

Bronze & Iron Ages

The Bronze Age began in Britain around 2500-2000 BC. At this time there was a migration of Beaker People from the Low Countries arriving in this country. The knowledge of working with gold and copper coincided with this. The earliest type of bronze tool to be found in Britain, c2500-2000 BC, is the flat axe (**BR1**). Based on a Stone Age design but of much smaller size it has a rounded butt and a curved cutting edge. This axe has a very pitted and worn surface, which is an indication that it is likely to have a high copper content, perhaps with no tin added. This means the metal is much softer than bronze. Bronze at this time was normally an alloy consisting of nine parts copper to one part tin. In the later Bronze Age lead was added as well.

Another flat axe (**BR2**), of a more developed form than the first example, has an expanded, curved cutting

edge with a bevelled face. The sides of the axe are now raised, forming slight flanges. This probably dates the axe to around 1800 BC. This example has a beautiful chocolate brown patina, which suggests that the metal is bronze. It was found in Hertfordshire.

The axe would have been used mainly for domestic use, clearing woodland etc, but could also have been used in battle.

The next stage in development around 1800-1500 BC, is that the axe (**BR3**) has high side flanges. This evolved to prevent the axe from slipping sideways in its wooden haft. These flanges are sometimes referred to as "wings". The example illustrated again has an expanded, curved cutting edge with a bevelled face. There are also the remains of a stop-ridge in the centre and traces of wood behind it. This has survived because the axe was found in the River Thames.



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BR1 Copper flat axe based on Stone Age design.



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BR2 Bronze flat axe with bevelled face.



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BR3 Bronze flat axe with high side flanges.



BR4 *Bronze palstave axe.*

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BR5 (M1) *Bronze palstave with prominent loop.*

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BR6 (M2) *Bronze socketed axe.*

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Around 1500 BC the side flanges and stop ridge were fused together to form a pocket on both sides of the axe. This is evident in **(BR4)**. It means that the axe was now held firmly in place in the haft and would not slip or be pushed back. This type of axe is called a "palstave" and dates to around 1500-1300 BC. It has a square butt with an expanded curved cutting edge. There is a depression on each side of the blade below the stop ridge.

Around 1300 BC the palstave gained the addition of a loop on its side **(BR5)**. This was for binding the

axe to its haft more securely, and it becomes a feature of all subsequent bronze axes. The example illustrated is in superb condition, with a beautiful patina and shows little evidence of use. It was found in the Fens, hence its excellent state of preservation. The cutting edge is spread out (splayed) with curved bevelled edges. There are three vertical ribs on each face as decoration. The butt is square with a deep pocket. The single loop on the side is circular in section and quite prominent, which may be an early feature as it could have been liable to break in use.

The next stage of development, which occurred around 1000 BC, was that the axe was no longer solid cast. Instead, it was moulded hollow so that the wooden haft could be inserted inside the socket. **BR6** is an example of a socketed axe, which has a biconical-moulded mouth. There are three vertical ribs on each face, and a curved expanded cutting edge. The loop is provided just below the mouth, and is thicker and less prominent than that of the previous example. This type dates from 1000-800 BC. It was found near Newbury in Berkshire.