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Deposited on: 23 October 2014
Chapter 20

Special places for special axes? Early Bronze Age metalwork from Scotland in its landscape setting

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Our understanding of the Early Bronze Age in Scotland is still very largely shaped by the funerary record and by chance discoveries of artefacts, particularly the finds of metalwork accumulated over more than two centuries of collecting activity. While the name John Coles has become virtually synonymous with the study of Scottish Bronze Age metalwork, it is appropriate here to recall the somewhat earlier ground-breaking work of Stuart Piggott, together with Margaret Stewart, in drawing together a number of the most important associated finds from Scotland as a fascicule in the series *Inventaria Archaeologica* published in 1958 (Piggott & Stewart 1958).

Much of the work at that time was concerned with recording of the data and with establishing the basic timetables of the Bronze Age. However, in his survey of Early Bronze Age metalwork, John Coles (1969) did pause to look briefly at aspects of the condition and context of deposition of the artefacts, a theme that was later followed up by Stuart Needham in an influential paper (1988) in which he examined the evidence for selective deposition, pointing up especially the marked contrasts between the metalwork found in graves and in hoards. This brief paper simply reviews some of the ways in which this engagement with the material can be developed, in the light of non-funerary finds of bronze metalwork from Scotland, broadly speaking during the period from c 2100 to 1700 cal BC.

Findings from Scotland provide some of the most telling evidence in support of the idea that the axe enjoyed a key symbolic role in the Early Bronze Age, and that at least some axes were taken out of circulation and placed in the ground as special deposits, probably in places that were invested with special significance. The qualification is necessary for it has to be stressed that a significant proportion of the Early Bronze Age metalwork that survives for us to study has done so precisely because it was deliberately taken out of circulation. An unknowable amount would have been recycled and would have re-entered the metal supply system.

Three separate finds made within the last two decades can be used as the basis for exploring some of the possibilities that lie behind these metalwork deposits.

The first is a find of a single axe from Carnethy Hill, part of the Pentland Hills which stretch southwards from Edinburgh (illus 20.1 & 20.2). The discovery was made by a local metal detector user who was just out for a casual walk rather than a deliberate prospecting foray. As he was making his way along the line of a track leading up a shoulder of the hill, his detector registered a non-ferrous signal. Investigating further, he unearthed a fine decorated bronze axe (O’Connor & Cowie 2001, 215–18; illus 20.3).

At 573m, Carnethy is the highest hill in the Pentland range of hills, and is itself topped by a large burial cairn, also presumably of broadly Early Bronze Age date. The findspot lay at an approximate height of nearly 450m above sea level, just above a distinctive saddle between Carnethy Hill and its neighbour to the north. Unfortunately the track where the axe was found follows the spine of the range of hills and is a popular route with hill-walkers. As a result, the path is prone to erosion and it is likely that the axe lay just below the ground surface at a point where the thin turf and peaty soil cover had probably been disturbed by foot-traffic. While the general location could be assessed, the extent of the disturbance meant that the precise findspot could not be retraced and no further investigation was possible.

The second notable find is a hoard of three axes found right in the heart of Edinburgh. In 1996 three bronze axes were unearthed by a metal detectorist operating illegally on Dunsapie Crag (O’Connor & Cowie 2001, 218–22). Dunsapie forms part of the suite of geological features associated with Arthur’s Seat, close to the centre of the modern city and one of the most distinctive features of the Edinburgh skyline (illus 20.4). While making his way around the edge of the hilltop, which is crowned by a later prehistoric fort, the finder picked up a strong signal on his metal detector, which he proceeded to investigate. This resulted in the discovery of three bronze axes in severely corroded condition (illus 20.5) close to a low rock outcrop.

Subsequent excavation showed that the axes had been retrieved from a small, roughly rectangular hole, only just big enough to hold them. The space was defined on one side by the face of the outcrop itself, and on the other
sides by the weathered bedrock. The likeliest explanation appears to be that a few fragments of rock laminating or splitting off from the parent outcrop had been levered out from the face to create a hole only just large enough for the reception of the axes themselves. They may have been lying at an angle. It is just possible that they could have been wrapped in material or in a container such as a bag or pouch, but it must be stressed that there is no supporting evidence for such a container. The account of the finder suggests that the axes had then been covered again with the small fragments of weathered bedrock originally prised up to create the hole in which they lay. It is therefore certain that the axes could not have been hafted when deposited.

