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THREE SOCKETED AXES FROM NORTH-EAST ENGLAND, WITH NOTES ON FACETED AND RIBBED SOCKETED AXES

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1. TWO SOCKETED AXES FROM ULGHAM, NORTHUMBERLAND

IN JUNE 1973 a bronze socketed axe-head (fig. 1a) was picked up from the ploughsoil at Robin Hood's Field, Ulgham Park Farm, Northumberland (NZ 218934) by Mr. R. Lawson. Two years later a second axe-head (fig. 1b) was discovered under similar circumstances at the same place, resulting in the two axe-heads being brought to the Museum of Antiquities for identification where they were seen by the present writers.¹ In view of the proximity of their find spots, the site was visited by the writers in June 1975, and again in September 1975, when a metal detector search was conducted to determine whether the axe-heads may have formed part of a larger hoard.² No additional discoveries were made and it has subsequently been learnt that the ground in question was marginal to, if not actually on, reconstituted open-cast mining land.

In view of this uncertainty, and the circumstances of discovery, it cannot be proved that these axes constitute a valid association. But their condition and patina are sufficiently similar to make association possible, and the fact that the two axe-types represented have so often been found together make it likely that they were associated. Even if the find spot is secondary after land reconstitution, they are likely to have originated not too far away in South-East Northumberland.

AXE a: a characteristic slender faceted socketed axe of Type Meldreth (Schmidt and Burgess, forthcoming). The flared trumpet mouth is separated by a slight horizontal moulding from the faceted body, which is of octagonal section. A thin loop is set low down on the side below the horizontal moulding, and the strongly expanded blade has prominent tips. The axe is in good condition, its surfaces various shades of brown in colour, with orange patches surviving in irregularities, and some orange encrustation. The face not illustrated is rougher than that depicted in fig 1a. Length 98 mm, width at cutting edge 52 mm.

AXE b: a characteristic socketed axe of the Yorkshire three-ribbed type (Fox, 1933; Schmidt and Burgess, forthcoming). The body is short, the blade only slightly expanded, and three wide-spaced ribs depend from a horizontal moulding placed below a mouth collar of roughly biconical outline. The loop at the side springs from

¹ We are extremely grateful to Mr. Lawson for notifying us of his discoveries and allowing them to be drawn by Miss M. Hurrell. At present they remain in his possession. Miss Hurrell has kindly allowed us to use her

drawings. We are also grateful to Mr. D. Vass for his work on the distribution map.

² Our thanks are due to Mr. J. Butler for carrying out this survey.

