III

A BRONZE AXE FROM ELSDON, NORTHUMBERLAND, AND THE PROBLEM OF MIDDLE BRONZE AGE FLANGED AXES

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IN JANUARY, 1973, Mr. T. O'Neil of Choppington found a bronze flanged axe (fig. 1, 6) in an afforestation furrow east of Eastnook Farm, 3·7 kms east of Elsdon (NY 973936).[1] It has a slender form with slightly sinuous outline, swelling gently above a constricted waist. The blade is narrow and only moderately expanded. The septum rises gradually to a slope-stop curved upwards in plan, below which the flange ends curve into a shield pattern. This bears faint hammer marks. There are slight cracks at the bottom of the flanges, a common feature on such axes, perhaps caused by too vigorous hammering of the sides. The flanges are angular in profile, rising *c.* 15 mm above the septum, and bear a narrow, flat facet extending longitudinally from the butt to the bottom of the flanges. The axe is generally worn, with corroded surfaces coloured various shades of brown and green. A recent drill hole below the stop on one side suggests there are some deep corrosion pockets. The side illustrated is much better preserved than the other, with a worn but smooth green patina. The axe is 139 mm long, 45 mm across the cutting edge, and weighs 349 gms.

Discussion

The Eastnook axe belongs to the family of developed flanged axes ("short-flanged axes") of the Middle Bronze Age studied in a pioneer paper by M. A. Smith (1959, 171-5), and subsequently by Coles (1963-4, 83-103) and the present writer (Burgess, 1974). These axes have shorter, higher flanges than Early Bronze Age flanged axes, frequently confined to the butt half of the implement. Smith's division into an earlier *haft-flanged* group with low flanges and a later *wing-flanged* group with higher flanges has obvious problems of subjectivity. Not so Coles' straightforward distinction between *convex-flanged* (Class II) and *angle-flanged* (Class III) axes (Coles, 1963-4, 86), but this scheme claims no chronological, typological or geographical implications, and thus by itself has limited value. Coles' attempts

[1] We are grateful to Mr. O'Neil for bringing the axe to the Joint Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle upon Tyne, and allowing us to examine and record it. It remains in his possession.