The third discovery comes from the central Highlands of Scotland. In 1987, a woman found a bronze axe while out for a walk at Bunrannoch, near the village of Kinloch Rannoch, Perthshire. Following up this report, a metal detector survey and limited excavations were undertaken which resulted in the discovery of a further three axes (O’Connor & Cowie 2001, 207–14). In this case the findspot lay on the floor of the highland glen, near the edge of a low fluvio-glacial terrace, overlooking what appear to have been ancient channels and areas of poorly drained ground at the eastern end of Loch Rannoch (illus 20.6). The valley preserves ample indications of settlement from prehistoric times onwards. Although relatively remote from the main centres of population today and bypassed by modern transport routes, its location between Loch Rannoch and Loch Tummel would once have given it a more important strategic position in terms of east-west communication through the central Highlands.

The findspot of the first Bunrannoch axe lay in an irregular hollow in the fluvio-glacial terrace. Metal detector survey of the area of the hollow revealed anomalies on the northern edge of the hollow, just to the north of where the first axe was said to have been found and excavation revealed a further three axes lying in the loose soil comprising the fill of the hollow. Further excavation revealed that the hollow had almost certainly been formed as a result of the extraction of coarse fluvio-glacial sand in modern times. In summary, it can reasonably be concluded that the four axes (illus 20.7) were originally deposited together at this location, although the original circumstances of deposition of the axes are unknown owing to the degree of modern disturbance of the immediate area. However, their condition and location suggest that the group of axes may have been protected in some way, either as a result of their burial in some pre-existing monument such as a low cairn or stony bank, or simply in a pit dug into the
20.2  a) The central part of the Pentland hills viewed from the east. Carnethy Hill is the higher summit to the left; b) the decorated axehead was found in the saddle between Carnethy and neighbouring hill, approximately at the point indicated on the skyline.
fluvio-glacial mound. Unfortunately, the recent sand-and-gravel quarrying has altered the shape of the mound and removed any minor monument that may once have capped it. Gradual slumping of the unstable quarry edges had then led to the exposure of the first of the axes to be found.

Metal detecting lay behind the discoveries at Carnethy Hill and Dunsapie Crag, and it was crucial in the successful recovery of additional evidence at Bunrannoch. It is therefore salutary to note that in the absence of the metal detector as a means of prospection, the increment of metalwork finds would probably be limited to the first axe from Bunrannoch, which would doubtless have been reported as a ‘single’ find.

Reverting to the question of the context of these and other Early Bronze Age axe finds, are these find-circumstances providing hints of special places for special axes? Given the considerable investment of resources and craftsmanship involved in their production, it has long been accepted that decorated axes were not intended for use as everyday tools. There is much to suggest that such metalwork was taken out of circulation deliberately and with some formality, rather than simply as the result of casual loss or discard. In each case described here, it has been possible to assess the finds, offering welcome opportunities for evaluating the context of their deposition. Such opportunities are all too often denied to us in the case of old finds, where little or no circumstantial evidence may be available.

Returning to Dunsapie Crag, for example, the axes had been placed in a small hole prepared for their reception next to a low bedrock outcrop. While this evidence for preparation of the site is unusual, the close association with natural rock surfaces recalls the setting of several Early Bronze Age metalwork deposits in Scotland. Hereafter, the discussion will be widened to include other Early Bronze Age metalwork: undecorated flat axes, as well as other types such as daggers and ornaments.

In 1976, for example, two bronze flat axes were found in the striking ravine known as the Pass of Ballater, in the upper valley of the River Dee in Aberdeenshire (Ralston 1984, 77–8). The pair of axes was lying, one on top of the other, about halfway up and embedded blade-first in the loose stone scree derived from the granite cliffs of the ravine (illus 20.8). Neither of these axes was decorated, but at least one appears to have been in pristine condition. The current heavily corroded condition of the axes from Dunsapie Hill belies the fact that they may still have been in very fine condition when they were committed to the ground. The hilltop situation, dramatically overlooked by the summit of Arthur’s Seat, may also have been significant to the people who deposited the axes at this spot. Accounts of earlier finds are also comparable. Although its contents are dominated by ornaments and therefore rather atypical, the Migdale hoard itself (illus 20.9) was found in a weathered joint of rock in the course of blasting the top of a granite knoll (Anderson 1901). The finds are depicted in a contemporary, if rather murky, sketch (illus 20.10; see Cowie 1988, 21).

