

An Early Iron Age Sompting Type axe from Preston Capes

by

DOT BOUGHTON AND JULIE CASSIDY

with a contribution by G C Morgan

SUMMARY

The discovery, by metal detecting, of the first Sompting Type axe from Northamptonshire fills a gap in knowledge of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition in the county, as both metalwork finds and settlements of this date are few in number. The Sompting type axe is a copper alloy, socketed side-looped axe, distinguished by the presence of elaborate decoration in the form of pellets-in-circlets linked by ribs, and dated to c 800-600BC.

INTRODUCTION

In late May 2001, metal detectorist Mr David Grimbley, a member of Northamptonshire Artefact Recovery Club (NARC), discovered a decorated socketed axe (Fig 1) in a field in the parish of Preston Capes, Northamptonshire. Preston Capes (NGR SP 576 547) lies 16km south-west of Northampton and 7km south of Daventry, on high ground at around 130m aOD, near the watershed of one of the streams that form the River Nene.

Mr Grimbley reported this find to his local county Finds Liaison Officer, Julie Cassidy, who in turn passed news of the discovery on to the Finds Liaison Officer for Cumbria and Lancashire, Dot Boughton, a specialist in British Early Iron Age metalwork, who recorded the find on the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) database (www.finds.org.uk/database) under the code LANCUM-563E82 (Fig 2). It is recorded as an Early Iron Age

socketed axe of Sompting type, dating from c 800-600BC. Mr Grimbley provided a grid reference of 10 figures for the findspot of the axe.

The discovery of this axe adds greatly to our knowledge of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition in Northamptonshire. To date, there are 95 artefacts dating to the Bronze Age period from Northamptonshire on the PAS database. When compared with the total number of recorded artefacts from Northamptonshire of 11,600, this illustrates the rarity of Bronze Age finds recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. Of the 95 Bronze Age finds, 23 were discovered in the Daventry District of the county, and can be considered geographically close to the findspot of the Sompting axe. The vast majority of the Bronze Age finds date to the Early or Middle Bronze Age, and cannot be included in a discussion on the context of the Sompting axe within Northamptonshire.

However, one find of note, from the same field system as the Sompting axe, is a Late Bronze Age gouge, dating from 1150 – 800BC, recorded on the PAS database as NARC-5D5F57. Although of a slightly earlier date, its presence in the same field as the Sompting axe suggests this was an area of activity during the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age period.

DESCRIPTION

The socketed axe from Preston Capes is 135.5mm long and the blade is 55mm wide (Figs 2 and 3). The blade is not much splayed but very damaged and it is likely that,



Fig 1 The axe immediately following discovery (Photograph by David Grimley)



Fig 2 Images of the socketed axe from the PAS website



Fig 3 The socketed axe after cleaning and conservation

originally, it may have been up to 60mm wide. The axe is complete with a small side loop under the lower mouth moulding. It has a thick upper and thinner lower mouth moulding and the socket mouth is sub-rectangular, or 'back-to-front', in shape. The loop is somewhat splayed at the top and bottom. The casting seams are unusually prominent at the sides while they seem to have been flattened around the mouth and the loop. The state of

corrosion does not allow for much interpretation of the marks on the blade, but judging from the few patches of original surface which do survive, it seems highly likely that after the casting process was completed, the blade was worked into shape, hammered and subsequently used and re-sharpened.

The decoration on this axe is probably unique, but due to the advanced state of corrosion we cannot be certain

of the exact layout of the different patterns. The axe is decorated on both sides with a symmetrical ornament composed of ribs-and-pellets-within-circlets. Both sides display a very large single ornament just below the double mouth moulding: a pellet surrounded by two circlets (Fig 3). On the better preserved face there appears to be one or very likely two further pellets-within-two-circlets further down in the middle of the axe's body. It seems that the two circular ornaments on the body of the axe were connected to the lower mouth moulding by a rib, running from the corner of each face to the top of the outermost circle. The rest of the ornament is much worn, but it is likely that there were two further ribs which connected the top of the lower two ornaments with the bottom of the upper pellets-within-two-circlets. On the other face, only the central ornament below the mouth moulding survives plus, possibly, one rib to each the left and right.