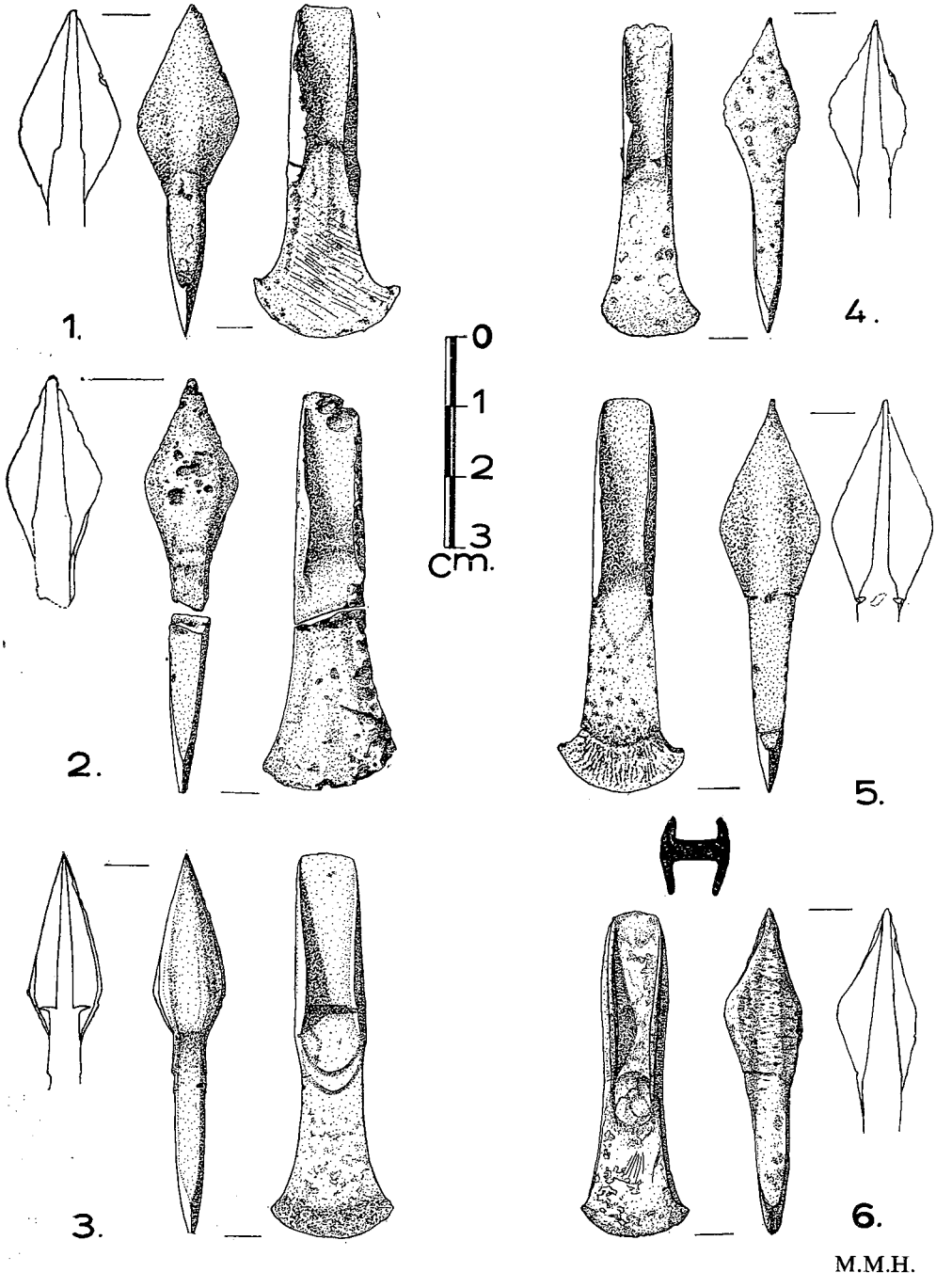

Fig. 1. 1, Ewart Park, Wooler; 2, Alston District; 3, Chollerton; 4, Halton Chesters; 5, Branshaw, Elsdon; 6, Eastnook, Elsdon.

to isolate typological groups within his classes are not always convincing,[2] and an overall classification may only be possible with an extensive corpus such as that forthcoming for all the axes from northern England and Scotland (Schmidt and Burgess).

A major problem confronting study of these axes is the severe shortage of associated finds, and the lack of parallel manufacture on, or trade to, the Continent. This is a marked contrast to the palstave situation (Butler, 1963; Burgess, 1974). This places undue, and dangerous, emphasis on the typological evidence, which can only be partially checked against the few hoards available. Only one of these,[3] from Battlefield, Salop, possibly dates from the first, or Acton Park, phase of the Middle Bronze Age, *c.* 14th-13th centuries B.C. The rest belong to the second, or Taunton phase, while the Kirtomy, Sutherland, find is of the Penard or Wallington phases, *c.* 11th-8th centuries B.C. (Butler, 1963; Burgess, 1968, 1974).

Theoretically Early Bronze Age flat and flanged axes ought to have been at least partly ancestral to short-flanged axes, though Coles has noticed that this involves some distributional difficulties. The strong resemblance of numerous specimens to Sögel nicked-flanged axes, *Randbeilen mit geknickten Rändern* (Sprockhoff, 1941, 34, 38) suggests another source of influence. One should perhaps look more widely at possible formative contacts with north-western Europe in view of the very varied axe developments discernible there in the Sögel and Ilsmoor periods (Smith, 1959, 165). Initial development need not have been confined to a single area, though the necessary requirements, plentiful finds of Early Bronze Age axes and primitive short-flanged axes, and evidence of links with north-west Europe, limit the possibilities to Ireland (Smith, 1959), north Wales (Butler, 1963), eastern Scotland and Yorkshire. With all these factors in mind, features such as a broad, splaying form, strongly nicked or shouldered sides, comparatively long, low flanges (generally convex, but sometimes angled), and decoration on blade or sides, should be early. The Battlefield specimen falls within these limits. Conversely, examples with a narrow form, with straight or "sinuous" sides, and short, well-developed angular flanges, should be late, and this is confirmed by those examples in hoards of the Taunton phase.

Just as the palstave was the Middle Bronze Age axe form of southern England and Wales, so the short-flanged axe was characteristic of northern England

[2] One notes that his Haddington group of Class II axes includes actual Class II axes (Coles, 1963-4, 91, fig. 3: 1, 2), Anglo-Welsh shield-pattern palstaves (fig. 3: 4, 6) and an Irish Group A palstave (fig. 3: 5). His Kirkless group of Class III includes not only Class III implements (Coles, fig. 5: 8-10), but also Irish palstaves of Groups A (fig. 5: 13) and B (fig. 5: 11), and other Irish axes (fig. 5: 12, 14).

