

A group of bronze socketed axes from Eildon Mid Hill, near Melrose, Roxburghshire

Brendan O'Connor* and Trevor Cowie†

ABSTRACT

In 1982, a group of seven socketed axes was found on the lower western slopes of Eildon Mid Hill, Ettrick and Lauderdale District, Borders Region. Although recovered from redeposited soil, the axes probably represent a hoard of the Ewart Park phase of the late Bronze Age. The find reinforces what appears to be a significant local concentration of contemporary metalwork around the Eildon Hills.

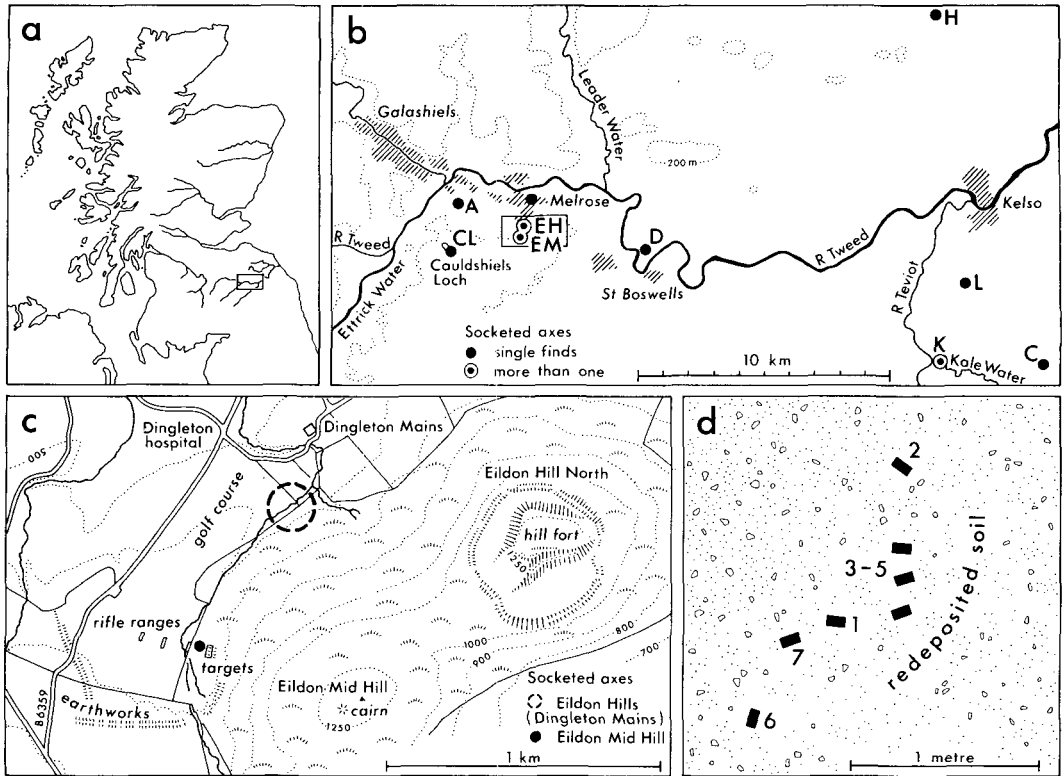
CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISCOVERY

On 9 August 1982, several bronze socketed axes were discovered by Messrs W and A Wilson (uncle and nephew) on the margin of the rifle range on the lower western slope of Eildon Mid Hill, the central and highest of the three peaks which form one of the most conspicuous landmarks of the Scottish Border country (illus 1–2). They were intending to use Mr William Wilson's metal detector slightly further uphill in order to search for shell-cases and cartridges in the area of the targets. While they were walking up the roughly trodden grassy path on the northern margin of the range, with their detector switched on but not consciously in use, their conversation was interrupted by a signal from the machine. The tone indicated a non-ferrous metal, and closer scanning with the detector suggested that there were at least four soil anomalies within a small area. The Wilsons decided to investigate the source of these signals: clearance with a trowel of a small patch of the tenacious turf revealed, to their surprise, not spent ammunition but a socketed axe of bronze (catalogue no 1); a second discrete signal was found to emanate from a further axe (7) also lying on its own just under the turf. The source of a third signal was revealed to be a cluster of three axes lying close together (3–5). Realizing the growing archaeological significance of their find, and not wishing to disturb the site further, the Wilsons responsibly left undisturbed in the ground the sources of what by then appeared to be two further signals of a similar nature. They replaced the disturbed turf as best they could to mask the site, and immediately reported their discovery to the Ancient Monuments Division of the Scottish Development Department, one of whose Inspectors, Dr N Fojut, in turn notified the National Museum. On 17 August, one of the writers (TGC) visited the finders to inspect the axes already recovered and to view the site of their discovery, and the following day, he and Mr Ian Scott of the NMAS, with the assistance of Aidan Wilson, investigated the immediate area of the find (NGR NT 542 325).