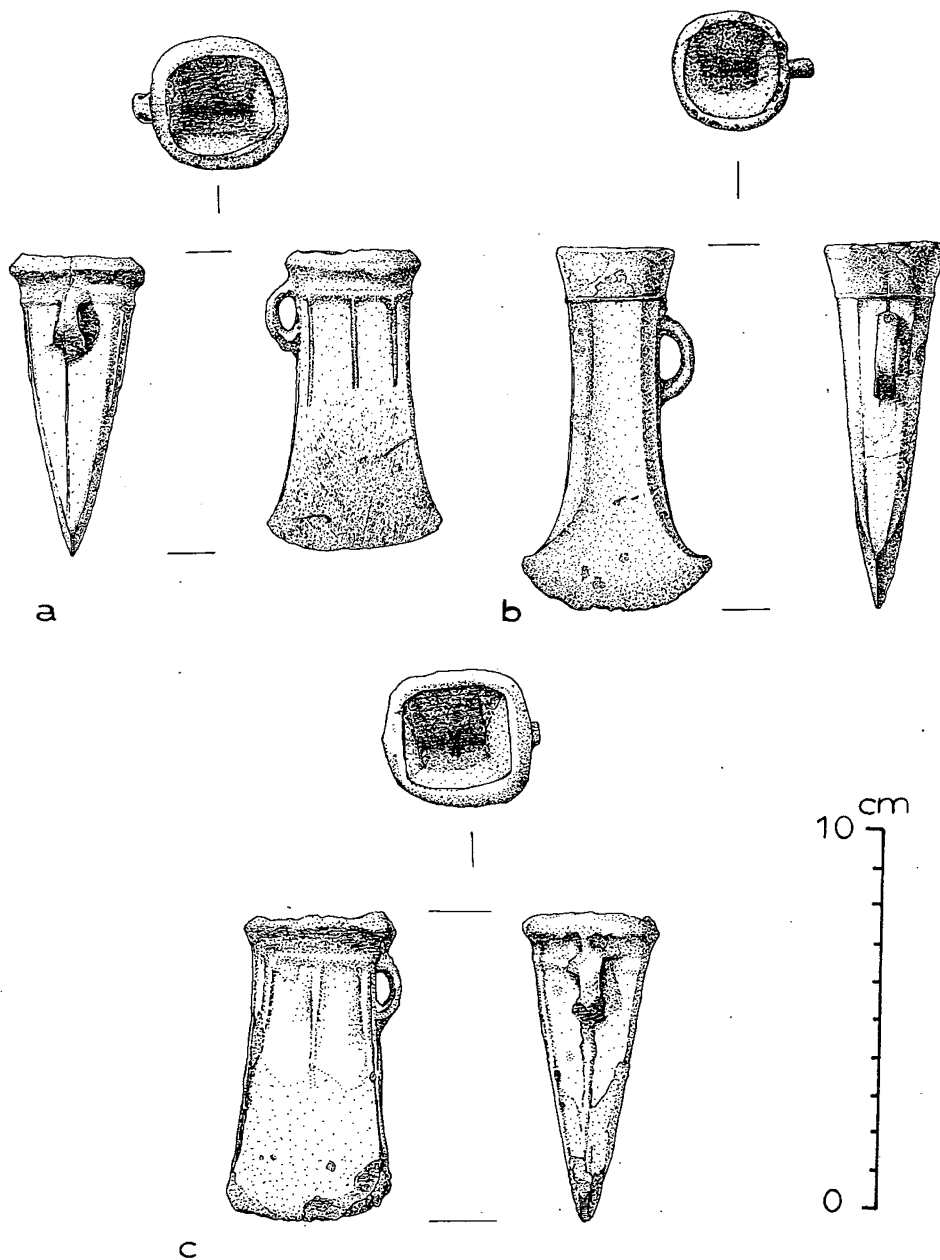


Fig. 1. Socketed axes from a, b, Ulgham Park Farm, Northumberland; c, Trow Rocks, South Shields, Tyne & Wear

a level between collar and horizontal moulding. The casting seams survive fairly prominently at the sides. This axe is in good if rather worn condition, with mainly green surfaces, though the blade has been filed to red-brown and golden hues. Length 80 mm, width at cutting edge 47 mm.

2. A SOCKETED AXE FROM TROW ROCKS, SOUTH SHIELDS, TYNE AND WEAR

This axe was picked up at Trow Rocks, South Shields (NZ 384667) on September 19th, 1867, but nothing further is known about the circumstances of its discovery. Apart from one brief mention (Hodgson, 1904) it appears to have escaped publication. The Trow Rocks axe is a characteristic member of the Yorkshire three-ribbed type, in every detail similar to that from Ulgham, except that it is considerably more worn, and its blade is practically unexpanded. The casting seams at the sides are very prominent. The face illustrated has a patchy dark brown-green patina preserving surface detail, but the other face is so worn and corroded as to be almost featureless. Corrosion pitting is particularly bad around the cutting edge. The surfaces of this axe are various shades of green and brown-green in colour, with a creamy buff surviving in irregularities. Its length is 81 mm, and it measures 43 mm across the cutting edge. It is housed in the South Shields Central Museum.

DISCUSSION

The socketed axes from Ulgham and Trow Rocks belong to two types very familiar from the British Late Bronze Age. Slender faceted axes of Type Meldreth have a wide distribution throughout Britain, and occur in many hoards. While the vast majority have eight body facets, examples with ten and even twelve facets are known. The mouth is usually funnel or trumpet-shaped, flaring out, and with at most a slight moulding around the rim. Mouth and faceted body are separated by a slight moulding or step, but rarely the body facets extend all the way to the rim.