[3] Battlefield, Salop (Chitty, 1943), Hotham Carr, Yorks. (Burgess, 1968), Tredarvah, Cornwall (Douch, 1964), Glentrool, Kirkcudbright, Balcarry and Caldonshill, Wigtown, Findowrie, Angus, and Kirtomy, Sutherland, these Scottish finds conveniently accessible in Coles, 1963-4. Two associations discussed by Smith (1959, 173) are now seen to be irrelevant. That from Moelfre Uchaf, Denbs. (Davies, 1949, 434-6), contains axes thought by Smith to be haft-flanged variants, but these are in fact thin-bladed flanged axes of a distinctive Acton Park-Tréboul-Ilsmoor form (Burgess, 1974). The wing-flanged axes in the Guilsfield, Montgom., hoard are now known to be recent intruders (Chitty, 1965).

and Scotland. Ireland alone had both palstaves and flanged axes, though the Irish palstave series differs markedly from the Anglo-Welsh one (Burgess, 1974). Smith (1959, 174-5, maps) showed that short-flanged axes enjoyed some early popularity in southern Britain, but were soon ousted by palstaves. The opposite situation prevailed in the north, where comparatively few palstaves of the Acton Park and Taunton phases are known. These include both Anglo-Welsh and Irish specimens, however.[4] The situation in the region between Tees and Forth is fairly typical, the area mapped in fig. 2 having about 11 palstaves of these phases against over 70 short-flanged axes. Palstaves became more common with the arrival of the "transitional" type in the Penard phase, towards 1000 B.C. This is the standard axe form in the Wallington hoards of northern England (Burgess, 1968), so that short-flanged axes may have been ousted there after the 10th century B.C. But in Scotland, and probably in Ireland, one has to agree with Coles that flanged axes may have remained common until the industrial revolution of the 8th century B.C. flooded the market with socketed axes.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE EASTNOOK AXE

The Eastnook axe is a wing-flanged axe in Smith's classification, angle-flanged in Coles' terminology. It bears none of the early features outlined above, indeed, its slender, sinuous form suggests that it belongs to the later short-flanged axes. On typological grounds, therefore, one may suggest a date in the Taunton phase, the second, or Hotham Carr, phase of the north English Middle Bronze Age, *c.* 13th-11th centuries B.C. (Burgess, 1968). As it has a shield pattern and comparatively undeveloped flanges it may have been made in the earlier part of that period. Its closest parallel among the axes of Scotland and northern England is one from Baldersby, Yorks. (Hull Mus. no. 49). None of the examples from the North East, the Borders or Cumbria are as close, though a second Elsdon angle-flanged axe, from Branshaw (fig. 1, 5), has many points of similarity. This has a very different shape, however, with straight, almost parallel sides, though it is one which, like the Eastnook "sinuous" form, is likely to have been characteristic of later short-flanged axes. Contrast an example from the Alston district (fig. 1, 2), which has a more primitive splayed form with nicked sides. Of the other local examples illustrated here, those from Chollerton and ? Ewart Park also have early-looking shapes with nicked sides, the former being particularly reminiscent of nicked-flanged axes. On the other hand the Halton Chesters axe is narrow and straight, with short, high, angled flanges, and should therefore be grouped among the later specimens.

[4] Irish palstaves include those from Branthwaite and Penrith, Cumberland (Group A), and the Hotham Carr hoard (Group C) (Burgess, 1968, figs. 2: 1, 2 and 3: 2); "Scotland" and Croy, Dumbarton (Group A), and unprovenanced examples of Groups B, C1 and C2 from "Scotland" (Coles, 1963-4, figs. 3: 5; 5: 11, 13; 8: 6, 8). For Irish palstaves, Burgess, 1974.

