SHORTER NOTICES

A Late Bronze Age Socketed Axe from Horsford, Norfolk

BY T. H. MCK CLOUGH, MA, AMA.

AMONG the many finds of interest brought to the attention of the archæology department at Norwich Castle Museum in 1972 was a bronze socketed axe from Horsford. It was found on the surface of a ploughed field, and when found its socket was blocked with the fine reddish-brown silt of the area. When the finder, John Hubble, cleaned out the socket, he discovered the end of a piece of wood inside. The wood, which was in good condition, had been cut to a wedge shape to fit into the socket. It has been identified by P. W. Lambley, of the museum's natural history department, and C. F. Yates, of Norwich City College, as young oak, not more than five years old.

The axe itself (Fig. 1) is of sub-rectangular section, with double mouth-moulding and single loop; it bears no decoration. It has been sharpened, but the cutting edge is not greatly expanded. The flashings left after casting were evidently substantial, but they have been well trimmed and flattened to appear as wide seams on the side of the axe. Its measurements are as follows: length, 109 mm.; width at the cutting edge, 53 mm. It has been purchased by Norwich Castle Museum, accession number 150.973, and has subsequently received conservation treatment.

Axes of this type are well represented in East Anglia, both as stray finds and in hoard associations such as those of North Elmham or Aylsham.[1] They are indeed well known from south-eastern England as a whole, and can be dated to around 700 B.C. on the basis of such associations.

The main interest of this example lies in the rare survival of wood in the socket. No other axe at present in the museum's collection retains any wood, since the axe with linear-wing decoration from Hockwold-cum-Wilton, previously on loan to the museum, was returned to its owner in 1972.[2] Part of the shaft has survived in two of the Eaton (Norwich) hoard spearheads, and part of the handle of the Feltwell flesh-hook still exists.

Little is known for certain of the way in which prehistoric axes of any kind were hafted, because so few examples of their wooden hafts have been found. Those that have survived have carried Neolithic axes of flint or stone. They include the well-known head of a beech-wood haft from Ehenside Tarn, Cumberland,[3] and part of a birch-wood one recently found at Port Talbot, Glamorgan.[4] More complete examples are known from the continent, like one from Sigerslev Bog, Denmark.[5] These are much like a modern axe haft except at the head where they are thicker and are perforated to take the axe. Exactly the same type would have been suitable for flat or low-flanged axes of copper or bronze, and the same principle can be applied with equal success in the case of palstaves and socketed axes.