CONSERVATION NOTE

by *Dr G C Morgan ACR*

The socketed axe, as received, still had some light sandy clay soil on it. The socket was filled with the same material, containing root fragments but there was no trace of a wooden handle. The reverse shows some mechanical damage, perhaps caused by ploughing. The surface of the axe has been subject to ion exchange, with the copper being replaced with iron, which has subsequently corroded. This is quite common in iron rich soils as are found in Northamptonshire. This iron rich surface is very friable and there has been considerable loss. Traces of five ring decorations can be seen, three very clearly.

The axe was subject to careful mechanical cleaning, the soil from the socket being examined for any items of interest, although nothing was found. The metal was stabilised with benzotriazole solution, 5% in IMS. After drying, it was then given three coats of 5% Inralac, acrylic lacquer, which is removable with acetone (Fig 3).

DISCUSSION: SOMPTING AXES

The axe from Preston Capes is a rare find amongst the enormous corpus of cast copper alloy socketed axes dating from the British Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Its size and especially its elaborate decoration identify it as an axe of Sompting Type and it dates from the Earliest Iron Age rather than the Latest Bronze Age. Copper-alloy socketed looped axes of Sompting and related types represent by far the largest group of metalwork surviving from the Earliest Iron Age (*c* 800-600BC). They clearly outrank other tool and weapon types such as gouges and chisels as well as horse-gear, vessels, spear-heads and personal items such as razors and jewellery.

It was a group of decorated copper-alloy socketed axes which had not previously been looked at that caught Colin Burgess' attention in 1971. The examples of socketed axes discussed in his paper include three single finds from Yorkshire (Seamer Carr, Cayton Carr and Broughton, near Malton) and the fifteen heavier axes from the Sompting hoard, East Sussex, thus excluding the two linear-faceted axes that were also part of the

hoard (Curwen 1948, plate XX). Following Burgess' definition, Sompting axes have fairly straight sides and a moderately expanded blade. Their profile is heavy and pronounced and the loops tend to be of moderate size with some having a distinctive spurred base. The sockets are usually of sub-rectangular or 'back-to-front' shape rather than aligned with the blade (Burgess 1971, 268). Sub-rectangular sockets are more common in the Early Iron Age while rectangular sockets, aligned with the blade, can be found on the large majority of Late Bronze Age socketed axes. Furthermore, Burgess suggested that one of the main characteristics of Sompting axes is their elaborate decoration, but even he admitted that there does not seem to be a clear-cut definition of the various decorative styles and sub-styles (Burgess 1971, 267).

The wealth of patterns, both simple and more and less elaborate, is striking indeed and cannot be matched on axes of the Ewart Park metalwork assemblage of the preceding Late Bronze Age. Apart from plain and simple ribbed axes (with three, four or five ribs), there are rib-and-pellet decorated axes (one, two, three or more ribs), rib-and-circlet, triple-rib-and-circlet, rib-and-circlets connected with ribs forming Ms and Ωs, empty boxes, or boxes with a central X, etc. Most of the patterns are unique, making it difficult to group them with others. This new find from Preston Capes conforms well to this description as it too displays a decoration which seems to be unparalleled on any of the known Sompting type axes.

However, even though the ornament on the Preston Capes axe is probably unique, there are parallels for this find with equally elaborate decoration. Similar axes were discovered in the Lea Marshes, Walthamstow, London (Fig 5) (British Museum Reg. No. WG1742); Holme Pierrepont, Nottinghamshire (Private Possession); Ludgershall, Wiltshire (Devizes Museum Acc No DM 1984.94); Holytown, Lanarkshire (Glasgow: Hunterian Museum Acc No B.1951.21.24) and Knock and Maize, Wigtownshire (Stranraer Museum Acc No 1964.14): (Trustees of the British Museum 1953, 26, fig 7.6; MacCormick 1964, 23; Scurfield 1997, 53, no 57; Annable and Simpson 1964, no. 611 (the drawing is incorrect); Evans 1881, 137, fig 166; Coles 1962, 74 (Wigtownshire, no 10); Schmidt and Burgess 1981, no 1586).