The faceted socketed axes of Britain and Ireland have often been discussed (e.g. Sprockhoff, 1941; Hodges, 1956; Butler, 1963), but no corpus or classification of the type has been attempted. While the idea of socketed axes with faceted bodies may originally have been borrowed from Continental practice, the British versions, best represented by Type Meldreth, are unmistakably insular products, and stand out as such when they are found on the Continent. In their turn they may have inspired imitations in several parts of Europe, notably Southern Scandinavia (Butler, 1963, 88–9). The evidence of associations from all parts of Britain, and many areas of the Continent, is unanimous in placing them in the final period of the Bronze Age. In north European terms this is Montelius V (e.g. one is found in the MV hoard from Gurki, Poland: Reinerth, 1940, Abb, 189), and in central Europe Hallstatt B3. It was one of the typical socketed axe forms of the Carp's Tongue complex, more so in southern England than France, but appears almost as much at home with South

Welsh socketed axes in the Llantwit-Stogursey tradition on both sides of the Bristol Channel, (e.g. St. Arvans hoard, Mon.: Fox, 1926, Stogursey hoard, Somerset: McNeil, 1973), with Yorkshire ribbed axes in the Heathery Burn phase in northern England (e.g. Bilton hoard, Yorks.: Howarth, 1899, 78; Portfield hoard, Lancs.: Blundell and Longworth, 1968), in the Duddingston-Adabrock phases in Scotland (e.g. Gospertie hoard, Fife; Adabrock, Lewis; Wester Ord, Ross; see Coles, 1959–60), and even in the Dowris phase in Ireland (e.g. Kish hoard, Co. Wicklow; see Eogan, 1964). There appear nowhere to be associations in contexts certainly earlier than this horizon. Thus faceted socketed axes like that from Ulgham appear to have been in use throughout the British Isles and in many parts of the Continent in a period which in absolute terms began c. 800 B.C. Many will have belonged to the 8th century B.C., although one of the most intractable problems of Bronze Age studies at the moment is to know how long these final western bronze-working traditions lasted. In central Europe late Bronze Age metalworking came to an end with the rise of Hallstatt power from c. 700 B.C., but to what extent this event affected existing western metalworking traditions is unknown. Whatever the ultimate fate of Carp's Tongue and its contemporaries, faceted socketed axes seem to have been among the most durable of Late Bronze Age products. On the Continent local forms of faceted axes have been found in contexts as late as Hallstatt D (e.g. Court-Saint-Etienne, Belgium; Marien, 1953, B7.2(2)). There seems to be no comparable evidence from England or Wales, but in Scotland Coles (1959–60, 45–8) has suggested a Hallstatt C date for three finds of Meldreth axes, firstly the Adabrock hoard, Lewis, and also the "Late Bronze Age" phases of the settlement at Traprain Law, East Lothian, and Jarlshof, Shetland (where the Meldreth type was represented by a clay mould). Meldreth axes like that from Ulgham thus probably survived through the 7th century B.C., and perhaps even into the 6th.

Some faceted axes in northern and western Britain possess a shorter, more squat form than is typical of Meldreth axes, perhaps due to the influence of Irish socketed axes. While slender faceted axes of Meldreth type do occur in Ireland, the overwhelmingly dominant axe shape there is bag-shaped. Thus a large number of "baggy" axes in Ireland have faceted bodies, the number of facets ranging from six to fourteen. The degree of resemblance to Meldreth axes varies. Some are just baggy Meldreth axes with such characteristic Meldreth features as a flared trumpet mouth, whereas on others the faceting is almost coincidentally a feature on an essentially bag-shaped axe.

