

A HOARD OF BRETON SOCKETED AXES FROM NETHER WALLOP

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THE realisation that five fragmentary examples of socketed axes of the Breton type may belong to the Nether Wallop hoard, has led the writers to re-examine the details of the hoard's discovery. The axes in Portsmouth Museum were given in 1948 and 1950 by Miss Spyers of the White House, Festing Road, Southsea. Before her death she was visited by Mr. Corney of Portsmouth Museum who elicited from her that she had found the fragments while out on a walk in 1920, half a mile from Nether Wallop. The axes have been inspected by G. Dunning who has noted, 'The condition of the axes is unusual; they are all broken at the mouth end or at the cutting ends. All the breaks are ancient. This suggests that the axes were in the process of being broken up for melting down at the time of concealment'.

The way in which the mouth sockets on these axes are broken links these axes with six other axes in the British Museum and one in Salisbury Museum. The Salisbury axe has a very similar ancient break. The British Museum axes were acquired in 1922 and in 1955 Salisbury Museum was given the further axe by Mr. P. H. Blake of the High Street, Broughton. It was said at the time of the Salisbury acquisition that there was a further axe in private possession in Broughton. All these axes were found by a Mr. Brewer in 1918, in a gravel pit north of the Mill at Nether Wallop and about half a mile north of the track to Hungry Hunt (su 30733760). Mr. Brewer's son stated that these axes formed part of a 'heap of such things'.¹

The similarity of the axes in Portsmouth Museum, and the others give good reason to presume that they all came from the same hoard. A possible explanation would be that Mr. Brewer had only kept the best specimens and Miss Spyers had found some that he had discarded. From this information it would appear that the hoard consisted of at least 13 whole or fragmentary axes, and there seems a strong possibility that further examples will come to light.

The axes in Portsmouth and Salisbury Museums (fig. 5; Portsmouth, nos. 2-6, Salisbury, no. 1) are illustrated here for the first time. The Breton type of axe has been studied by G. Dunning and recently in greater detail by J. Briard.² Hoards of Breton axes are fairly common in southern England; a large hoard was found in the New Forest, probably near Lymington, and others came from Ventnor, in the Isle of Wight, and from near Eggardon, Dorset.³ The distribution of these hoards suggests a strong connection with similar hoards of rectangular socketed axes in Brittany. There, the

¹ This information comes from Salisbury Museum Archaeology file no. 1/21 which contains letters from the Ordnance Survey about the location of the hoard and from Robert Aitken of Broughton about local traditions concerning its discovery. These axes have previously been noted in *H.F.C.* (1939) XIV, 141 and the British Museum Guide to *Later Prehistoric Antiquities* (1953), 45.

² G. Dunning. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (1959), 53-5. J. Briard. *Les Depots Bretons et L'Age du Bronze Atlantique* (1965).

³ Two axes from the New Forest hoard are illustrated in *Archaeologia*, vol. v 114, pl. viii 9, 10. Another possibly from it is in the British Museum Guide to *Later Prehistoric Antiquities* (1953), 26, fig. 8, no. 1. The Eggardon hoard is in Dorchester Museum.

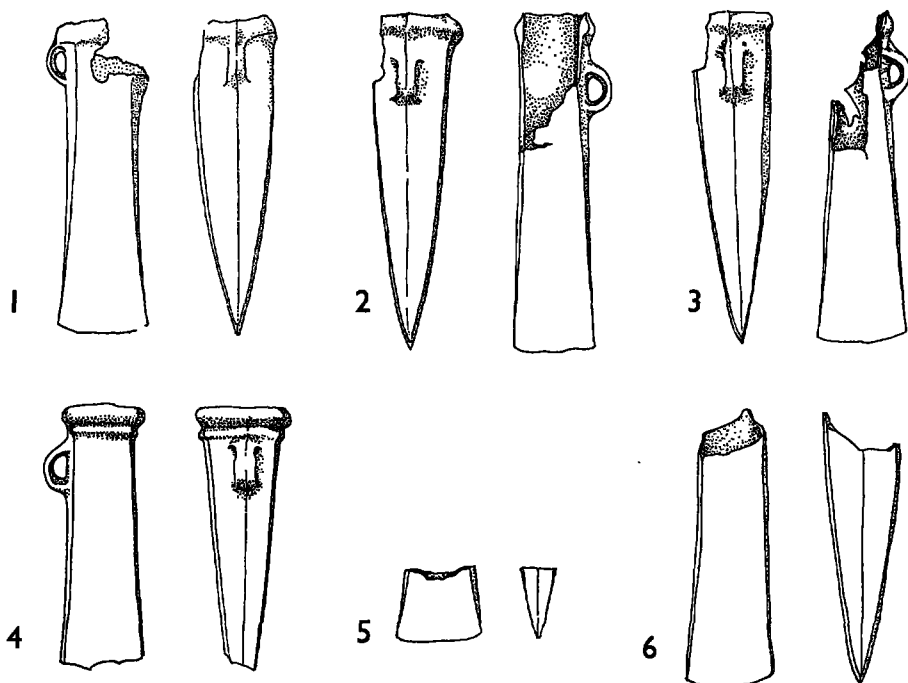


Fig. 5. Bronze palstaves from Nether Wallop. Scale: 1/3.

Saint Bagan hoard has been dated by the Radio Carbon method to 559 ± 130 B.C.

This seems a very reasonable date for the Nether Wallop and other southern English hoards. It is noticeable that some of the decorated Breton axes are imitating decoration on socketed axes from Late Bronze Age hoards such as Llyn Fawr⁴ and Sompting, Sussex.⁵ As both of these latter hoards must be dated later than 650 on account of the bronze cauldrons and Hallstatt C₂ metalwork included in them, a date around 600 or during the 6th century B.C. for the currency of the Breton axes seems reasonable.

Various uses have been suggested for the Breton axes, in particular that the different sizes represent monetary units, or that they were special votive axes. However, it seems far more likely that they were a convenient form of metal ingot, which could be re-cast by the bronzesmith into a useable tool. The Nether Wallop hoard would seem to have been prepared for this re-casting, when it was deposited.

We should like to thank Mr. N. Griffiths who drew the axe in Salisbury Museum and Dr. I. Longworth who has kindly supplied details of the axes in the British Museum.

⁴ W. F. Grimes. *Prehistoric Wales* (1951), fig. 72, no. 2-4.

⁵ *Antiquaries Journal* (1948), XXXVIII, 162, pl. xx, nos. 1-4, 13 and 15.