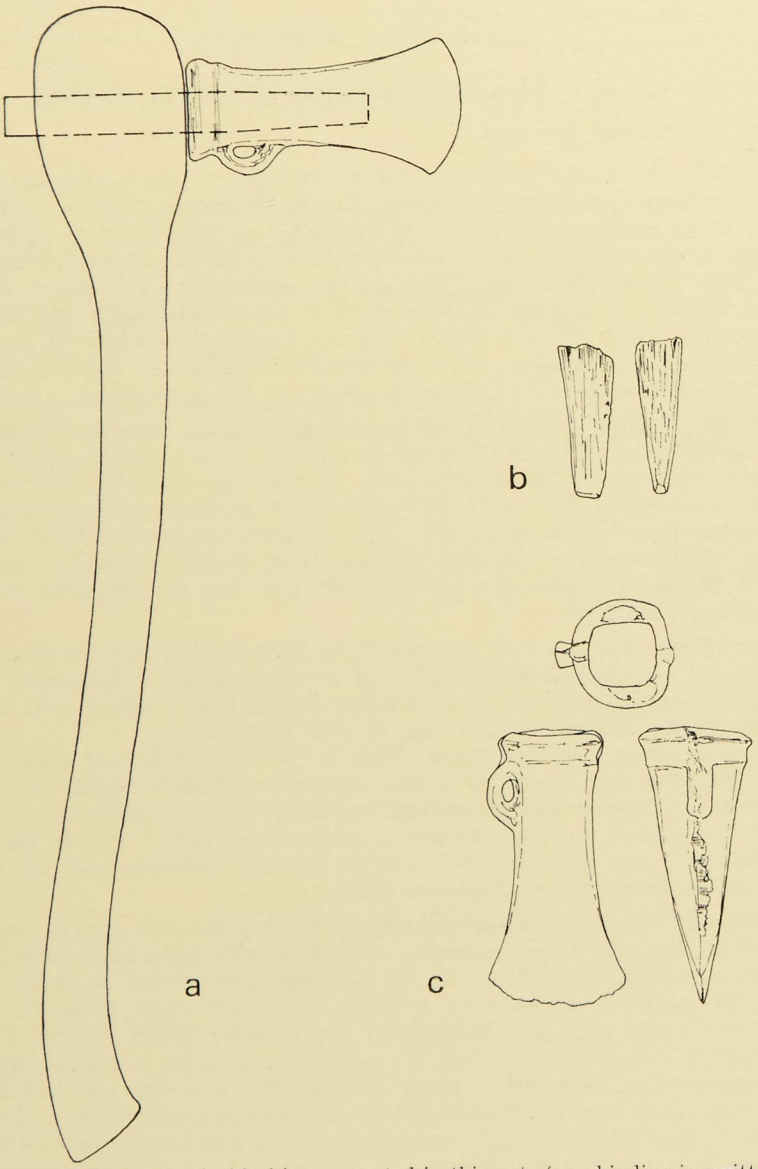

Fig. 1. (a) The method of hafting suggested in this note (any binding is omitted for the sake of clarity) (scale about $\frac{1}{3}$).
(b) The wood from the socket of the Horsford axe (scale $\frac{1}{3}$).
(c) The Horsford axe (scale $\frac{1}{3}$).

It has generally been assumed that a single piece of wood of an appropriate L-shape was used in hafting palstaves and socketed axes.[6] This would have incorporated the angle formed by two branches or by a trunk and a branch. However, during recent work on the prehistory displays in the museum, search was made without success for a piece of wood of this shape which would have been suitable for making a reconstruction. The alternative method of hafting which was then devised, and which is illustrated here (Fig. 1), entails the use of two pieces of wood. The first is a short length of "dowelling" which is shaped to fit against the raised septum of a palstave or into the socket of a socketed axe. The second is shaped like any other axe haft, with the dowel fitting into a perforation through it. The joint so formed can be bound with leather thongs to hold the axe tight against the haft, using the mouth-mouldings and the loop on the axe to secure it even more effectively. The wood surviving in both the Horsford and the Hockwold-cum-Wilton axes is exactly the type of straight small or young growth that the dowel represents.

This method has several advantages over that accepted previously. It would be difficult to find wood suitable for a single-piece haft, and such a single piece would probably split quite quickly under the repeated shocks of use, no matter how good the binding was. Indeed it might be difficult to hold the mouth of the axe tightly against a single-piece haft, or to prevent it from working loose. The method now proposed would have the advantage of strength, in particular because the haft itself could be made of the most suitable wood. Most important, however, this method of hafting can ensure that the axe has a good balance. Although socketed axes were efficient edge tools, they contain a minimum of metal; the thickness of the wood gives additional weight at the head where it is needed, and compensates for the lightness of the metal itself. Those who have seen the reconstructions now on display in the museum have found them convincing.[7]

[1]*Norfolk Archæology* XXXV, i (1970) 6–18, and XXXV, ii (1971) 159–69.

[2]*Bronze Age Metalwork in Norwich Castle Museum* (1966) 20, accession number L.1965.13.

[3]*Archæologia* XLIV (1873) 273–92, Pl. VIII, Fig. 13; and S. Piggott, *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles* (1954) 297, Fig. 47.

[4]*Antiquaries Journal* LI (1971) 296–7.

[5]S. Cole, *The Neolithic Revolution* (5th edn. 1970) Fig. 25.

[6]An assumption perpetuated in popular literature, and apparently taken uncritically from W. F. Grimes, *Guide to he Collection illustrating the Prehistory of Wales* (National Museum of Wales 1939) 64–6, Fig. 23.

[7]This note results from discussion with Miss Barbara Green, to whom my grateful thanks are due. The reconstructions were made by N. J. Arber of the museum's display department.