

# A Western Pontic Socketed Axehead “From Limerick, Ireland”

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Recently a bronze socketed axehead, labelled as being “from Limerick, Ireland”, was submitted to the Department of Antiquities, Ulster Museum, Belfast, for identification. The axe may briefly be described as follows:

SOCKETED BRONZE AXEHEAD WITH LOOP, 111 mm long; 363,5 g  
“From Limerick, Ireland” (on attached card label).

Socketed bronze axehead with single loop; faces flat and sides bevelled; cast oval perforation through each face near socket-opening. Socket of broad oval cross-section, extending for almost exactly half the length of the axe. Fig. 1.

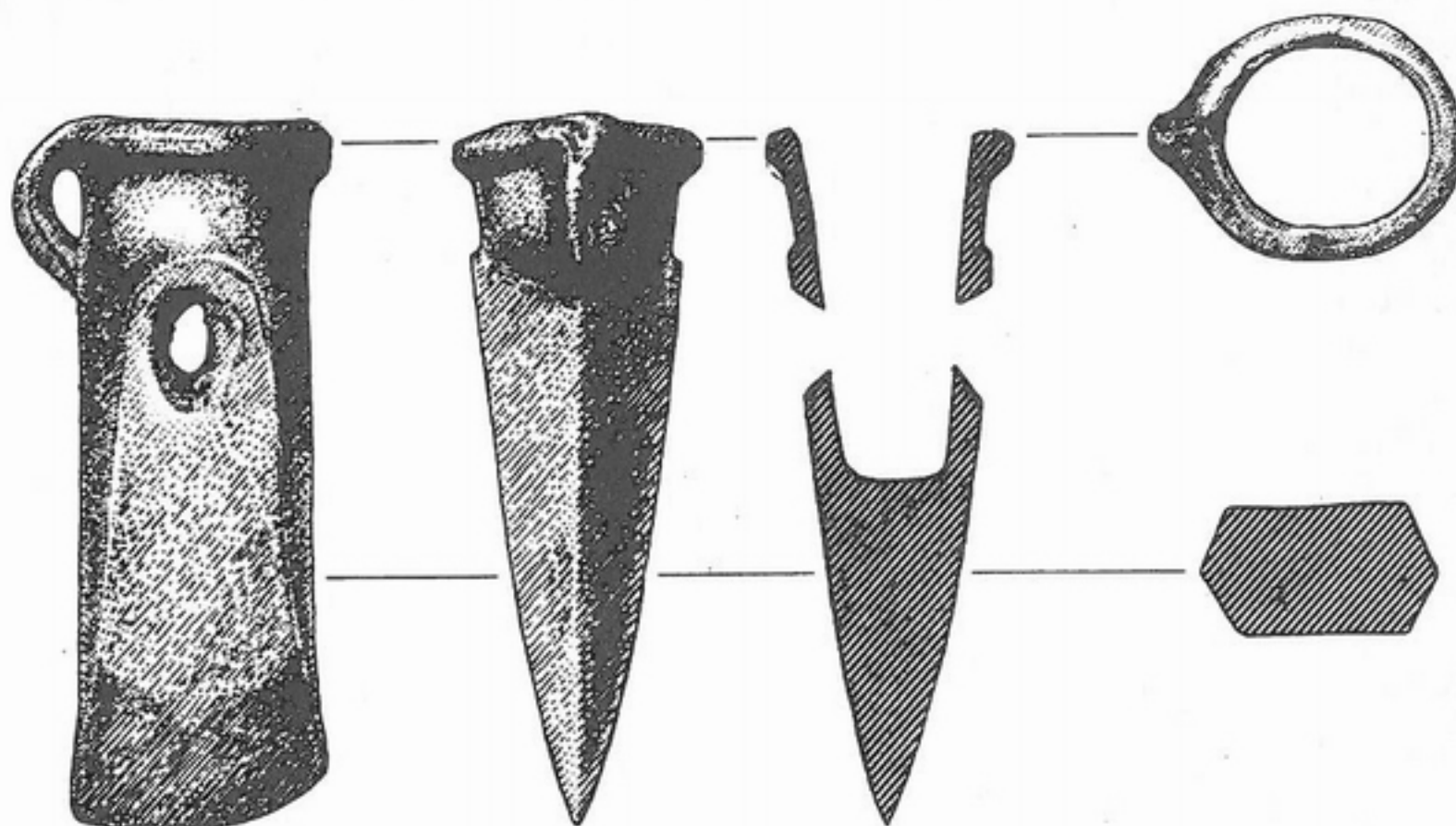


Fig. 1. Bronze socketed axehead of Western Pontic type “From Limerick, Ireland”. ( $\times \frac{1}{2}$ ).

