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Bronze Age Hoards from NW Essex

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Examples of metalwork from the Bronze Age hoard found recently in NW Essex: left - a socketed spearhead, a gouge with fragment of another spear blade and a fragment of sword hilt below; right - a selection of axes from the hoard, illustrating the range of styles and sizes. Photographs ©Saffron Walden Museum.

Our understanding of local prehistory has been enriched over the past few years with the acquisition by Saffron Walden Museum of no less than six hoards of Bronze Age metalwork, all approximately 3,000 years old. This is principally thanks to the Treasure Act 1996, which defines prehistoric metalwork hoards as treasure even when they do not contain gold or silver, and to the efforts and responsible reporting by finders

Barry Knee and other anonymous local detectorists.

This note describes a recently-acquired hoard from the Saffron Walden area, and how these finds are contributing to our understanding of prehistoric use of the landscape. The hoard dates from around 1020-800 BC at the end of the Bronze Age and came to light thanks to the vigilance of Essex Police who apprehended a man taking objects from a field without permission by night.

Subsequent fieldwork by the Essex Finds Liaison Officer, Laura McLean, and local detectorists, recovered more pieces. The hoard shows a typical range of tools, weapons, scrap metal and pieces of bun-shaped ingots for hoards of this period: 14 socketed axes (plus a fragment of another); one socketed spearhead and a fragment from a second; a socketed gouge; a fragment of a sword hilt; a fragment of rim from a bronze vessel; a scrap of flat bronze and nine pieces from ingots.

A feature of this particular hoard was that some of the socketed axes had pieces of scrap bronze carefully packed inside them, and one even contained a miniature bronze axe.

Many such late Bronze Age hoards have been recovered across the country, nearly all by metal detectors. They are sometimes referred to as 'founders' hoards' because they typically contain broken objects, scrap metal or ingots for recycling by a smith or founder. However, that does not on its own explain why so much bronze was buried in the ground and never recovered.

One theory is that by the end of the Bronze Age, iron was becoming the new metal of choice for elite weapons and tools, so there was less incentive to recover bronze which had been 'put away' for safe keeping. Other recent studies have focused on the placing of these hoards within the landscape and their relation to natural features, such as spring lines and upland overlooking sources of rivers, and to patterns of human settlement and land use. There may be other dimensions to the deposition of these hoards and the communities who buried them which we do not yet fully comprehend, and which cannot be adequately summed up by that over-used tag 'ritual'.

Looking at the distribution of hoards from north-west Essex, and the results of recent excavations around Stansted Airport and the A120, our picture of Bronze Age people in this district is gradually becoming more focused. In the small river and stream valleys draining the upland chalk and boulder clay plateau, small communities may have preferred the valley floors and the lighter, chalky soils of valley sides for cultivation, but the wooded clay plateau would have been exploited for timber, natural food resources and browsing for cattle. At least some of the community

may have moved with their animals and the seasons around these landscape zones, each community's territory taking in a slice across the full range of land types and resources. An initial and extremely tentative appraisal of the placing of hoards in Uttlesford district suggests some preference for sites at or near the source of streams draining valley slopes, perhaps overlooking a small local territory or at a locally-significant place on the boundary between chalk valley and clay plateau zones.

A wider and more detailed landscape study is needed to investigate this, so every new find of late Bronze Age metalwork helps to build a bigger picture. The Bronze Age hoards now held by Saffron Walden Museum are listed below. Those marked * have all been acquired since 2010.

Middle Bronze Age c.1500 – 1100 BC

Hatfield Broad Oak 2*. The hoard is dated by a broken piece of a palstave axe, a typical Middle Bronze Age tool.

Late Bronze Age c. 1140 – 1020 BC

Broxted 1* and Hatfield Broad Oak 3*. Both these hoards are of a type comparatively rare in Essex, with distinctive scrap metal of flat bronze plate.

Late Bronze Age 1020 – 800 BC

High Easter, Hatfield Broad Oak 1*, Broxted 2*, Saffron Walden area*. These contain a variety of socketed axes, the distinctive tool of the late Bronze age, amongst other items.

In addition, the Museum has some socketed axes and other objects from a hoard discovered in the 19th century at Arkesden, and a number of other apparently single finds of Bronze Age metalwork. The best of these are displayed in the archaeology gallery while the 'Finds Chest' next to the display case allows visitors to browse a representative selection of all the hoards, including samples of scrap metal and bronze ingots.

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