The Migdale Hoard

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The Migdale hoard (MHG10007; Coles 1969; Stevenson 1956; Needham et al 1985; Clarke et al 1985, 107, 302–3, figs 4.33–4.37) is a magnificent Early Bronze Age hoard of bronze and cannel coal artefacts, comprising two flat bronze axeheads (of which one had been tinned to give it a silvery surface); six V-perforated buttons of cannel coal or shale; and the following items of jewellery and dress accessories: a pair of decorated ribbed bronze ‘armlets’ (but these could conceivably have been worn as anklets), two sets of three bronze bangles, graded in size, one basket-shaped hair ornament of bronze and a fragment of what had probably been its pair, plus at least 40 (when found) tubular sheet-bronze beads, five conical sheet bronze mounts and an embossed sheet-bronze mount. The beads had been supported, and prevented from being crushed, by having thin pieces of willow running through their interiors. One such piece was radiocarbon-dated in 1995, as part of the National Museums’ Scotland radiocarbon dating programme, and produced the result 2282–1787 cal BC (3655±75 BP, OxA-4659: Sheridan 2002).

The hoard was found by workmen while blasting the top of a granite knoll on the moor at the west end of Loch Migdale (according to the 1901 account by Joseph Anderson, Keeper of the then-named National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (NMAS): Anderson 1901). Anderson’s account does not give the date of discovery, and reports that the exact findspot and circumstances of the discovery were unclear, but an extract from the *Highland News*, dated 5 May 1900, cited in Sarah Horne’s *A Peek into the Past* (Horne nd), offers the following additional details:

“Interesting Finds - While the workmen in the employment of Mr McPherson, mason contractor, Bonar Bridge were blasting some boulders of granite at Migdale for the buildings now being erected at Bonar Bridge for Messrs, Polson and MacKenzie they discovered in their excavations caused by the blasting operations a splendidly preserved bronze axe head and several flint arrow heads and also six bronze wristlets and two anklets supposed to be worn by chiefs in the Bronze period. Other articles of personal adornment were also found as well as quite a collection of arrow feather holders made of bronze. There is here, it appears, a wide field for antiquarians.”

As with so many newspaper reports, this one suffers from inaccuracies; the ‘arrow feather holders made of bronze’, for example, are the tubular bronze beads. A further account, passed to the Kyle of Sutherland Heritage Society’s Valerie Mackenzie-Harris by Margaret Thomson of Ospisdale Organic Farm in 2003 following the *Time Team*’s excavations at the Migdale ‘mini-henge’, reports that the objects were found in a bag made of ‘cloth or leather’, which disintegrated, scattering the beads. Margaret Thomson’s father, Lord Migdale, offered £1 per bead to the local community for searching the find area to retrieve any beads that had been missed. It is believed that not all of the beads were passed to him, so there may be some still in local hands. A watercolour painting of the findspot was made around the time of the hoard’s discovery, and the director of the *Time Team* programme was taken to the spot and filmed it for the TV programme; this does not correspond with the position as listed in Canmore or the HER.

It may be that the objects had been in a cleft in the rock where the explosives were being laid.

The beads and mounts may well have been sewn onto a garment such as a hat, as suggested by the small perforations in the side of the conical mounts. In 1956, Robert Stevenson, Keeper of the then-named NMAS, published a reconstruction showing the beads and the embossed mount as a necklace, with the beads arranged in a criss-cross pattern – echoing Joseph Anderson’s arrangement of the beads in his 1901 report on the hoard (Anderson 1901, fig. 1), and alluding to the shape of Early Bronze Age spacer-plate necklaces of jet and jet-like materials, as their form was envisaged during the 1950s. This can be discounted, however, for the following reasons: 1) It is now known that the criss-cross arrangement of beads in spacer-plate necklaces was based on a long-standing misunderstanding; they were arranged end-to-end in strands; 2) the damage to the ends of the beads is in any case not consistent with a criss-cross arrangement; 3) Had the intention been to replicate a spacer-plate necklace in bronze, the metalworkers would have been able to create beads that are closer to the fusiform (barrel) shape of the jet and jet-like beads; and 4) the reconstruction fails to take into account the perforations on the mounts (and possibly on the beads too), permitting them to be sewn onto a backing.

Instead, if one considers the fashions that were current in central Europe at the time, it is possible to find several parallels for the beads and mounts in the cemetery at Straubing in Bavaria, for example, where they were found in the head area of females and are interpreted as having been attached to a hat or other headwear (Hundt 1958; Möslein 2001). It is indeed possible that the Migdale items were inspired by these elaborate garments, since other aspects of the hoard echo central European Early Bronze Age fashion: the sets of graded-size bangles, when in use, would have resembled the spiral bronze armlets found in the Straubing cemetery and elsewhere. Brendan O’Connor’s critical review of the nature of the Early Bronze Age connections between Britain and the Continent (O’Connor 2010) makes it clear that the Migdale artefacts are not imports from the Continent, but this does not gainsay the claim that they were inspired by Continental fashions – with all that that implies in terms of long-distance travel.

The basket-shaped ornaments of bronze had probably been used as hair ornaments, rather than as earrings as had previously been assumed. Earlier examples in gold are known, for example from the ‘Amesbury Archer’ near Stonehenge.

The six V-perforated buttons, which were not new when deposited, range in diameter from 28.5 mm to 45 mm. The largest one could possibly have been used to fasten a cloak, while the others could have adorned a jacket. Large buttons, and sets of buttons, are associated with males. Originally described as jet, the buttons were analysed by Mary Davis (NMS) and found to be of cannel coal or shale (probably cannel coal).

It is impossible to tell whether the Migdale hoard represents the precious possessions of one person, but if it does, it implies that that individual had been male. This makes the bangles, beads and mounts all the more interesting since they were items of female apparel in central Europe. The late Victor Ambrus produced a magnificent image for the *Time Team* TV programme, showing the hoard as if worn (and, in the case of one of the axeheads, carried as an axe) by a man. Whoever had owned the objects was clearly aware of fashions in central Europe, and was probably well-travelled. That person would know that people at home would be unaware that he was wearing female accoutrements, if indeed that had been the case. Or did the hoard comprise some items for a man, and others for a high-ranking woman? We shall never know. What we can say for sure is that these will have been precious and very valuable possessions.