

Illus 1 *The Inchtuthil axe.*

The Early Bronze Age axe from Inchtuthil, Perthshire, and its deposition

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Provenance

The axe was found in 1962 during excavation of topsoil in the left praetentura—geographically the southern quadrant, the south-east quarter in terms of the excavation—of the Roman fort at Inchtuthil, Caputh, Perthshire (NGR NO 125 397). The find is mentioned in the excavation report but neither described nor illustrated, though a footnote records analysis of its metal as 10.6% tin bronze (Pitts and St Joseph 1985, 252, 261 n 180). Coles listed and classified the Inchtuthil axe (1971, 84 Perthshire 13), but it was inaccessible to Schmidt and Burgess for their corpus (1981, 257). The axe was donated to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1983–84 (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 114, 1984, 597 no 4). The Royal Commission included the Inchtuthil axe in the list of Bronze Age metalwork in its survey of south-east Perth (RCAHMS 1994, 154).

Description

The axe is in the National Museums of Scotland (DA 125) and I must thank Trevor Cowie for access to it and other axes there, and for the drawing (Illus 1).

The Inchtuthil axe is complete, except for some erosion of the butt and cutting edge, which have modern corrosion. The original surface survives except for a few small patches and has green patina. There are two drill-holes for analysis, on the upper face and the right side. The butt is thin and arched; the sides diverge gently to the cutting edge. There is a triple facet on each side and distinct angles with the faces, which are slightly convex with no central bevel. The cutting edge expands a little more on the left side than on the right; there is a distinct edge bevel on both faces.

Length: 136mm; width at butt 29mm, at edge 79mm; maximum thickness 10mm.

Classification

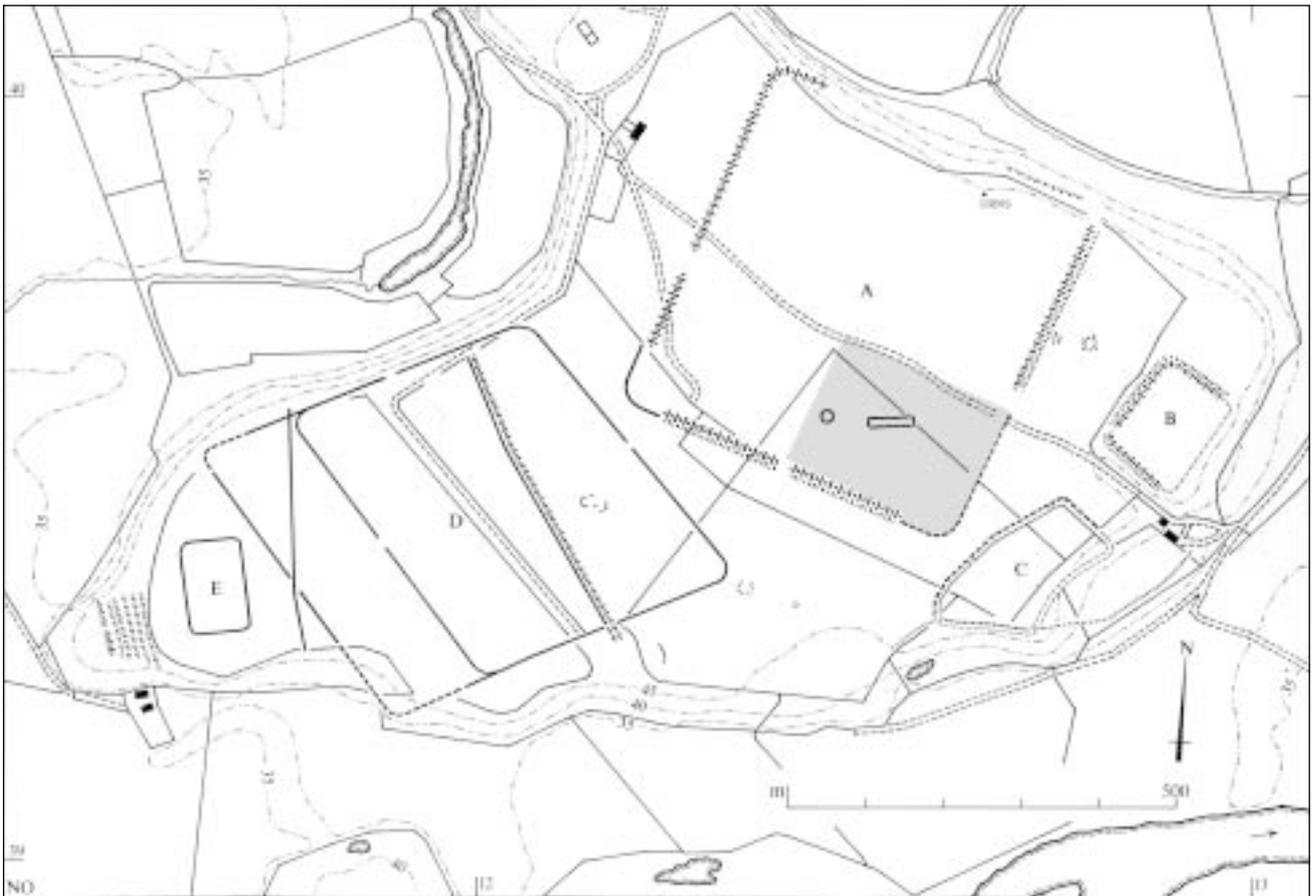
The hoard from Hill of Finglenny, Rhynie, Aberdeenshire, contains two axes similar in form and outline to the Inchtuthil axe, though both have slightly broader butts (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, nos. 85 and 87). An axe from Glen Drynoch, Bracadale, Skye (ibid, no. 88) is also similar in size and outline, though lacking its original surface; another from Camptown Farm, Athelstaneford/Haddington, East Lothian (ibid, no. 54) is similar in outline, but smaller. While the Camptown