A small trench, 2m by 2m, was set out centred on the find-spot of the cluster of three axes

*48 Rodney Street, Edinburgh

†Royal Museum of Scotland, Queen St, Edinburgh



ILLUS 1 Eildon Mid Hill: location maps and diagram to show relative positions of axes. Abbreviations: A, Abbotsford; C, Caverton; CL, Cauldshiels Loch; D, Dryburgh; EH, Eildon Hills (near Dingleton Mains); EM, Eildon Mid Hill; H, Humehall; K, Kalemouth; L, Ladyrig (based on OS maps, Crown Copyright reserved)

already removed (cf illus 1, d). Following removal of the coarse turf, the points from which the five axes had been retrieved became clear: these showed up as irregular depressions in what appeared to be the natural subsoil of reddish clayey loam with plentiful stones (mostly the local felsite). Scanning of the trench with the detector relocated the positions of the two signals not investigated by the Wilsons the previous day. One of these emanated from a slightly darker patch of humic soil: on removal, this proved simply to be a deeper pocket of topsoil, occupying a slightly damper, clayier depression in what seemed once again to be the natural subsoil. A further socketed axe (6) lay at an angle on the side of the depression 10–15 cm below the present ground surface: perhaps on account of the damper matrix, the axe was in a noticeably more corroded condition than the others when found. Surprisingly, the source of the final signal appeared to emanate from natural subsoil with no obvious trace of any feature on its surface. Removal of a small area of this supposedly natural 'subsoil' revealed the source of the remaining signal to be a further axe (2) and threw some light on the context of the group of axes as a whole. It became clear that this last axe was not, as first thought, lying in undisturbed ground, but rather was lying in compacted redeposited soil apparently occupying the side of a natural gully or channel in the hillside. In the time available, it was not possible to excavate the presumed channel nor determine its width or depth, but the circumstances which led to the incorpora-

tion of redeposited soil in natural features seem clear enough for the construction of the rifle range must have involved considerable smoothing out of the contours and irregularities of the hill-slopes. Churning up of the ground, the infill of erosional features such as gullies caused by water run-off, and the compaction of the area by machines could account for the formation of the deposit on and in which all seven axes lay. Indeed, gullies of the type envisaged can be seen elsewhere on the slopes of the Eildons (see illus 2). The axes are likely to have been moved bodily in a load of earth and soil, dumped and then slightly dispersed (axes 2 and 6 were separated by a distance of 1.5 m). Following the removal of the final two axes, the excavated soil and turf were replaced and the site restored to its original appearance as far as possible. Finally the surrounding area was scanned with the metal detector, but no further non-ferrous anomalies were noted.



ILLUS 2 View of the site of the discovery (indicated by the figures) with Eildon Mid Hill in the background

In view of its importance, the find was claimed on behalf of the Crown as Treasure Trove, and the finders were in due course rewarded. Although the Wilsons had cleaned out the sockets of two of the five axes originally retrieved by them, they realized that further unskilled cleaning might result in damage or destruction of evidence, and had refrained from further excavation of the sockets or cleaning of the metal. Five of the seven axes were therefore submitted to the museum laboratory for conservation with their loops and sockets filled with earth and stones in the hope that some trace of organic remains might have survived. In the event, the soil matrix in which the axes had lain proved not to have favoured the preservation of such evidence but it is worth stressing the importance of being given the opportunity to check in controlled laboratory conditions.

THE ORIGINAL DEPOSITION OF THE AXES

In view of their discovery in redeposited soil we cannot be absolutely certain how the axes were originally deposited. However, their number, their proximity and their similar condition all suggest that they came from a hoard, probably close to their eventual find-spot. Whether the seven axes recovered in August 1982 comprised the whole hoard remains uncertain. On the other hand, it is possible, though less likely, that more than one separate deposit was originally involved.



ILLUS 3 Eildon Mid Hill: the group of socketed axes (scale 1:3)

DESCRIPTION OF THE AXES (illus 3-4)

- 1 Socketed axe with angular collar, well-defined horizontal moulding and three short ribs which diverge slightly; the broad loop springs from the moulding and is narrower at this point. The straight sides diverge and are slightly expanded towards the edge, which has been sharpened. The mouth is square and the section rectangular. The surface is pitted and there is a small casting flaw in the collar on the unillustrated face. Each internal face has a central rib from the level of the horizontal moulding nearly to the base of the socket. Length 82 mm, blade width 42 mm, internal mouth width 30 mm.
- 2 Socketed axe with everted collar, horizontal moulding and three ribs, longer and more widely spaced than on axe 1. The sides diverge slightly to the expanded and resharpened edge. The casting seam is prominent on the upper part of the unlooped side; both seams are off-centre. The mouth is squarish and the section rectangular. The surface is pitted and there is a fracture down one angle and across the illustrated face at the base of the socket. Each internal face has a central rib from the mouth to about half-way down the socket. Length 81 mm, blade width 51 mm, internal mouth width 31 mm.