The Meldreth series itself is obviously capable of extensive sub-division, but only a few provisional observations can be offered here. Firstly, there are three clearly distinguishable body shapes, (a) a splayed form, the sides continuing to diverge slightly from the level of the loop to a moderately expanded blade; (b) a more slender concave-sided form, as represented at Ulgham, which is characterised by a strongly expanded blade; and (c) a straight form, with sides almost parallel from loop to just above a slightly expanded blade. These differences appear to have no chronological significance to judge from the frequency with which they occur in combination; thus splayed with concave examples are found in the Meldreth hoard, straight with splayed

in the hoard from Haxey, Lincs. (Davey, 1973, fig. 30). There are also considerable differences in the arrangement at the mouth, though some sort of flaring mouth is characteristic. In a few cases the facets may extend all the way to a plain rim, or one that at most has a slight moulding. But usually the facets terminate below the mouth at a horizontal moulding or mouldings, or the base of a band collar. This upper, non-faceted zone is of circular or oval section, and can vary greatly in depth. Finally there is the question of facet treatment. These are generally flat-surfaced and extend all the way to the blade tips. But concave facets are known, particularly in the case of short facets, which curve inwards to end about two thirds of the way down the axe. Concave facets may be further embellished with a longitudinal rib. Frequently the facets, both flat and concave, are defined by raised mouldings.

Three-ribbed axes of Yorkshire type were first defined by Fox over forty years ago (1933, 158, fig. 10b), and further discussed by Hodges (1956). They constitute one of the most distinctive of the many forms of three-ribbed socketed axe found in Britain. Their most characteristic feature is the treatment of the ribs. These are wide-spaced in a way found on no other Irish-British socketed axe type. The two outer ribs are placed almost at the edges of the face, and, as they frequently are aligned with the edges, may diverge slightly from each other and the central rib. The ribs are usually relatively short, extending over not more than half of the total length of the axe. They always depend from a horizontal moulding which encircles the axe below a protruding collar. The loop springs from the side at a point below the collar, at about the level of the horizontal moulding. The other diagnostic feature of Yorkshire axes is their small size, and short, relatively broad form. A distinction can be made between examples which have straight sides, diverging only slightly to an unexpanded or scarcely expanded blade (as at Ulgham and Trow Rocks); and those where the sides curve sharply into a strongly expanded blade. This may reflect only differences in the finishing of the blade after casting, for the two forms regularly occur together in the same hoards. One other feature has to be mentioned, and that is the frequent occurrence of a pair of ribs *inside* the socket, placed vertically opposite each other on the two inner faces of the socket. These ribs may vary considerably in length, from examples which extend down most of the socket from just below the mouth almost to the socket root, to others which are so short and slight as to be almost invisible. The Trow Rocks axe has internal ribs in the latter category, two slight opposed mouldings in the very base of the socket. The purpose of these internal ribs is not clear, but they may result from some aspect of the casting process.

Yorkshire axes have frequently been mapped (Chitty in Fox, 1933, and Fox, 1959; Sprockhoff, 1941; Hodges, 1956), but all of these have been incomplete in some respect. The distribution map included here (fig. 2) confirms that Yorkshire axes were mainly a northern and eastern type, with the major concentration falling in Yorkshire as the name implies. Finds are scattered widely through northern England and into Scotland, where, as might be expected, they are well represented in the Borders and the East. But surprisingly they are also distributed thinly through the West and the Islands. South of the Humber Yorkshire axes are densely concentrated