Not all such sites are in upland locations. In 1883, a group of five axes and an armlet were discovered in a crevice while rock faces were being cleared for the construction of a ship-building yard at Port Murray on the Ayrshire coast (Munro 1884; see also this paper illus 20.3, Decorated axehead found on Carnethy Hill, Midlothian (drawn by Marion O’Neil).
20.4a–b Dunsapie Crag, Edinburgh: the hoard was found beside the bedrock outcrop in the foreground. Dunsapie has wide views in most directions, a) but the view to the south-west b) is dominated by Arthur’s Seat.
20.15). As Richard Bradley (2000) has emphasized, natural places – mountain- and hill-tops, caves, rivers, lochs and coastlines – provide suitable arenas for intercession between humans and gods, liminal locations between the mundane and the sacred worlds.

However, in some cases there are hints that metalwork deposits may be marking less ethereal boundaries. Although it is not known exactly how and where the axehead was buried, the location of the Carnethy Hill find also offers scope for speculation regarding other factors that may have been meaningful to the communities of the time. Here, the apparently very fine condition of the axe when deposited and its topographical setting again combine to make interpretation in terms of casual discard or burial for safekeeping extremely unlikely. Instead, it is tempting to suggest that this axe may have marked a symbolic boundary of some kind – for example, between neighbouring communities. If so, the significance of the locale may be emphasized by an old find from Lawhead Farm, which lies immediately at the foot of Carnethy Hill in Midlothian. Here on the lower slopes of the same hill is the general location of another ‘special’ axe deposit (illus 20.11, 20.12). During the 19th century, the digging of a drain produced a fine example of a massive flat axe weighing over 2000g (Schmidt & Burgess 1981, 48, no 246; Clarke et al 1985, 305). Intriguingly, springs rising below the findspot of the Carnethy Hill axe mark the head of the Lawhead Burn, which forms part of the line of the present day parish boundary. Is it just possible that these finds of ‘special’ axes could hint at the presence of an even older territorial boundary?

Other examples of intriguing juxtapositions of metalwork finds and significant topographical features are beginning to emerge. Brendan O’Connor has recently drawn attention to the discovery of a fine example of an Early Bronze Age tanged spearhead at Langstilly Farm near Lochwinnoch, Renfrewshire. The spearhead was found in the 1960s and donated to Paisley Museum (Discovery & Excavation in Scotland 1962, 39–40), where its date and significance had remained unrecognized. The details of the spearhead need not detain us here: the immediate point to be made is that Langstilly lies close to Gavel Moss, the findspot of another exceptional
group of metalwork in the late 18th century (Piggott & Stewart 1958, GB 28; Clarke et al 1985, 302). Both of these finds, and an axe from the nearby Ladyland estate, lie close to a major watercourse, in this case the Maich Water, that was in historical times to become a significant administrative boundary, marking both parish and county divisions.

While it would be unwise to imply that there is a direct thread linking the Bronze Age to historic land divisions, patterns are nevertheless emerging which demand consideration even if the explanations remain elusive. Perhaps metalwork deposits played a part in the definition, or periodic redefinition, of territories, both sacred and profane. Another possibility is that certain axe finds demarcated what may have been seen at the time as the limit of the ‘settled’ or domestic landscape – as opposed to the ‘wild’ uplands. Other hoards could also be viewed in this way: as well as being a natural gateway to the Aberdeenshire highlands, the Ballater area may well have been the western limit of settlement in Deeside in the earlier second millennium BC. Ian Shepherd has suggested that the Pass of Ballater hoard may thus have been a form of ritual demarcation of this boundary (cf Shepherd 1986, 13).
Not all these deposits are in montane or upland settings. The Bunrannoich axes were discovered in a quite different topographical context, the broad floor of a highland glen. Yet here too, the location may have been a significant factor in their deposition. It was noted how the site lay close to the edge of a fluvio-glacial terrace overlooking an area of what may have been ancient channels and areas of poorly drained ground, and thus once again potentially at an interface between agricultural land and the natural or semi-natural landscape. Here, too, it is possible that the presence of a mound may have been a factor. However, owing to the degree of past or modern disturbance, it is unclear whether the cluster of axes had been deposited in an entirely natural mound or on the fringes of an artificial feature whose original form is now lost to us.