ILLUS 4 Eildon Mid Hill: the group of socketed axes (set out as in illus 3)

- 3 Socketed axe with flat-rimmed mouth retaining two prominent flashes from the runners of the casting jet at the top of each casting seam. The seams are prominent in places and off-centre on the unlooped side. The everted mouth moulding with horizontal moulding below give a concave-profile collar; the loop springs from the lower moulding. The faces are undecorated but the surface bears some striations. The sides are slightly concave and diverge to the edge which preserves the casting seams at its angles; the edge also has indentations which seem original, so the axe was probably never used. The mouth is sub-rectangular and the section rectangular with distinct angles. Length 100 mm, blade width 46 mm, internal mouth width 30 mm.
- 4 Socketed axe, corrosion obscures features at the mouth and collar, but these appear to resemble axe 3. The loop is miscast. Concave sides diverge to the edge which is expanded and, though corroded, seems to have been sharpened. The faces are undecorated. The section is sub-rectangular. Each internal face has a central rib extending about half-way down the socket. The internal surface is also corroded. Length 99 mm, blade width 48 mm, internal mouth width 27 mm.
- 5 Socketed axe of similar form to axe 3, although its mouth is more nearly square and its edge bears smaller indentations and may have been sharpened. Length 100 mm, blade width 46 mm, internal mouth width 28 mm.
- 6 Socketed axe, flat-rimmed mouth, everted with slightly moulded lip; the axe is otherwise undecorated. The loop springs from below the mouth. The sides are concave and diverge to the edge, which is sharpened but not expanded. The casting seam is prominent in places and off-centre on the unlooped side. The mouth is sub-rectangular and the section rectangular with well-defined angles. The surface bears fine pitting. Length 60 mm, blade width 42 mm, internal mouth width 25 mm.
- 7 Socketed axe with flat-rimmed everted mouth and deep ill-defined collar from which springs the loop. Slightly concave sides diverge to a much expanded and resharpened edge. The faces are undecorated but the angles bear narrow ill-defined facets. The mouth is sub-rectangular and the section rectangular. A shallow septum is set obliquely in the base of the socket. The surface is pitted. Length 74 mm, blade width 52 mm, internal mouth width 33 mm.

DISCUSSION

Axes 1 and 2 are characteristic but distinct examples of the Yorkshire type which belongs to the Ewart Park phase of the late Bronze Age in northern Britain. The type is most common in east Yorkshire and plentiful between the Tees and the Tweed. Scottish finds are sparser beyond the Borders, but the distribution reaches the Rhins of Galloway, Skye and Aberdeenshire (Schmidt & Burgess 1981, 233, 237–9, pl 130).

Axe 6 belongs to the Portree type of bag-shaped axe with rectangular mouth and section; the absence of a collar classes it among the Alford variant. This variant is not numerous, about a score being known, but it can be dated to the Ewart Park phase. Most Scottish finds are from the north-east and the Alford variant is rare S of the Tweed (*ibid*, 188, 190–1, pl 126).

Axes 3, 4 and 5 are very similar in form, though probably not identical. They do not seem to belong to the Everthorpe type, the most widespread form of undecorated socketed axe in northern Britain. At 99 mm–100 mm long, the axes from Eildon Mid Hill seem to be significantly longer than Everthorpe axes, the longest of which are around 90 mm (*ibid*, nos 1308, 1312, 1313, 1317, 1322, 1344A). Nor do their concave profiles match the straight-sided, wedge-shaped form of the Everthorpe type. However, the configuration of their collars does resemble the characteristic Everthorpe form (*ibid*, 218). If not of Everthorpe type, these plain axes should belong to some variant of the extensive South-eastern type (*ibid*, 212); but this identification is speculative, especially in the absence of any comprehensive analysis of variants within the South-eastern type. Neither Everthorpe nor South-eastern axes are common in the Borders (*ibid*, 217, 221, pl 129). A possible identification of axes 3–5 is that they belong to some variant combining features of the Everthorpe and South-eastern types.

The classification of axe 7 is also uncertain. It has narrow facets, but it does not belong to the

Meldreth type of faceted axe (*ibid*, 204–5). Nor does it appear to be characteristic of the Gillespie type, though these faceted axes are relatively common in the Borders (*ibid*, 191, 197). Its form is unlike that of Everthorpe axes, though some examples of this type have narrow facets (*ibid*, no 1309). Like axes 3–5, 7 probably belongs to some variant or hybrid.