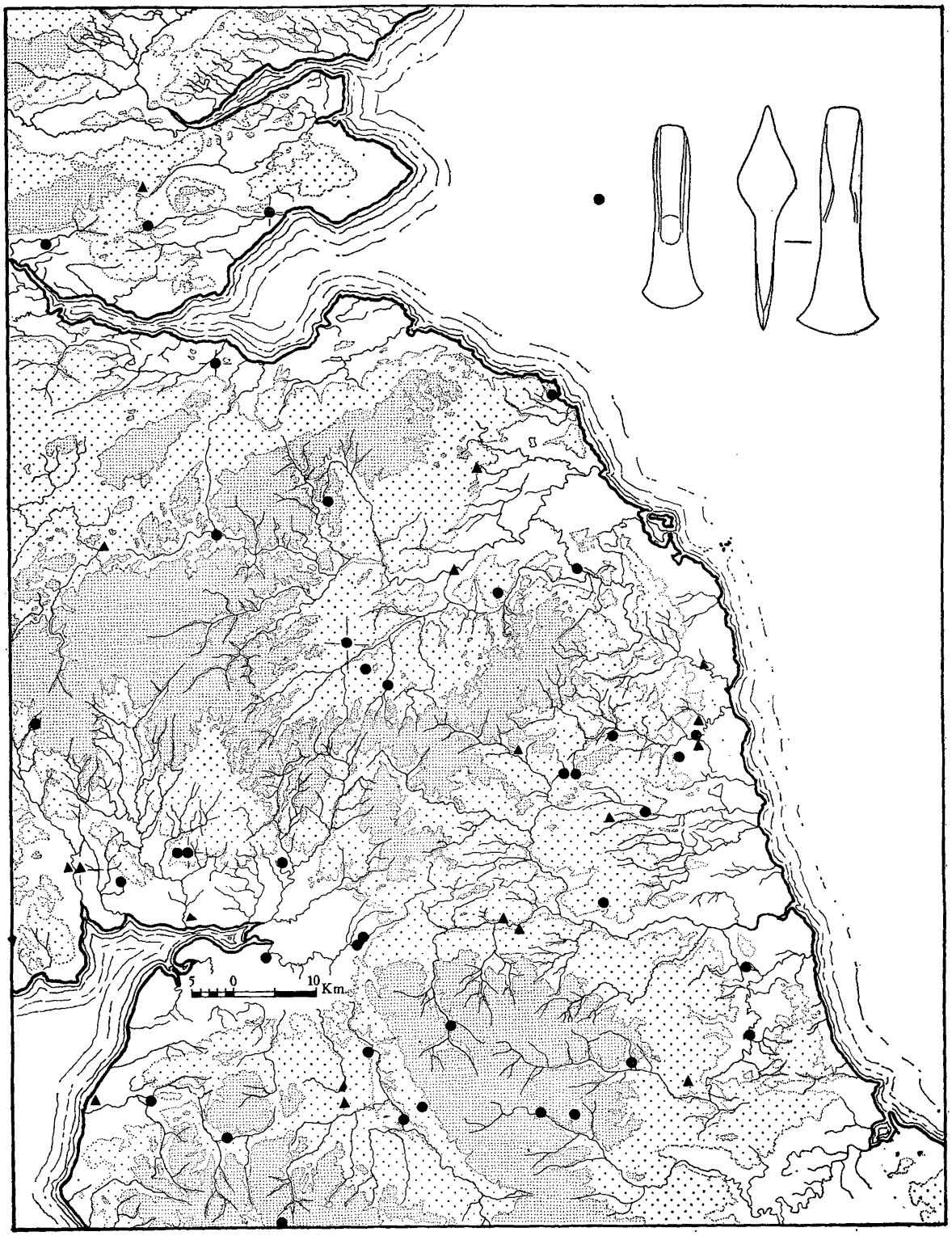

Fig. 2. Angle-flanged axes (●) and palstaves (▲) in the Border region

Fig. 2 maps angle-flanged axes in the Border region. Finds are well scattered, and there are no marked concentrations. The presence of so many examples in river valleys is only to be expected in a region where so much land is above 300 m and the likely settlement limit. The absence of finds from the great upland tracts, as from areas of difficult soil such as the coastal plain, needs no explanation, but the lack of specimens from the Cheviot valleys, especially around the north end of the Cheviots, from Wooler vale and the Fell Sandstones is puzzling when these areas are so rich in other prehistoric material.

The Eastnook axe has to be added to at least three other bronze axes found within 2 kms of Elsdon, the Branshaw flanged axe and two socketed axes.[5] Elsdon occupies a focal point just below the watershed of the Grasslees and Elsdon Burns, which lies at 200 m between hills rising to over 380 m. These valleys provide an important natural route between Redesdale and Upper Coquetdale, one which the modern B 6341 road follows for much of its course, and one which was clearly important in antiquity to judge from the Elsdon axe finds.

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[5] *NCH* XV, 54, Map A. A fourth axe, a low-flanged palstave found in a peat bog "near Elsdon" in 1865, seems in fact to have been found nearer to Bremenium, High Rochester (information from Joint Museum of Antiquities records, Newcastle upon Tyne).