Farm axe is attributed to the Dunottar type, the other three are Migdale axes and to this type the Inchtuthil axe may be assigned (ibid, 35–6). Migdale axes are most common in north-east Scotland, but Inchtuthil forms part of a smaller concentration in Angus and south-east Perthshire (ibid, 59, pl 115). Undecorated Migdale axes were probably current between about 2300 and 1900 BC (Gerloff 1996, 15; Needham 1996, 130; Rohl and Needham 1998, 88).

Deposition

The southern quadrant of the Roman fort contained a Neolithic ditched enclosure (Pitts and St Joseph 1985, 248–51, fig. 75; RCAHMS 1994, 28); even if our axe was found in the southernmost corner of the fort, it would have been no more than about 150m from this enclosure (ibid, 78) and it could have been much closer, even inside the enclosure (Illus 2). The eastern half of this enclosure has subsequently been excavated. Its ditch contained fence-like structures dated to the early fourth millennium BC; the excavators speculated whether the enclosure might in its final phase have been mounded over and suggested that other Neolithic monuments were present on the Inchtuthil plateau (Barclay and Maxwell 1991; 1998, xvii, 2, 5). Thus the Inchtuthil axe was deposited close to an earlier monument. While we cannot be sure how visible this monument would have been some 1500 years after its demise we may wonder whether proximity was significant for the deposition—a question that does not seem to have been considered in previous discussions of prehistoric Inchtuthil. Several recent finds of Early Bronze Age axes in Scotland can be shown to be in significant, often geographically prominent, locations (Barrett and Gourlay 1999; O'Connor and Cowie 2001, 225–8; Cowie forthcoming), endorsing suggestions that single axe deposits had a distinct, non-funerary, significance during the Early Bronze Age (Needham 1988; Barrett and Needham 1988, 129–30).

There was other Early Bronze Age activity at Inchtuthil. Two fragmentary collared urns were found inverted beneath the centurion's house of Barrack 30, close to the northern edge of the fort and thus at least 250m from the bronze axe (Pitts and St Joseph 1985, 58, 252, fig 83; RCAHMS 1994, 23). The surviving fragments (Henshall and Cowie 1985) represent a secondary series urn (Longworth 1984, 312 no 1988) probably later than the Migdale axe, though some overlap is possible (Needham 1996, 130–2, fig 2). There is also an



Illus 2 Putative find-spot of the Inchtuthil axe.



Illus 3 Regional distribution of Bronze Age flat axes in Perthshire.

undated ring-ditch in the same part of the fort as the axe (Pitts and St Joseph 1985, 261; RCAHMS 1994, 19, 78).

In addition to its local context, the Inchtuthil axe appears to be part of a significant regional distribution of flat axes (Illus 3). The Royal Commission helpfully included metalwork in their distribution map of early prehistoric monuments in south-east Perth (RCAHMS 42) and the first nine items on their list (*ibid*, 154) are Migdale or related axes. While two are further inland (Baldowie and Blairgowrie), the rest were found within 2km of the left bank of the Tay, from Newtyle Hill in the north-west to Loan Farm, Errol, in the south-east.

Schmidt and Burgess list two more axes that would be part of this distribution, but both seem to have been incorrectly provenanced. The first is attributed to Burrelton (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, no 89), following Coles (1971, 84 Perthshire 5), but the Dundee Museum catalogue gives the provenance as Douglas and Angus, Dundee (Coutts 1971, 60 no 118). The second is attributed to Bracobrae, Grange, Errol (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, no 128), though the justification of this provenance—which seems to derive from the fact that the donor's grandfather was a builder in the Braco area, Ardoch (Coles 1971, 86; *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 82, 1947–48, 317)—appears doubtful. But even without those two examples, the presence of seven axes less than 30km apart along the left bank of the Tay seems significant. The only equivalent find on the other side of the river is an unclassified blade fragment from Abernethy (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, no 277). To the west, the nearest Midgale axe is 35km away at Drumlanrig, Comrie (*ibid*, no 120).

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe and illustrate, for the first time, the Early Bronze Age axe from Inchtuthil and to comment on the local and regional significance of its deposition.

Keywords

Early Bronze Age
Migdale
Neolithic
Roman fort