As Stuart Needham in particular has noted (1988), a significant number of metal deposits from Britain appear to be associated with mounds. In a Scottish context, particular mention may be made of the large assemblage of flat axeheads and dagger blades found at Dail na Caraidh, Inverlochy, near Fort William, Inverness-shire, at the southern ‘gateway’ to the Great Glen through the Highlands (within Needham’s metal flow control zone: see this volume). With Ben Nevis and its attendant peaks providing a dramatic backdrop at this site, at least two substantial groups of metalwork were deposited at one
end of a prominent elongated fluvio-glacial mound overlooking the confluence of the Rivers Lochy and Lundy (Barrett & Gourlay 1999). There, the excavators found that there had been very little modification of the place; noting the possibility that metalwork may have been deposited in quite ephemeral features, perhaps tucked under boulders or stone, or perhaps simply left on the ground surface.

Clearly, additional difficulties to our understanding of the possible significance of the metalwork are posed when deposition may have involved a sense of ‘place’ that may no longer be apparent. Quite apart from obliterated monuments, many forms of natural feature, ranging from natural boulders to trees, may have been invested with special significance, and doubtless named in the past (cf ‘Seahenge’; Pryor 2001). A find from Knockgranish, near Aviemore, is a case in point (Discovery & Excavation in Scotland 1985, 23). There, a pair of axes was found by a metal detectorist beside a large glacial erratic boulder (illus 20.13) – a salutary reminder of fact that boulders like these littered parts of the landscape before agricultural improvements. Bearing in mind the vulnerability of such features in areas of agricultural improvement, many so-called stray finds of metalwork may once have been associated with features which simply no longer survive.

While natural features may have played a far greater role than formerly recognized, it has long been realized that the ‘built’ or ‘cultural’ environment may also have been a significant factor governing the placement of metalwork deposits. In some cases, for example, the proximity of earlier or broadly contemporary monuments may have been important, strikingly demonstrated by a recent and as yet unpublished find from Easter Ross. In this case, a metal detectorist making his way through woodland near Tarradale House, to the east of the Muir of Ord, came across fragments of copper alloy among the upcast from a rabbit burrow. Subsequent inspection of the findspot showed that the finder had unwittingly been detecting on the fringes of a spectacular chambered cairn, Clachan More na Taradin. This impressive monument was first discovered in the early 19th century but, amazingly, in view of its state of preservation, it had disappeared from archaeological records until it was rediscovered by local amateur archaeologist, Dr A Robb, fortunately just in
The Migdale hoard (after Piggott & Stewart 1958). Note that axe no 1 is no longer thought to have been found with the hoard, but elsewhere on the Skibo estate.
time to be recorded by Audrey Henshall and Graham Ritchie as they worked on their volume on the chambered cairns of the Central Highlands (2001, 194–6). Although superficially unprepossessing, the fragments represent parts of at least two bronze flat daggers, comparable in form with the blades in the Auchnacree hoard (Piggott & Stewart 1958, GB 27; Clarke et al 1985, 300).

In another case, a long-known but neglected axe find has only recently been given the detailed attention it deserves. The axe comes from Inchtuthil by the River Tay and was found during topsoil clearance in the course of Richmond’s excavations at the Roman fortress (Pitts & St Joseph 1985, 252, 261). Dr Brendan O’Connor (forthcoming) has shown that the axehead must have
been recovered only a short distance from the site of
the Neolithic rectangular enclosure subsequently re-
Obviously reading meaning into association by virtue of
proximity requires caution, but if it is accepted that the
find circumstances may have been significant, this raises
an interesting point. By the time this bronze axe came to
be deposited, the enclosure may have been all but invisible
as a surface feature. Unlike the great cairn at Tarradale,
deposition here may have had some connection with the
memory of the associations of the place. In following up
the Inchtuthil find, Brendan O’Connor has also gone on
to note a striking distribution of Migdale-type axes along
the east bank of the middle Tay, with a blank area to the
west that cannot readily be explained by modern patterns
of land-use and finds recovery. As Stuart Needham has
shown so vividly elsewhere in this volume, there are
patterns of evidence to be teased out from outwardly
intractable material.