The axehead is quite obviously not an Irish type, and is immediately recognised as East European, of a type represented in such well known Ukrainian hoards as that from Koblevo, Western Ukraine (Tallgren, 1926) and that from Rajgorodok, Eastern Ukraine (Gorodtsov, 1928). For Western European use the context of axes of this type seem admirably to have been summed up by Gimbutas (1965, p. 134):

“The socketed axe with flat faces, having a hole near the socket and one loop, or sometimes two, or no loops, is the most frequent form west of the Black Sea in Eastern Bulgaria, Eastern Rumania and the Western Ukraine: they are typical of the Noua group in Moldavia. Axes of the same kind have been found in the northern Caucasus, where they must be regarded as imports from the west”.

The main problem concerning this axehead, of course, is whether it is a genuine pre-historic import into Ireland or whether its recorded provenance “Limerick, Ireland” is a secondary one as a result of modern importation and loss with subsequent discovery.

The best established examples of the importation into Ireland during the Irish Late Bronze Age of articles of East/Central European manufacture are, of course, the sheet-bronze buckets of the type known from the celebrated hoard from Kurd, Hungary (Hawkes and Smith, 1957). One, that from Dowris, Co. Offaly (Armstrong, 1922), was in a well known hoard of some 200 Late Bronze Age objects and, therefore, presumably from an incorrigibly authenticated context. Of it Hawkes and Smith say (p. 137): "This bucket also, therefore, belonged not to the Irish-British but to the continental Kurd type. The hoard, as is notorious, belongs characteristically to the latter half of the Bronze Age in Ireland. In that period, then, imported Kurd buckets reached Ireland as well as Britain". Another, now in the Hunt Collection, Plassey House, Limerick, from Cape Castle Bog, Armoy, Co. Antrim (Evans, 1881, p. 412; Doran, 1978, p. 6, pl. I, 2), notwithstanding its (added) Irish-type handle-attachments, "is the unique example of a bucket in these islands having embossed ornament in the continental style" (Hawkes and Smith, 1957, p. 142). Two others are on record, also with Irish-type handle-attachments (as replacements), one from Derrymacash, Co. Armagh, the other, sadly, unprovenanced).

While these four Kurd-type buckets do constitute approved evidence of actual imports of Central/Eastern European metalwork into Ireland, with at least a plausible distributional link-pattern (Hawkes and Smith, 1957, fig. 4—though one of the symbols in Ireland is at variance with the text), it would seem highly unlikely that buckets, and buckets alone, however desirable as esteemed and prestigious possessions, should have been capable of making the journey of some 1,500 miles, right across Europe.

While a brief note of this nature, ostensibly about a single find, of not totally reliable nature, of an Eastern European axe in the West of Ireland, is scarcely the place to open up the whole question of trans-European trade in the Late Bronze Age, one or two observations do seem germane.

In the first place, in the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna are three axeheads of this "Western Pontic" type (Mayer, 1976, nos. 996-998), all sadly, without provenances, but possibly indicative of trade westwards as well as eastwards. Furthermore, in the Dowris Hoard itself are four axeheads, with flattened faces and apparently bevelled sides (Armstrong, 1922, fig. 2, 27 & 28; fig. 3, 19 & 23), that might be construed as suggestive of influence from socketed axes of Transylvanian type (cf. Gimbutas, 1957, p. 134; fig. 99, 3; fig. 100, 3 & 4).<sup>1</sup> Axeheads exhibiting similar characteristics appear to occur,

