Hands On Learning
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BRONZE AGE ARCHAEOLOGY PH 4

Neolithic & Bronze Age Archaeology

The term 'Stone Age' was used by archaeologists to designate the vast prehistoric period during which humans used stone for toolmaking. In 1865 John Lubbock subdivided the Stone Age into the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic Periods. These three periods were further subdivided. In reality, the succession of phases differs enormously from one area of the world to another.

The Neolithic (or New Stone Age) is traditionally the last part of the Stone Age. It is thought of as beginning with the start of farming and ending when metal tools became widespread, depending on geographical region. In Great Britain the Neolithic extends from about 4,000 BC to 2,000 BC.

The Bronze Age is the next period. In Great Britain, the Bronze Age is considered to have been from around 2,000 to 700 BC. During this period the techniques for smelting copper and tin from naturally occurring outcroppings of ore and then making tools from the resulting alloy became common. However, it should be remembered that stone tools continued being used in the Bronze Age - there was no neat break between the two periods!



Above: A miscellany of Bronze Age weapons and ornaments.

Bronze Axes

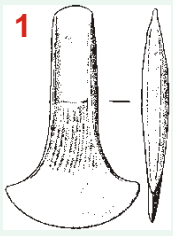
Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. It is harder than pure copper, more suitable for casting and also resists corrosion. Bronze may contain as much as 25% tin, together with small amounts of other metals, mainly lead. It is one of the earliest metal alloys known, and was used in the Middle East from about 5,000BC. Knowledge of bronze was slow to spread, and depended on the availability of tin, a scarce metal. The Aztecs did not discover the alloy until the fifteenth century, and in sub-Saharan Africa, Australasia and much of America there was never a Bronze Age at all.

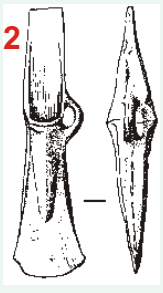


There are carvings of bronze axes on one of the stones at Stonehenge, all with the blade upwards with no handles (right). No one knows what they mean, but such tools were obviously highly valued. In 1998 a timber henge was discovered just off the coast of Norfolk. Axe marks on the timbers indicated that at least 51 different bronze axes were used in working the timbers. No stone tools were used. Was this because such an important religious structure had to be made with only the best tools? The largest axe was used to cut the central tree and not any of the other timbers. The excavators interpreted each unique axe as representing a different individual and that Seahenge (as the structure was nicknamed, see image on left) was a community endeavour. Again, though, such suggestions can never be proved.

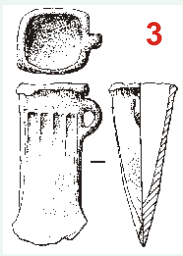


The development of bronze axes is more clearly understood. The earliest type (1) was based on the same shape as the previous stone axes, with the working edge hammered out to create the cutting edge. Hammering also had the effect of hardening the metal, but taken too far, the bronze could break. These axes would have been hafted onto a stick and bound with cord.





Later the 'palstave' axe head developed (2), which had a ridge at the end of the blade to help anchor it in place.



Finally, socket axes developed (3). These blades were hollow and could be fitted onto a projection on the haft, fixing it even more securely.

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Flanged Axe

The very earliest bronze axes were flat, but it became apparent that if the sides were hammered out to form flanges then the blade could be even more securely attached to the haft. An axe head like this one may have been attached in the way suggested in the photograph on the right.







Palstave Axe

Palstave axes are entirely cast, rather than partially hammered into shape. They have a stop-ridge running between the flanges to hold them even more securely in place. Many, like this one, also have a loop which would have been used in binding them to the haft.

Socketed Axe

The socket axe marks a further refinement in design. Many have moulded decorative patterns on the sides, although this example is plain.





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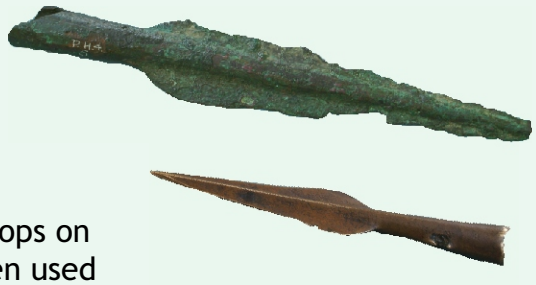
Two Spearheads



Bronze spearheads show a similar development to that of axes. The earliest forms had tangs which slotted into the shaft and were held in place with pins. Socketed types, like these, were a later development. As with the axeheads, the loops on the side of the smaller one would have been used to help bind it securely. Spears may have been used for hunting or for warfare.

The Bronze Age period also saw the development of many other metal technologies, including gold. In 1960 a gold torc was discovered in a field at Moulsford, Berkshire, dating from about 1,200 BC, which is currently on display at the Museum of Reading (see photograph below). Perhaps, despite the violence, the period should be known as the Golden Age?



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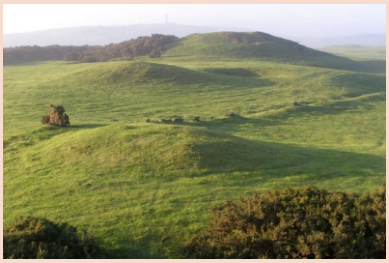
Pottery from Bronze Age Funerals



In the Neolithic Period in Britain the most striking funeral monuments are long barrows long mounds of earth, usually about 100 to 3,000 feet long, inside which there were chambers where the bones of the dead were placed.

By the time we get to the Bronze Age the construction and use of long barrows had ceased and round barrows were the prevailing fashion. Whether this shift was due to new groups of people coming into Britain or because ideas changed within the existing culture is uncertain. There are between 10,000 and 20,000 barrows in Britain and there were probably many more, but destruction by farming and building has obliterated them.



Round barrow cemeteries are found throughout Wales and Scotland although the main concentration of recorded examples is in the southern counties of England, with a very marked focus in Wessex. They are often found in groups, usually on elevated ground, although not necessarily always on the top of hills; examples in river valleys often lie on gravel ridges.



Burial practice within individual barrows varies greatly. Looking at the period as a whole, in the early Bronze Age the dead were buried in a crouched position in a grave cut into the chalk. Later cremation became universal, the ashes being deposited in a small pit or in a pottery urn before the barrow was heaped up over them.

The larger fragment of pottery is believed to be from a vessel that was used to hold the ashes from a cremation. The small bowl is from the continent and it is believed that it was used to hold offerings which were buried within a barrow, as part of the funeral ritual.

The photographs show round barrows on the chalk ridge of Bronkam Hill in Dorset and, below, Bronze Age beakers. These kinds of pottery vessels start to appear in Britain in the early Bronze Age and are associated with the change from long barrows to round barrows.