Nor are these isolated instances of discoveries in
potentially significant proximity to ceremonial monu-
ments. In 1947 a well-known Early Bronze Age axe hoard
was found on the slopes of the Hill of Finglenny, near
Rhynie in Aberdeenshire, comprising eight flat axes,
some of them apparently deliberately broken and buried
underneath a stone (Stevenson 1948). In the case of the
Finglenny hoard, it is surely significant that the findspot
directly overlooks Wormy Hillock, one of the North-
East of Scotland’s four late Neolithic henge monuments
(Shepherd 1986, 149). And again at Migdale itself,
another of the small henges characteristic of the north of
Scotland lies in the vicinity of the findspot and may have
had a bearing on the location of that crucially important

Before leaving Hill of Finglenny, it is worth noting
in passing that some of the axes had been tinned, a
reminder of an alternative form of embellishment applied
to a number of Early Bronze Age axes (Needham &
has recently drawn attention to the importance of light
and colour in the construction and use of ceremonial
monuments in the North-East of Scotland. There is some
evidence to suggest that deliberate tinning of the surfaces
of axes was a North-East innovation. Might this have been
a conscious attempt to capture the silvery effect of lunar light as opposed to the usual golden surface of bronze.

Two final examples bring this brief survey to a close. One on the north-east coast looking out on the North Sea that was such a crucial link to continental Europe, the other on the Ayrshire coast looking out towards the Firth of Clyde and the North Channel beyond, one of the key links to Ireland.

A well-known hoard of decorated axes was found in a pottery vessel at Colleonard Farm, Banffshire in 1857 (Piggott & Stewart 1958, GB 29, Clarke et al 1985, 145–6; illus 20.14). Here too, there is some evidence to suggest
that this hoard may have been deposited close to the coastline only a short distance away from a stone circle that is now destroyed. Colleonard is also a useful reminder that not all the ceremonial axes that were produced and circulated among the insular Early Bronze Age communities were destined to end up in British or Irish soil, for decorated axes have long been recognized as an important component of the evidence for connections between Britain, Ireland and the Continent (Megaw & Hardy 1938; Butler 1963; O’Connor & Cowie 2001). Indeed, axes provide some of the most telling evidence that the grey North Sea was not a barrier to communication but a medium for contact during the Early Bronze Age.

Over on the opposite, south-western coastline of Scotland, in Ayrshire, it may be noted that the Port Murray hoard, referred to earlier, was found only 150m from a prominent standing stone, which overlooks the findspot at the southern end of Maidenhead Bay. There, perhaps sitting on the bench thoughtfully provided by the local eventide home (illus 20.15), it is possible to ponder on the possible significance of landscape, context of deposition and symbolism of our Early Bronze Age metalwork.

Ceremonial occasions such as marriages, funerals, feasts and festivals – and perhaps even celebrations of the achievements of Big Men like Stuart Piggott! – will have presented opportunities, perhaps the primary opportunities, for the skills of the metalworker to have been extolled and fine details of technique and ornament admired, yet these are bound to remain invisible to us. Similarly, much or most of the metalwork that was in use will have been recycled and become invisible to us. Funerary contexts and hoards represent the primary pool of material that is available for study, and of course it is a dataset full of inherent biases and flaws. But the weight of evidence combines to indicate that axes, particularly embellished axes, were deposited deliberately and carefully as offerings, perhaps in well-known or prominent locations, though in circumstances where it is unlikely that they were intended for straightforward retrieval. Just as our appreciation of rock art in relation to
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the landscape has been transformed by detailed analysis of location and distribution (cf Bradley 1997; Hale 2003), so the way appears to be set for us to achieve a fuller understanding of the patterns that lay behind metalwork deposition. New finds, some of which have been noted here, continue to reinforce the view that the choice of site and the content of deposits of Early Bronze Age metalwork were very far from random, and that the axe in particular enjoyed a key symbolic role that it was only to lose as the inventory of metalwork changed at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age.

Acknowledgements

As a former student of Stuart Piggott, I am grateful to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for inviting me to speak at the Conference in his honour and to contribute to these proceedings. Time, space and circumstance have dictated that I have had to limit myself here to a sketch of aspects of the Scottish material rather than the wider canvas that I had originally set myself (and that Stuart would doubtless have expected!). For a variety of information and advice, I am greatly indebted to Stuart Needham, Brendan O’Connor and Ian Shephard; I am especially grateful to Brendan O’Connor for permitting me to refer to his work on finds from Langstilly and Inchtuthil in advance of publication.

I am grateful to Craig Angus and Neil MacLean for scanning and preparing digital images for publication. The line drawings, illustrations 20.1, 20.3, 20.5 and 20.7, are the work of Marion O’Neill. The photographs are all by the author, with the exception of illustrations 20.12 and 20.14, which are by Ian Larner and are reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland.

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