

Lyme Regis Museum
Lyme's History in Museum Objects
2. Neolithic - Polished Stone Axe
Accession Number LRM 2000/25-2

By Felicity Hebditch



Axe from Great Langdale found at Stonebarrow Down, Charmouth.

The rock, an epidotised greenstone, is geologically very distinctive. 100mm long

Significance

This polished greenstone axe was found at Stonebarrow Down in the 1960s in an area being eroded by the sea. It was made some time in the Neolithic period between 4,000 and 2,000 BC. It would have been used to cut down trees to make clearings for agriculture, the beginning of the felling of woodland and the impact of mankind on the environment. It was given by John Fowles and is on display in the Ancient History Cabinet on the Ground Floor of the Museum.

Summary

Britain became thickly wooded after the last Ice Age retreated and the Mesolithic people lived by hunting and gathering, many of their artefacts being made of the antlers of the deer they hunted. When people began farming, they needed to make clearings in the woods to plant their crops and to have enclosures for their sheep and cattle, so it would have been essential to have axes to cut down trees and to work timber.

Experiments have shown that roughly chipped stone axes are not as efficient as polished ones for working wood. Greenstone was good for axes; certain stones were traded over a distance. This one came from the Lake District.

There are barrows (burials under a mound of earth) on Stonebarrow Down, so the axe may have come from one of these. They are often sited on high ground, but we don't know whether there were many more sites in valleys which were later destroyed by the more intensive agriculture on lower ground. Round barrows often

date from the Bronze Age, but some items in early Bronze Age burials were still in a stone tradition, although others were copper or bronze.

Polished greenstone axes

Mesolithic peoples found it easier to get to Britain as the North Sea was mostly land, inundated by rising sea levels from about 6000 BC, so that many early sites are now under the sea. Off the Dorset coast and Bristol Channel the roots of trees can be seen at a very low tide where it was once land. In the Scilly Isles, for example, a Neolithic tomb is now under water, and the land area was once much larger.

After the ice of the last Ice Age retreated around 9000 BC, Britain was gradually covered with forest, birch and hazel at first, and oak and elm later (we know what their environment was like from plant pollen which remains in the soil). Mesolithic hunters caught deer - the site at Star Carr in Yorkshire shows how they used antler for tools and deer for food. They made arrows stuck with tiny flakes of flint, known as microliths. Their axes were shaped by trimming off flakes of flint or stone. They trimmed pieces of wood to make wooden handles for their tools. These hunters and gatherers may have been nomadic, following seasonal food. Radiocarbon dating shows that Mesolithic sites seem to end about 4,500 BC.

Neolithic farming dates from 6,000 BC in the Near East, and seems to have started in Britain in about 4,000 BC. Rather than a movement of peoples, it may have been that indigenous people were adopting farming as a way of life. They grew wheat, a variety called einkorn, and barley, which originated in Anatolia, as did sheep. Cattle and pigs may have been domesticated in forest areas.

The landscape in Britain was deeply forested, so farmers would have needed to make clearings for agriculture. They may have cleared areas by setting fire to the forest, as the Australian Aborigines did. They used **polished stone axes** to cut trees. Experiments have shown that it is much easier to cut timber with a polished stone axe rather than a roughly chipped one. They needed hard fine grained metamorphic stone, from Cumbria, North Wales and Cornwall, and even jadeite from as far as Central Europe, around Switzerland and Northern Italy. They were roughly chipped to shape in the 'factory' site to make them easier to carry (you find a lot of flakes of stone where this went on), and probably finished by grinding and polishing when they got to their destination.

Axes like this would have had a sleeve or handle when in use, and there are carvings showing axes with a haft or handle. Phil Harding, of Channel Four Time Team fame, found that you had to cut with them at an angle, but with a copper axe you could cut straight into the wood and it was much quicker. Some axes have no signs of wear and seem to have been kept perhaps as objects of beauty or magic.

It is difficult to find the settlement sites where they lived, as they are destroyed in the valleys by modern farming. Sites survive on hills like Hambledon Hill, near Blandford, which had a number of areas where people were living and burying their dead.

In the Somerset levels trackways were made over wetlands as timber walkways. A 'god dolly' was found under one trackway, a human figurine possibly, though very rough, which you can see in the Museum of Somerset in Taunton.

Care for woodlands

Pollen analysis showed that when people started cutting trees, there was a drop in the number of elms. It is possible that this was elm disease rather than mankind. But there was evidence of cereals and weeds that grow in grass pasture.

Now we only have 1% of the Mesolithic forest. This area of Dorset has lost much of its woodland. Medieval custom valued woodlands, and there were rules not to use it up as firewood. There was also demand for timber for housing, and ships got larger. By the time the Mary Rose was being built it took many trees to provide for one ship. Camden, writing in the 16th century, described Lyme as treeless, and presumably all the hills around must have lost their trees to shipbuilding.

By the 17th century the landed gentry impoverished by the Civil War was selling off woodland as handy revenue. John Evelyn in his book *de Silva* sounded the alarm. Landowners began to plant trees.

We have been making inroads on the environment to the detriment of wild species. In America 30 genera of large animals - some very large indeed - disappeared at a stroke after the arrival of modern man on the continent between ten and twenty thousand years ago. We need to care for our trees.

© 2013 Felicity Hebditch and Lyme Regis Museum