

NOTE ON THE STONE AXE FROM A MIDDLE BRONZE AGE WATERHOLE AT PERRY OAKS

by Fiona Roe

Description

A stone axe ((135040), object No. 500) was found upright at the base of middle Bronze Age waterhole 135071 (SG 135067). The axe is complete and in good condition, with much of the original polished surface surviving. It is somewhat plump in appearance, with a rounded butt and sides and a blade that is not particularly sharp. The axe measures 104 mm in length, 59 mm maximum breadth and 35 mm maximum depth, with a weight of 316 grams. Thin sectioning was considered undesirable, as complete stone axes in good condition are not particularly common finds. Macroscopic examination with a hand lens showed that the axe probably belongs to petrological Group I, which is an uralitised gabbro or greenstone likely to come from the Penzance area of Cornwall. The axes from this particular petrological group are often relatively thick, and compare well morphologically with the example from Perry Oaks (Keiller *et al.*, 1941, 54, fig 1). The likelihood is that they were made out of beach pebbles.

The axe may have been in a bark container (SG 135045) which was placed on the primary silt in the bottom of the waterhole with other objects including a bone point and wooden items, one of which was perhaps the haft for a bronze axe. This deposit is attributed to the first episode of silting after the pit stopped being used as a waterhole (SG 135067). It is thought that the bark container and the objects found with it may represent a 'placed' deposit. Sherds of Deverel Rimbury pottery and radiocarbon dates from associated woodwork provide the evidence for a middle Bronze Age date for the contents of the waterhole.

Discussion

It would be no great surprise if this axe were to be confirmed as another find of the Group I greenstone. This variety of stone axe material was the second most commonly used overall in England and Wales (Cummins 1979, 7) and is also the dominant petrological axe group in much of southern England (*op cit.*, 8, fig 3). There are a number of finds of these axes from middle reaches of the Thames (Clough and Cummins 1988, 266, map 2), so that this petrological group is the one most frequently found in London and Middlesex (*op cit.*, 34) and also in Surrey (Field & Woolley 1984, 97). Another axe from the terminal 5 excavations probably belongs with these finds. This is a weathered butt end, which was found in the fill of a Medieval enclosure ditch (PSH'02, (59905) SF 19516). Macroscopic examination suggests that it too was made from a Cornish greenstone and it may well be another instance of a Group I axe.

Stone axes are traditionally considered to be Neolithic in date, and the possibility of one in a 'placed' deposit of middle Bronze Age date is unusual though not entirely without precedent. The initial use of Group I greenstone appears to have been quite early in the

Neolithic, but in the south-west only, with a few finds from sites such as at Carn Brea, Cornwall (Smith 1979; 17, implement petrology numbers CO 110, 166, 358, 363), Hambledon Hill, Dorset (Smith, in prep; DO 146, 147) and, most recently, the causewayed enclosure at Raddon in Devon (Gent & Quinnell 1999, 53; DEV 177). Finds of Group I or near Group I axes from later Neolithic contexts are dispersed over a wider geographical area and include at least 8 found in Grooved Ware associations, often in pits, as at Barrow Hills, Oxfordshire (Roe 1999, 228).

Stone axe fragments occur quite frequently in post-Neolithic contexts, as for example in hillforts or on Roman sites, but usually in circumstances that suggest that they may be no more than loose finds. There are however some other axes which by contrast appear to have been deposited quite carefully. Complete stone axes found in particular post-Neolithic contexts are especially suggestive of intentional deposition. One such axe, identified petrologically as Group XX, came from the Bronze Age enclosure at Rams Hill, Berkshire (Bradley & Ellison 1975, 86; BER 70), where its position in a foundation trench for the rampart at the southern entrance may be of some significance (Bradley 2002, 54). A complete, small, greenstone axe was found at the base of an Iron Age pit at Gussage All Saints (Clough & Cummins 1988, 161; DO 120). Another Iron Age occurrence is of two Mesolithic axes found in a pit with Iron Age pottery (Bradley 2002, 54). There could be further unpublished examples of comparable finds. There are more instances of stone axes which, although not complete, were found in specified Bronze Age contexts. One such fragment came from one of the central postholes belonging to a house at Thorney Down, Wiltshire, where it was associated with Deverel Rimbury pottery. J F S Stone wrote at the time that 'its occurrence here can hardly be fortuitous' (1941, 132; WI 48) and referred to another axe fragment found in the ditch of the Bronze Age enclosure at Boscombe Down East (Stone 1936, 479; WI 189). Both these fragments belong within petrological Group I. A fragment from another Group I greenstone axe was found in a pit with later Bronze Age pottery at Weston Wood, Albury, Surrey (Field and Woolley 1984, 97; SY 64), adding to the suspicion that some of these axes may have been deliberately placed. There are also precedents for finds of early Bronze Age bronze axes in later Bronze Age hoards (Bradley 2002, 53). The question now arises as to whether some of the stone and indeed flint axes found in the river Thames (Adkins & Jackson 1978) may have been deposited during the Bronze Age.

Further comments can only be speculative. It may be noted that all but one of these axes found in Bronze Age and Iron Age contexts are made from specific varieties of rock belonging to known petrological groups. The waterhole at Perry Oaks is in an area of Bronze Age fields where there had been previous specific Neolithic activity, being sited in the centre of the smaller (C2) cursus and just to the north of the hengiform enclosure. The axe could have been a casual find, picked up as a curiosity. However this particular axe is in good condition, suggesting that it may have remained all along in personal possession, perhaps even being cared for as an heirloom. Could it have been substituted in a 'placed' deposit for a bronze axe which was not found, although there was a possible wooden haft for one? There might well have been hesitation about consigning a valuable metal axe to the bottom of a waterhole. Was this waterhole drying out as the result of a change to a drier climate? If so, the deposit could perhaps have been made in the hope of

reversing the process and restoring a reliable water supply. The conclusion may be that by the Bronze Age stone axes had not entirely lost their former value.

References

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