oval depressions extend partially around the front and reverse surfaces. After the depressions the blade starts and it is clearly defined by a step down from the socket. The blade has a crisp rectangular cross-section and it gently expands towards the curved cutting edge (width from: 28.35 mm expanding to 37.17 mm). There are visible hammer marks on the surface of the blade and the hammering has created a clear bevel at the cutting edge. There are some edge losses to the cutting edge and one corner is missing, however this may be post depositional damage. There are some casting flashes remaining around the mouth of the socket and along the sides. There are no internal ribs on the socket. The copper alloy has a dark brown patina. Dimensions: length: 97.47 mm; width: 37.00 mm; thickness: 24.76 mm; weight: 108.74 g.

The indentations on the body mark this axe out as being of a relatively uncommon type. Only about ten examples of 'indented' socketed axes are known from the British Isles.¹ Examples from hoards such as Wilburton (Camb.) suggest that this type was current in the Wilburton metalworking phase, O'Connor's Late Bronze-Age 2 phase; the examples from hoards have multiple collar mouldings, as does the Benson axe.² The Wilburton phase is currently dated to c.1140 to 1020 BC.³ Indented socketed axes are also known from France, although the British and French forms are distinct.⁴

The Benson axe is the only example of this form known from central southern England; the type generally has a much more easterly distribution.⁵ This find is another demonstration of how the PAS is extending archaeological knowledge in useful ways.

ROGER THOMAS

¹ C.B. Burgess, 'The Later Bronze Age in the British Isles and North-West France', *Archaeological Journal*, p. 125 (1968), fig. 8a; B. O'Connor, *Cross-Channel Relations in the Later Bronze Age*, 2 vols., BAR IS, 91 (1980), p. 135.

² O'Connor, *Cross-Channel Relations*, vol. 1, p. 135. See also P.K. Schmidt and C. Burgess, *The Axes of Scotland and Northern England*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde Abteilung IX, Band 7* (1981), pp. 178–80 ('Type Ulleskelf').

³ S. Needham et al., 'An Independent Chronology for British Bronze Age Metalwork: The Results of the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Programme', *Archaeological Journal*, 154 (1997), p. 90.

⁴ O'Connor, *Cross-Channel Relations*, vol. 1, p. 135; vol. 2, p. 504, List 99, p. 815, map 39.

⁵ *Ibid.* vol. 2, p. 815, map 39.



Fig. 1. Indented socketed axe from Benson, scale = 10 centimetres. Photo courtesy of PAS. © West Berkshire Council. (Reproduced under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence.)