

## Two bronzes from Caithness

by Joanna Close-Brooks

Two new finds of middle bronze-age metalwork from Caithness have been shown to the National Museum recently, and the opportunity taken to put them on record. Both objects were found in peat, and both have corroded to a dull dark brown surface with occasional pale grey patches, quite unlike the normal green patina of Scottish bronzes. It seems possible that the dull, iron-like appearance of bronze finds from northern peat bogs could have led to some finds going unreported, and thus reduced the apparent number of bronze-age artefacts found in the area.

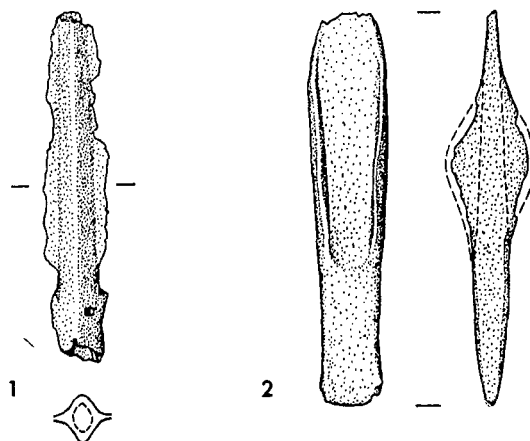


FIG 3 Bronzes from Caithness: 1, Reay; 2, Blingery Moor (1:2)

In January 1975 Mr John Jefferis found a bronze spearhead (fig 3) near Reay at c NGR NC 920643, some hundred yards S of the A 836 road from Tongue to Thurso and close to the Caithness/Sutherland boundary. The area is one of open peat and heather hill land, the peat being only 40 cm or so deep at this point. The broken socket of the spearhead stuck out of a cut and dried peat already stacked on the peat bank, and part of the paper-thin blade was unavoidably lost in extracting it from the hard peat.

The surviving portion of the spearhead, comprising the midrib and part of the socket, is

9.2 cm long (fig 3, 1). Traces of loops at the base of the blade show that it was a basal-looped spearhead, Coles (1964, 106–11) Class E. There is no direct evidence as to the blade shape, but the midrib is markedly diamond-shaped in section. The small hole in the midrib seems to be a casting flaw. The Reay fragment is similar in size to a spearhead with damaged blade from the Eildon Hills (NMA cat no. DG 95; Coles 1964, 144) which is 17 cm long. A larger but complete basal-looped spearhead with leaf-shaped blade from Crawford, Lanarkshire, also in the museum (DG 40; Anderson 1886, 183 fig 189), is probably close to the original shape of the Reay spearhead.

Basal-looped spearheads have been discussed by Coles (1964, 106–11) and Burgess (1968, 19–22), who show that they are a middle bronze-age form, going back at least to 1300–1200 BC, but with some examples, generally triangular-bladed forms, still in use in the late bronze age down to the 8th century BC.

I wish to thank Mr Jefferis for allowing me to record his find. The spearhead has been presented to the Thurso Museum.

In 1973 Mr F Cameron found a small bronze chisel (fig 3, 2) on Blingery Moor, Caithness, NGR ND 29994924, in an area ploughed by the Forestry Commission. The plough had penetrated the thin peat cover and turned up the underlying subsoil, and the chisel was found on top of this at the end of the furrow. A few scraps of medieval pottery were found near by. I am grateful to Mrs Norman for bringing the find to my attention, and to Mr Cameron for information about the find. The chisel is now on loan to the National Museum.

The chisel is a reduced version of the angular-flanged axes current in the earlier part of the middle bronze age, around 1500 to 1300 BC in conventional dates (Coles 1964, 94, Class III, Kirriemuir group). The butt end, the blade and the flanges are damaged, the present length being 10.5 cm and the present maximum blade width 1.7 cm. Overall it has a dull brown patina, but in places this surface layer has flaked off to reveal a pale-grey corrosion below.

Coles (1964, 117, 146) has listed as chisels six small flanged implements with the blades set adzewise to the flanges, and pointed out that these were more common than tanged chisels in the middle bronze age. He retained the classification as axes for other tools of equally small size which, like the new find from Blingery Moor, have the blade set axewise. There are four of these in the National Museum: DC 36 (Coles county number Abd 3); DC 73 (Sut 7); DC 35 (Ban 2); and DC 145, from Cockburn Farm, Duns, Berwickshire (given to the NMA in 1967). These are particularly narrow axes with a maximum blade width of 2.9 cm or less, whereas all other flanged axes in the NMA (save two) have a blade over 4 cm in width, and are correspondingly thicker and heavier; the adze-blades here are at most 2.9 cm wide. None is more than 10 cm long, but this is less distinctive, as some of the heavier axes are also short.

While use as chisels is plausible for those implements with stop ridges it raises difficulties for those without, such as Blingery Moor, and one of the adze-hafted tools in Coles' list, DC 41 (from 'Scotland'). Chisels struck with a mallet on top of the handle might be expected to split their hafts more readily even than axes if they had no stopridge. Nevertheless, all these tools, with or without stopridges, seem so similar and sufficiently distinct from the axes proper, that they should perhaps be regarded for the moment as one group and all called chisels. Practical experiment with replicas might help to resolve the method of use.

#### REFERENCES

- Anderson, J 1886 *Scotland in Pagan Times. The Bronze and Stone Ages*. Edinburgh.  
 Burgess, C 1968 *Bronze Age Metalwork in Northern England c 1000 to 700 BC*. Newcastle.  
 Coles, J M 1964 'Scottish Middle Bronze Age Metalwork', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 97 (1963–4), 82–156.