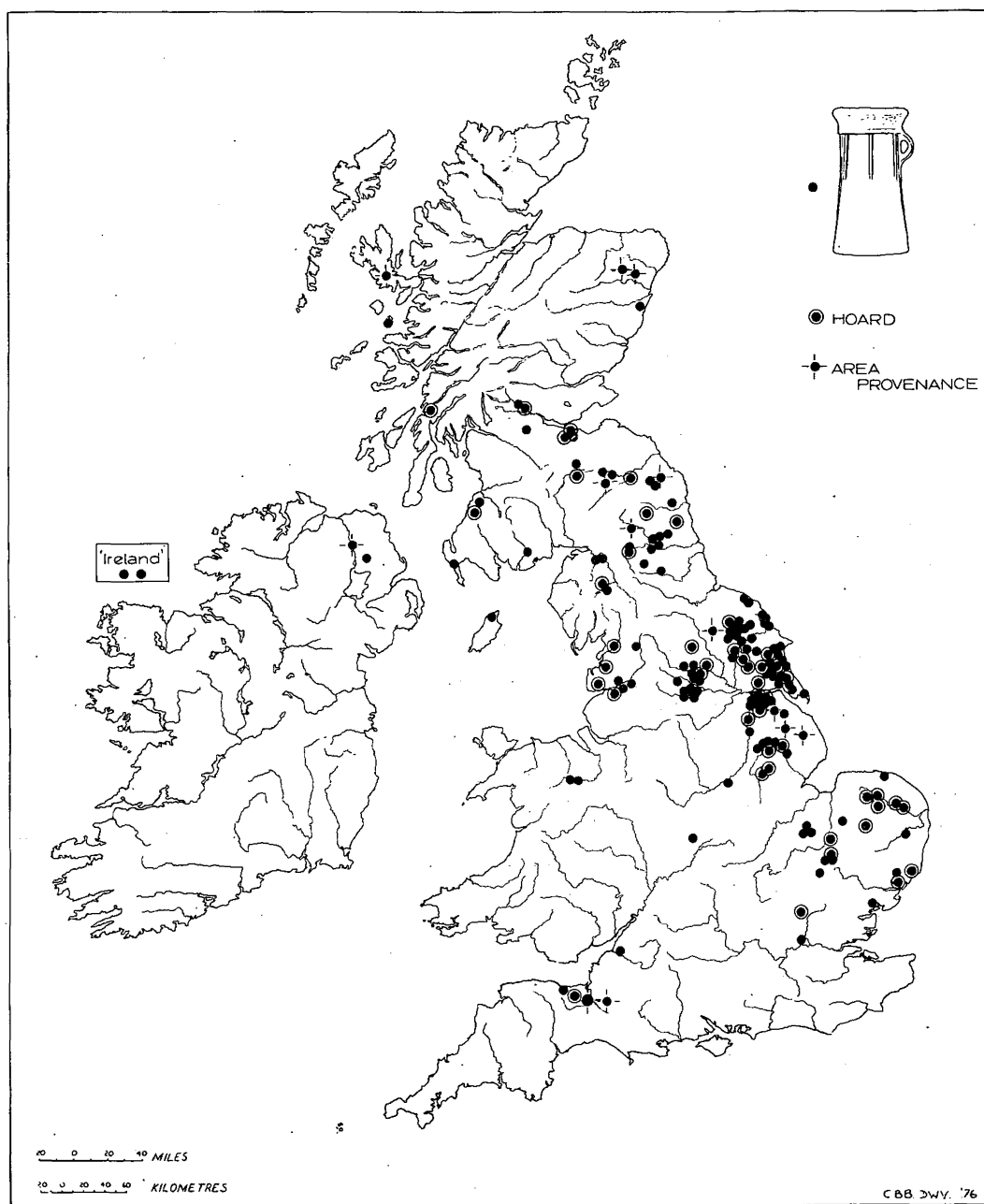


Fig. 2. Distribution map of Yorkshire three-ribbed socketed axes.

in eastern districts, especially Lincolnshire, thinning out beyond the Fens. In an eastern province, taking in east Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, Yorkshire axes are a major component of a distinctive group of presumably merchants' hoards, consisting wholly or largely of socketed axes. Typical examples include the Lincolnshire hoards of Fiskerton 1, Roxby 1, West Halton, "Lincolnshire 1", and Burton upon Stather 2 (Davey, 1973), and the finds from Kirby Malzeard, Everthorpe, Scarborough, Scalby Cliffs and Hutton Cranswick in Yorkshire (Schmidt and Burgess, forthcoming). This group of hoards contrasts strongly with very different types of hoards characteristic of other regions, such as the sword hoards of eastern Scotland and North-East England, the spearhead hoards of the Broadward province, and the founders' hoards of south-east England (Burgess, Coombs and Davies, 1972, 229-30, map. fig. 1d). Yorkshire axes were rarely carried beyond northern and eastern Britain. Sporadic finds are known from the south, west, Wales and even Ireland, but unlike many British socketed axe types, notably their south-western rivals the three-ribbed axes of South Welsh type (Hodges, 1956), they appear to be unknown on the Continent.