All of these axes share a variation of ribs terminating in pellets-in-circlets with or without additional pellets-in-circlets below the mouth moulding, but no two are exactly the same.

Sompting Type axes with elaborate decoration have also been found in a small number of Early Iron Age hoards, most notably in the hoards from Sompting, Sussex (Worthing Museum and Art Gallery), Kingston, Surrey (Fig 4) (British Museum Acc No 1849, 3-26, 1-4) and Skelmore Heads, Cumbria (Barrow-in-Furness: Dock Museum Acc. No 5045.1-3 (two axes lost); Lancaster City Museum: Swanson Cowper Collection) (Curwen 1948, 157-159; Curwen 1954, 64, 203-204; O'Connor 1980, 423, no 223 and 585, List 227, no 28; Thomas 1989, 282; Huth 1997, 275; Gerloff 2011, 218-20, no 59; Evans 1881, 124, fig 137 and 126, fig 142; British Museum Bronze Age Guide 1920, fig 55; Thomas 1989, 281; Huth 1997, 274).



Fig 4 A group of Sompting type axes from Kingston, Surrey (a single plain axe is omitted)

The examples discussed above all share the more ornamental pellet-in-circling decoration, but there is also a basic and much more common decoration of long ribs terminating in pellets which can be found on a number of Early Iron Age socketed axes, especially from the

Fen edges of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk and the Thames in London. There is also a wide scatter across Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, with smaller clusters focussing on the River Trent, the Peak District and coastal areas. However, highly decorated axes with a rib and pellet-in-circling ornament like that on the axe from Preston Capes are very rare in the Midlands, Northern England and Scotland and they are virtually unknown in Wales, South West and South England. Geographically, the three axes most closely related to the new find from Preston Capes, come from the River Trent, the Cambridgeshire Fens and a single find from near Cirencester, Gloucestershire.

The closest parallels amongst contemporary axes of other Early Iron Age types come from Wolverley, Shropshire; Beckley, Oxfordshire and Maids Moreton, Buckinghamshire, but none of them are decorated Sompting axes. The geographically closest Sompting axe is the somewhat malformed undecorated specimen from Beckley, Oxfordshire (Ashmolean Museum Acc No 1955.70). The only other possibly contemporary find from Northamptonshire is the linear-decorated or linear-faceted socketed axe from Stoke Bruerne (Northampton Museum Acc No ZL6; Kennett 1975, 14; O'Connor 1980, 584, List 227, no 22), but its identification is uncertain and it is possible that it dates from the preceding Late Bronze Age rather than the Earliest Iron Age.

The axe from Preston Capes does not only stand out

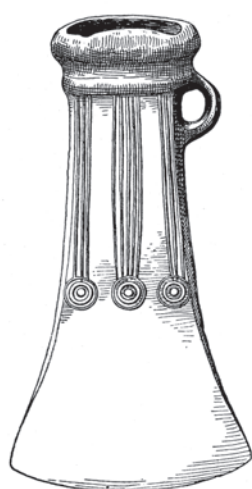


Fig 5 A Sompting type axe from Lea Marshes, Walthamstow, Essex (122mm long) (British Museum 1953, fig 7; 6)

because it has been discovered in an area where Sompting axes are generally unknown, but it was also found on dry land. Most Sompting axes were found in wet contexts or former wet contexts, for example in streams or rivers, in former wetlands such as the East Anglian Fens or the Carrs of Yorkshire, or in places overlooking a river or the coast. The hoards from Sompting, Ferring and Eastbourne, Sussex, were deposited in places either very close to the coast or possibly immediately overlooking the English Channel (Aldsworth 1985, 4; Budgen 1920, 143-144; Grinsell 1931, 60, E10; Huth 1997, 274-275; O'Connor 2007, no 21). Some hoards that include Sompting Type axes were deposited near ancient monuments, for example, Skelmore Heads, Cumbria and Tillycoultry, Clackmannanshire, and there are few examples of true stray finds, that is finds with no apparent connection to a watery or former wet context, an ancient monument or a settlement. However, even though the axe from Preston Capes was not found in a former wet context or a dry context overlooking a river or a lake, the findspot is only c 1.5km south of the one of the main sources of the River Nene which is one of the three major rivers that create the low-lying wetland area of the East Anglian Fens, flowing into the North Sea at the Wash. This suggests that geographically, rather than being a stray find in the south Midlands, its place of deposition may not have been accidental and the axe from Preston Capes was part of the large group of Sompting axes from the Fenland edges.