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<sup>1</sup> Hodges (1956, p. 31) refers briefly to "faceted axes of hexagonal section", surmises that they constitute "a transitional stage between the octagonal axe and the bag-shaped axe", and records their occurrence in three Irish hoards, viz. Cromaghs, Co. Antrim (Coffey, 1906); Coachford, Co. Cork (Coffey, 1912 and 1913), and Kilfeakle, Co. Tipperary (Coffey, 1907). (It is highly unfortunate that the Mountrivers hoard is referred to as the "Coachford" hoard). Of the two types between which this hexagonal form is considered to be transitional, the faceted axe of octagonal section is considered to "stand at the beginning of the series of native Irish socketed axes, and from it are probably derived the faceted axe of hexagonal section and the bag-shaped axe". Hodges refers this octagonal form of axe to four Irish hoards, viz. Ballinlis, Co. Armagh (Morris, 1940); Charleville, Co. Offaly (N.M.I.); Kish, Co. Wicklow (Raftery, 1951), and Crossna, Co. Roscommon (N.M.I.). Neither form does he refer to the well-known hoard—which seems particularly germane to the present issue—from Dowris, Co. Offaly (Armstrong, 1922).

Eogan (1964) presents a picture of the occurrence of these two forms in Irish hoards that is almost totally at variance with that presented by Hodges, to the extent that a "correlation-table" (Appendix) seems necessary to define the discrepancies. In view of these discrepancies it does seem a little premature to launch into specious arguments about which is derived from which; in fact, it seems more appropriate to review totally and independently the occurrence of faceted axes (of whatever number of facets) not only in Irish hoards but among non-associated finds before discussing at length their real role in the Irish Late Bronze Age and their precise relationship with the particularly "Irish" bag-shaped axe.



sporadically at least, in Western Europe (*cf.*, for example, Chardenoux and Courtois, 1975, nos. 899 & 900, as well as Mayer, 1976, nos. 988 & 999).

The other main problem, of course, is one of chronology. Gimbutas (1965, pp. 138 & 139) dates the Noua Culture, to which she ascribes the Western Pontic axes, to the period 1250-1125 B.C. The Kurd-type buckets are dated by Hawkes and Smith (1957, pp. 137-140) to a "Late Urnfield source", "Borne out by the Whigsborough or Dowris bucket" "not later than the eighth century B.C.", *i.e.* apparently four whole centuries later. In Coles and Harding (1979, Table 16) on the other hand, "Kurd" (presumably, though not explicitly, meaning the deposition of the hoard) is dated (after Mozsolics) to between 1100 and 100 B.C., which seems, at least, to reduce the gap both considerably and conveniently. The fact that the Dowris Hoard also contains fragments of Class B Cauldrons, dated (Eogan, 1964) to the middle of the seventh century B.C., need not present a problem—though not, in my opinion, because it is a scrap hoard belonging to a bronze-smith as Hodges (1957) suggested, but because it is clearly a cumulative ritual deposit as so many of the Irish bog-hoards appear to have been.

We are left, therefore, with four Kurd-type buckets in Ireland, and (so far) one Western Pontic bronze axehead of not impossibly dissimilar date, as well as an unknown number (but at least four) socketed axeheads that *may* show influence either from Transylvanian sources, or sources intermediate between Ireland and Transylvania, or from sources common to both. Does this "score" indicate that the "Limerick" find represents a genuine prehistoric import? To this the answer must be that the "Limerick" find's authenticity is still in doubt, but perhaps not quite so much in doubt as might have been at first thought.

## APPENDIX

The incidence of faceted socketed axes in Irish Late Bronze Age Hoards according to Hodges (1956) and Eogan (1964); the Roscommon Hoard is omitted for the reason given by Eogan.<sup>2</sup>

HOARD	HEXAGONAL SECTION		OCTAGONAL SECTION	
	Hodges	Eogan	Hodges	Eogan
Cromaghs, Co. Antrim	1			
Ballinlis, Co. Armagh			1	1
Mountrivers, Co. Cork	1	2		
Charleville, Co. Offaly			1	
Dowris, Co. Offaly		1		6 + 1
Crossna, Co. Roscommon		1	1	
Kilfeakle, Co. Tipperary	1			
Trillick, Co. Tyrone		1		
Kish, Co. Wicklow			1	2

<sup>2</sup> As Eogan (1964, p. 293) remarks: "From the published illustration (the object does not survive) it is difficult to know if the faceted axehead from the Co. Roscommon hoard (Day, 1879-82, fig. opposite p. 266, no. 2, bottom) belongs to the octagonal or hexagonal variety. This doubt is not restricted to the axehead from the Roscommon hoard, *cf.* Herity and Eogan (1977), fig. 77, no. 1 (octagonal section) and no. 2 (hexagonal section).



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