Yorkshire three-ribbed axes should be considered in conjunction with socketed axes termed the North English plain type by one of the writers elsewhere (Burgess, 1968, 29, 39, fig. 18=1), but more concisely described as Type Everthorpe (Schmidt and Burgess, forthcoming). These have exactly the same form as Yorkshire axes but lack the ribs. Much of what can be said about the background, chronology and distribution of Yorkshire axes also applies to Type Everthorpe. The two have frequently been found in association, for example in the Everthorpe hoard (Burgess, 1968, fig. 18), and at West Halton (Davey, 1973, figs. 34-5). Both represent distinctively north English developments of the final, Heathery Burn, phase of the north English Late Bronze Age, their developers drawing on local socketed axe traditions of the preceding Wallington tradition (Burgess, 1968a), but influenced by the multifarious socketed axe traditions, indigenous and Continental, which were permeating Britain around 800 B.C. The chronology of these two types is essentially that of Meldreth axes, with associations from many parts of Britain fixing their use in a period beginning about 800 B.C., the Ewart Park phase, contemporary with Carp's Tongue, and with Montelius V and Hallstatt B3 on the Continent. How late they lasted is not clear. Although survival into the 7th century B.C. and even beyond seems likely it is difficult to prove. There seem to be no associations in contexts demonstrably of a period as late as Hallstatt C (7th century) let alone Hallstatt D, but the same can be said of the great bulk of British Late Bronze Age material. This is part of a general problem and one without solution at present: the closing date for Ewart Park metalworking, including Carp's Tongue, in Britain. Two Yorkshire settlements provide evidence of indeterminate value. The Yorkshire three-ribbed type is represented at the Scarborough settlement (Smith, 1928) which might be thought not earlier than the 7th century B.C. on the strength of its pottery. But not only is this pottery not closely debatable in itself, but also the relationship of bronzes and pottery at this site is uncertain. At the Staple Howe settlement, where bronzes include definite Hallstatt C material, the absence of Yorkshire three-ribbed axes may be significant. But here again the duration of the settlement is uncertain, and much of

it could belong to a period around 500 B.C., by which time Yorkshire axes may in any case have passed from use.

A cautionary note has to be interposed at this point. Socketed axes of Types Meldreth and Yorkshire, like the majority of socketed axes from Britain and Ireland, are always conventionally described as "axes", but it is clear that most are too small and too light to have fulfilled many of the functions of domestic axe-heads. The title is very much one of convenience, and a reflection of ignorance of their true purpose. A detailed examination, bearing in mind technology and ethnographic parallels, is urgently required, but even then might produce nothing more than a list of possibilities. Certainly uses in the fields of carpentry, agriculture and warfare should be considered. Whatever they were, they were not simply axe-heads.

Socketed axes like those from Ulgham and Trow Rocks are familiar finds in the North-East. The association of the two types is repeated in the find from Unthank Hall, near Haltwhistle, comprising two Yorkshire axes and a faceted example of Meldreth type (*PSAN*, 4 ser., IV (1929-30), 30), and possibly again in the hoard from Eastgate, Co. Durham (Cowen, 1971). Another faceted example of Meldreth type, the fine specimen from Newham Lough, near Bamburgh (Evans, 1881, fig. 151), is very much like the Ulgham one, though with deeper collar. It should be stressed that about half of the dozen or so faceted axes from the North-East have a more "baggy" form than is typical of Meldreth axes, and may show to varying degrees the influence of the "baggy" faceted axes common in Ireland. Such axes are fairly frequently found in Scotland.

While many more Yorkshire three-ribbed axes than faceted axes have been found in the North-East, at least twenty-four, many of these have come from one find, the Heathery Burn Cave, Co. Durham. The number of individual find spots, about a dozen, is roughly the same as for faceted axes. The Ulgham Park and Trow Rock axes thus belong to common local forms current in a period which begins about 800 B.C., but were still possibly in use two centuries later.

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