



### Early Bronze Age halberds, daggers, axes and arrowheads

This entry outlines the principle weapons and tools of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (c. 2450 – 1500 BC). Axes, daggers and halberds were made of copper during the Chalcolithic (c.2450 – 2150 BC) and bronze thereafter. Flint and stone axes can occur at this date, but there is little evidence of their continuing practical use; on the other hand, for a short time daggers were actually made in flint alongside metal ones. Arrowheads continued to be made exclusively of flint, albeit in radically different form from their Neolithic predecessors. While flint working skills were also maintained to produce many basic tools – including scrapers, knives, borers and strikers – some of these broad functions were also served by new metal versions, notably awls and knives. The awls – used for piercing and punching – could now have much more acute and durable points than their flint counterparts. Similarly, durable razors were only possible owing to the extremely thin edges that metal can retain.

A new form of **arrowhead** was introduced to Britain at the beginning of the Chalcolithic period by incoming Beaker populations – the archetypal Beaker barbed-and-tanged form. Variations in shape are partly due to desired style and partly to the quality of the raw material or flint-knapping skills available. A wide range of proficiencies can therefore be seen in the finished products, the more highly crafted examples probably indicating special status or a special context of deposition (such as a high profile burial). Although barbed-and-tanged arrowheads are most abundant in early graves, before 2000 BC, there are sufficient examples in later contexts to suggest they continued to be the normal type in use, even though rarely chosen for the grave. The enormous number of arrowhead finds across the British landscape suggests that hunting was a major preoccupation of the time. However, arrows seem also to have been used to kill humans as attested by occasional finds of arrowhead tips lodged within a skeleton.

Most of the metal in the copper and bronze artefacts came initially from copper mines at Ross Island, Co Kerry, south-west Ireland, these having been opened up almost as soon as metalwork became known in these islands. However, output declined towards 2000 BC and a range of other regions contributed to the metal supply, notably Wales and the Marches. Meanwhile the importation of metal from across the Channel also grew over time.

The most common metal find of the period is the **axe** (strictly *axehead*), yet these are rarely found in graves, instead occurring as single finds or in small hoards dotted across most parts of the country. The associated finds, in conjunction with evidence of metal composition, morphological features and decoration styles, have allowed a fairly refined chronology to be deduced with five main stages. Totally flat axes with broad butts in copper, gave way initially to similar but narrower butted versions in bronze. Low-flanges were then added along the sides to help prevent skewing in the haft. At much the same time, many axes were given stop-bevels, a slight ridge halfway down the axe; again, this was a device to improve hafting. Later changes saw shapes change further and then the increase of flange height to be more effective. Through much of this sequence many axes were decorated on their faces and or sides, sometimes with elaborate designs. Preferred designs changed over time, but the practice of decorating seems to imply more than just aesthetics for it was sometimes applied to the haft-end which would be concealed once hafted. Axes were clearly prized, prestige objects at this time, but at the same time there is also abundant evidence for their practical use.

**Daggers** and **knives** are treated here together because they can be very similar. Indeed, any weapon can also be used as a tool (for instance as a table utensil) and most tools can be used in anger as a weapon. The archaeological division between ‘daggers’ and ‘knives’ therefore relies on finding morphological distinctions or separate size ranges. Our ability to differentiate daggers from knives improves after about 2150 BC.

The earliest metal daggers were simple in design with thin flat blades leading to suggestions that even the larger examples were simply knives, rather than true weapons. However, an alternative interpretation is that they were used in like-against-like contests, or duels, their efficacy being suited to the code of combat adopted. From around 2000 BC, blades began to be strengthened by thickening the central spine; this was achieved in various ways and gave rise to heavier blades. These later blades were also more likely to have decorative grooving or, more rarely, *pointillé* (punched dot) designs. However, aesthetics were also a concern earlier; early blades were highly polished and were sometimes fitted to ornate hilts made of two or more materials from amongst wood, horn, ivory, bone, bronze and gold. A small number of dagger hilts were studded with numerous rivets for decorative effect.

Although **flint daggers** might be expected to precede those of metal, this is not the case in Britain. Neolithic flintwork has no obvious dagger-like blades and it was the introduction of copper daggers that gave rise to a dagger ethos that lasted centuries. For a relatively brief spell during this time, circa 2250 – 2000 BC, finely flaked flint daggers were produced, probably inspired by examples from the Low Countries. Although flint daggers were in contemporary use with metal (mainly bronze) types, evidence suggests that they were an alternative rather than a lower-value substitute and they may have been the choice of different factions of the population.

**Halberds** were a weapon type introduced from the Continent early in the Chalcolithic period, but they were also only favoured in limited parts of Britain, those not influenced heavily by pioneering Beaker communities. Moreover, their popularity was relatively short lived, fading soon after the transition to bronze metallurgy possibly due to the steady spread of the dagger ethos. With their stout dagger-like blades mounted at right-angles to a long wooden handle they were a fearsome looking instrument, but they were also rather unwieldy and required skilled handling to be effective. This suggests their use in a particular, codified mode of inter-personal

combat and this can be conjured up graphically from certain rock art scenes in the Alpine region. Equally feasible is their use for the ritual pole-axing of livestock; experimental work has shown their effectiveness in penetrating sheep skulls.

Despite their limited time-span (c. 2450 – 2100 BC), a number of different halberd styles were developed in Britain, whilst a few imports from Ireland were of distinct types. The technologies behind casting the metal blades and riveting them to a carved handle represents the highpoint of metalworking and associated skills at this date. At their apogee these weapons could be extremely elegant.

Amongst the seemingly more mundane flint equipment there were still instances of added attention to form and finish. This is best shown amongst knives, where a highly specialised type – the **plano-convex knife** – was produced using controlled pressure-flaking over all of one face. These most frequently occur in graves with Food Vessels or Collared Urns and are concentrated in Yorkshire.

### Further Reading

**Parker Pearson, M.** 2005. *Bronze Age Britain* (revised ed.). London: Batsford

**Pryor, F.** 2004. *Britain BC*. London: HarperCollins

**Heath, J.** 2009. *Warfare in Prehistoric Britain*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing



*Barbed and tanged flint arrowheads © Wessex Archaeology*

*Axes and large dagger, Gavel Moss, Renfrewshire.  
(Scottish Archaeological Research Framework)*



*Copper flat axes © National Museum of Wales*

*This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Stuart Needham*

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