Although identification of Eildon Mid Hill axes 3–5 and 7 is uncertain the types they resemble most closely belong to the Ewart Park phase, so the presumed hoard, which was probably the source of the axes, can be attributed to this phase, recently dated by Burgess (1979, 271–2, fig 15A) to the ninth and eighth centuries BC.

The form of the internal ribs on Eildon Mid Hill axes 1, 2 and 4 appears to be more characteristic of northern and eastern England than of Scotland. These three axes have ribs which do not reach the base of the socket, types 4 and 5 in Ehrenberg's scheme (1981, fig 1), which have been identified on very few axes from Scotland, seven out of 201 (119 with internal ribs), but on a majority of axes from northern England, 165 out of 314 (187 with internal ribs). According to Ehrenberg, 'Yorkshire axes and related forms in East Anglia were the types most frequently found to have internal ribs of types 4 and 5' (*ibid*, 216 table 1). It is not clear whether the septum in the base of axe 7 is related to the very short ribs in the base of the socket which constitute Ehrenberg's type 1a (*ibid*, fig 1).

The significance of the find may most usefully be illustrated by comparing its composition with the 36 socketed axes from Berwickshire, Roxburghshire and Selkirkshire listed in the recent corpus by Schmidt and Burgess (1981, 172–253). The two types certainly identified in the Eildon Mid Hill group are those most numerous in the region; Yorkshire type, 11 examples (*ibid*, nos 1356–62, 1377–8, 1384, 1556), and Portree type, six examples (*ibid*, nos 1041, 1055, 1069, 1072, 1079–80). There are three examples of Gillespie type (*ibid*, nos 1103, 1104, 1108) and two of Dowris type (*ibid*, nos 1167, 1178). Remaining types are each represented by a single example: Fulford, Rope-moulded, Meldreth, Melrose, South-eastern, Miscellaneous, Welby, Sompting (*ibid*, nos 1004A, 1037, 1250, 1266, 1280A, 1299, 1335, 1589). Six more axes are included in the corpus, but not classified under any type (*ibid*, nos 1674–5, 1689–92). Five socketed axes formerly at Abbotsford 'were probably found on the Scottish side of the Border' (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 69 (1934–5), 440), so may have come from Berwickshire, Roxburghshire or Selkirkshire. This group includes one Fulford axe, two South-eastern, one Everthorpe and one Yorkshire (Schmidt & Burgess 1981, nos 994, 1292, 1294, 1309, 1374). The preponderance of the Yorkshire type suggests that an axe, now lost, with three ribs from Easter Essenside, Selkirkshire, could belong to this type (*ibid*, 192).

The predominance of Yorkshire and Portree type axes is reflected both in finds close to the Eildon Hills and in the largest hoard from the region. Two Yorkshire axes were found in a burn on the north-west side of the Eildon Hills (*ibid*, nos 1377–8), apparently less than 400 yards S of Dingleton Mains, and thus only about 1 km away from the Eildon Mid Hill find. Another Yorkshire axe was found on the margins of Cauldshiels Loch (*ibid*, no 1384) about 3 km W of Eildon Mid Hill. From the grounds of Abbotsford House itself comes a Portree axe (*ibid*, no 1055). The eponymous axe for the Melrose type was found near Melrose (*ibid*, no 1266). The Kalemouth hoard of 14 axes also reflects the composition of the Eildon Mid Hill find with eight Yorkshire axes (*ibid*, nos 1356–62, 1556) and four Portree axes (*ibid*, nos 1041, 1069, 1079–80) including two of Alford variant; the remaining axes belong to the Gillespie and Welby types (*ibid*, nos 1104, 1335). These finds are plotted on illus 1, b–c with a lost axe from Dryburgh (Coles 1960, 72, Roxburghshire 3; Schmidt & Burgess 1981, 258), a Meldreth axe from Caverton, a Rope-moulded axe from Humehall and a Gillespie axe from Ladyrig (*ibid*, nos 1250, 1037, 1103).

The probable hoard from Eildon Mid Hill thus appears to represent part of a significant local concentration of Ewart Park phase axes around the Eildon Hills and of a regional concentration in the middle Tweed valley. The Yorkshire type is predominant in both these concentrations. In trying to

interpret their significance, it is tempting to speculate at least about the possibility of contemporary occupation on Eildon Hill North, even if the nature of the relationship between the finds of metalwork and settlement sites within the region remains unclear. The great hillfort on the north-east summit is as yet unexcavated and undated (RCAMS 1956, no 597), but in the light of the radiocarbon dates available for a number of palisaded sites and hillforts in northern Britain (such as Burnswark, Dumfriesshire) or the range of late Bronze Age material from Traprain Law (Jobey 1976, 192–8), it would be no surprise if the earliest defences were eventually found to have been in existence by the seventh century BC.

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