

A Bronze Axehead from Tullaroan area

ELLEN PRENDERGAST

During the Summer holidays 1980 schoolboy Michael Lanigan (aged 10) found an unusual object in the dried-out bed of a stream. It looked like a stone as it was caked with mud: it lay 4"-6" under the surface. He showed it to his teacher – Jim Neary at Kilnamanagh National School, Tullaroan. It was brought to Rothe House Museum where it was identified as a bronze axehead of a type called a palstave. It was covered all over with verdigris — a greenish patina formed on bronze through the centuries. This has worn off in places to reveal the golden-coloured metal.

It is a flattish oblong tool with sunken pockets on each face to grip the wooden haft. There is a slightly expanded cutting-edge at one end. It is quite blunt now. It measures 10.13 cm long by 4.30 cm wide and 2.20 cm thick (all maximum measurements). The pockets are formed by raised flanges developing into a stop-ridge about the centre of the object. Below this ridge there is a faint trace of a decorative feature in the form of a raised V-shaped tongue (it is scarcely visible in the photograph).

The palstave would have been cast by pouring molten bronze (an alloy of tin and copper) into a clay or stone twopiece mould. The seam on the narrow sides lengthwise indicates the joining of the two pieces. The cutting edge was hardened by hammering. The axehead is ready for bartering to the highest bidder. He would have provided it with a wooden handle by inserting the butt into a split knuckle, the flanges and stopridge securing it in position. It was a farmer's or a woodsman's tool used just like a hatchet for chopping wood, lopping branches, cutting down trees or such work. When the edge became blunt it had to be hammered sharp again.

The shape of this object indicates its position in the development of the bronze axehead, about halfway between the earliest flat copper axeheads to the final stage, the socketed type. The bronze smith was always aiming to produce a more satisfactory product and learned by experience. The little attempt at ornament shows the pride he took in his skill.

Palstaves of this kind were used for centuries about the middle of the Bronze Age, say around the 12th century B.C. This one apparently was lost, to be found, well preserved, after about three millennia. If the soil conditions had been favourable the wooden haft might well have been preserved too. The palstave itself is a reminder that our prehistoric ancestors, or at least some of them, were skilled craftsmen and able-bodied countrymen.

The young finder and his teacher are to be commended for their care of the palstave and for presenting it to Rothe House Museum in Kilkenny, where it will be exhibited and available for all to see and observe. A detailed record of it has been made by the National Museum where it can be put in context among the large assemblage of bronze axeheads of all types preserved there.

This find-spot of this palstave is in the townland of Graigue (Hayden) in the parish of Kilmanagh and the barony of Crannagh, in the wide plain between Ballycuddihy and the Slieve Ardagh Hills. On the 6" sheet number 22 for Co. Kilkenny it may be located exactly 34.80 cm from the West margin on the map and 22.50 cm from the North margin.

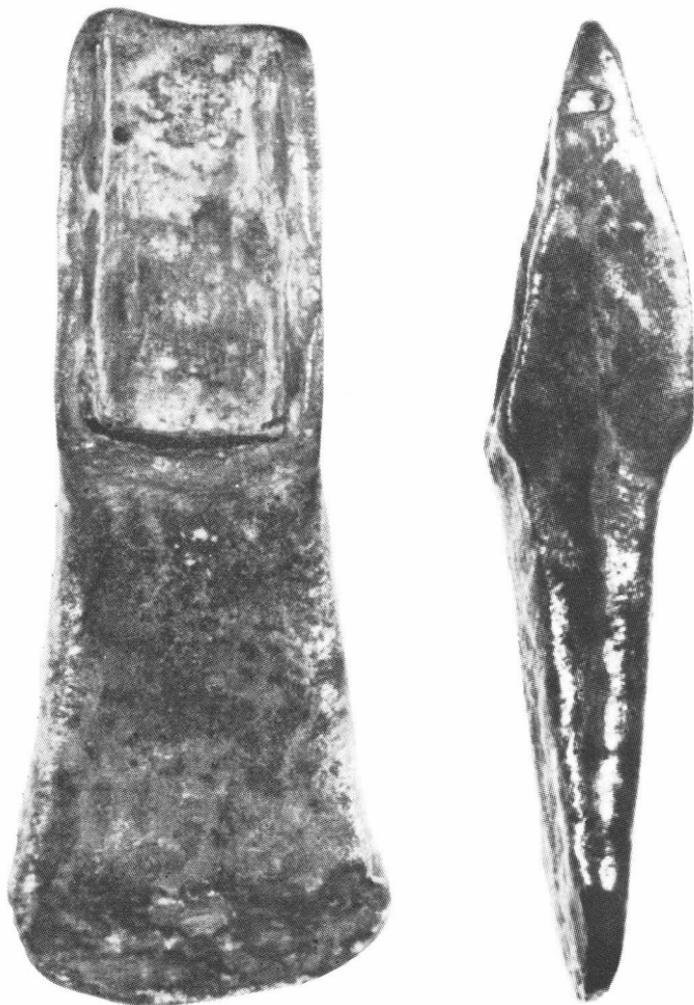


Photo: Courtesy of National Museum.

Palstave from Tullaroan area. Front and side views.