CONCLUSION

The discovery of a new Sompting Type axe from Preston Capes fills a gap in knowledge of the Early Iron Age in Northamptonshire. Until its discovery Sompting axes were unknown from the county and there have been no reports of other Early Iron Age metalwork finds, except for a possibly linear-decorated axe from Stoke Bruerne. Excavated sites of Early Iron Age date are also few in number.

The scarcity of Sompting type axes in this area is not unexpected because it is mirrored in the surrounding counties of Worcestershire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Leicestershire and Buckinghamshire: they all show equally low numbers of finds of Sompting axes, if any. However, these low numbers stand in stark contrast with the very dense clusters of findspots along the south western Fen edges in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. Even though the Fens are not close to Preston Capes in geographical terms, a connection between these two very different findspots may be suggested here. The axe from Preston Capes was discovered near the most westerly source of the River Nene which is one of the three main rivers that

create the Fenlands to the east of Northamptonshire. It could therefore be argued that the axehead was part of the same tradition of Fenland deposition, even though it was not deposited in the Fens, but close to the spring of one of its main rivers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aldsworth, F G, 1985 Proceedings of the Summer Meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute at Chichester, *Archaeology in West Sussex*, *Archaeol Journal*, **142**, 1-6
- Annable, F K, and Simpson, D D A, 1964 *Guide Catalogue of the Neolithic and Bronze Age collection in Devizes Museum*, Devizes
- British Museum Bronze Age Guide 1920 *A guide to the Antiquities of the Bronze Age*, London
- Budgen, W, 1920 Bronze Celts found at Eastbourn, *Sussex Archaeol Coll*, **61**, 143f
- Burgess, C, 1971 Some decorated socketed axes in Canon Greenwell's Collection, *Yorkshire Archaeol Journal*, **42**, 267-272
- Coles, J M, 1962 Scottish Late Bronze Age Metalwork: Typology, Distributions and Chronology, *Proc Soc Ant Scot*, **XCIII**, 16-134
- Curwen, E C, 1948 A Bronze Cauldron from Sompting, Essex, *Ant J*, **28**, 157-163.
- Curwen, E C, 1954 *The Archaeology of Sussex*, London (2nd revised edition)
- Evans, J, 1881 *The Ancient Bronze Implements and Ornaments of Great Britain and Ireland*, London
- Gerloff, S, 2010 *Atlantic cauldrons and buckets. Studies in typology, origin and function of multi-sheet vessels of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age in Western Europe*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde II*, **18**, Stuttgart
- Grinsell, L V, 1931 Sussex in the Bronze Age, *Sussex Archaeol Coll*, **LXXI**, 30-69
- Huth, C, 1997 *Westeuropäische Horte der Spätbronzezeit*, Regensburg
- Kennett, D H, 1975 The New Bradwell Hoard, *Northampton Museums and Art Gallery Journal*, **6**, 2-7
- MacCormick, A G, 1964 Newark, *East Midland Arch Bull*, **7**, 23
- O'Connor, B, 1980 *Cross-channel relations in the later Bronze Age*, Oxford
- Schmidt, P K, and Burgess, C, 1981 *The axes of Scotland and Northern England*, München
- Scurfield, C J, 1997 Bronze Age Metalwork from the River Trent in Nottinghamshire, *Trans Thoroton Soc Notts*, **101**, 17-29
- Stig-Sørensen, M L, and Thomas, R, (eds) 1989 *The Bronze-Iron Age transition in Europe: aspects of continuity and change in European societies, c 1200-500BC*, Oxford
- Thomas, R, 1989 The Bronze-Iron transition in Southern England, in M L Stig-Sørensen and R Thomas (eds), 263-286
- British Museum 1953 *Later Prehistoric Antiquities of the British Isles*, London

