LETTERS AND NOTES

A LATE MIDDLE PALAEOLITHIC-TYPE HANDAXE FROM EAST KENT

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990’s, the occurrence of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic artefacts as surface finds from superficial deposits capping the chalk of the North Downs has become increasingly widely recognised. These finds have primarily been made and published by members of Dover Archaeological Group, and are frequently associated with sub-surface chalk solution processes forming capture points (solution hollows and fissures) for Pleistocene sediments, as is common in Northern France. This paper presents a new find from the Alkham Valley, of likely late Middle Palaeolithic date.


Keywords: Middle Palaeolithic, Mousterian, handaxe, high level surface finds.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISCOVERY

In the summer of 2000, a farmer, Mr. Neil Burrows, of Greenhill Farm, South Alkham in east Kent found an attractive flint handaxe whilst ploughing his field (TR 2457 4296). He displayed it on his mantelpiece until 2009, when it was recognised by Mr. Vince Burrows, who brought it to the attention of local archaeologists. One of the authors (GH) initially assumed that it was unlikely to be very old, as it is not deeply patinated white, blue-grey, or stained an ochreous colour, as are many other flint artefacts from the chalk downlands of this area. However, when the axe was shown to other members of the Lithic Studies Society at the November AGM in 2009, it was recognised as a handaxe likely to be of later Middle Palaeolithic date.

SITE LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The field from which the handaxe was recovered is situated at the head of a south-east facing dry coombe on the edge of a NE-SW trending chalk ridge, flanked on either side by dry valleys. The ridge of the authors (GH) initially assumed that it was unlikely to be very old, as it is not deeply patinated white, blue-grey, or stained an ochreous colour, as are many other flint artefacts from the chalk downlands of this area. However, when the axe was shown to other members of the Lithic Studies Society at the November AGM in 2009, it was recognised as a handaxe likely to be of later Middle Palaeolithic date.

DESCRIPTION

The handaxe is in mint fresh condition, and minimally patinated, though faintly glossy; it is planoconvex in section, with the flatter face bearing slightly heavier “dentritic” patination than the other (Figure 1). The axe is small (maximum length = 82 mm; maximum width = 59 mm; maximum thickness = 24 mm) and cordiform in shape, with straight edges. The tip is missing and the break patinated (interestingly, more heavily so than either face). The contrasting condition of both faces (and the tip) might either suggest that the artefact was sub-aerially exposed on a surface, or that it was sealed between two deposits that differed chemically. In either case, swift and gentle burial is implied, and minimal movement once sealed.

It is impossible to determine the blank used to produce this handaxe, although one area in the centre of the flatter face could be interpreted as a relic ventral surface, implying that it may have been formed on a flake. It has been capture points, including solution hollows and fissures, which trap both fine-grained sediments (slope deposits and loess) and, potentially, Palaeolithic artefacts. Further fieldwork will be necessary to more accurately determine the context from which this handaxe derived, although its condition certainly indicates that it has never suffered protracted movement, and certainly had not been contained within the plough zone for any length of time.
shaped with an initial series of invasive soft hammer removals into the flatter face, and then further shaped with a second series of smaller removals into the domed face; these accentuate the volume of this surface, terminating along the centre line of the piece. A further sequence of small shaping scars then followed; these are concentrated around the edges of the axe on the upper, domed face, together with some around the carefully shaped, rounded butt on the flatter face. The left edge of the upper, domed face just above the butt is retouched; a slightly convex area some 35 mm in length bears steep, stepped retouch; this may either be deliberate blunting, or perhaps use damage.

DISCUSSION

Several features suggest that this handaxe may be of late Middle Palaeolithic date; however, none in isolation indicates that it definitely is, and in the absence of independent dating it cannot necessarily be assumed to be. Late Middle Palaeolithic handaxes from Britain and North France frequently display evidence of several phases of shaping (or reshaping; Boëda 2001; Cliquet et al. 2001; Emery 2010; Pope et al. 2006; Wragg Sykes 2009 & 2010; White and Pettitt 2011); this practice is particularly apparent on Benjamin Harrison’s collection of handaxes from the Ightham area, including the grounds of Oldbury Hatch (personal observation; Wragg Sykes 2009).

The apparent retouch (or use-damage) to the butt is also a frequent feature of late Middle Palaeolithic handaxes, which appear to function in a manner more akin to tool supports than core tools of fixed form and function. Indeed, retouched or utilised portions of bifaces are often opposed to a modified, blunted edge, which may have acted to aid handling. Such paired areas of use/manual adaptation have been termed “technofunctional units” (Boëda 2001), and in Britain are most obvious on the exceptional collection of handaxes from Lynford Quarry (67-64 KBP; Boismier et al. 2003; White and Pettitt 2011; White in press.). Planoconvexity, as a result of using an initial flake blank, is also a common feature of Late Middle Palaeolithic handaxes, though obviously not restricted to them; many
of the Lynford examples are certainly of similar form.

Drea’s Farm, Elham, some 5 miles east of this locale, has produced a substantial assemblage of likely Palaeolithic date from the surface of ploughed fields in a similar, elevated, geological situation, and including true Bout Coupés (Tester 1952; White and Jacobi 2002). The majority of the Oldbury area finds also represent surface finds from high up on the Greensand ridge. The exceptional condition of the handaxe presented here suggests that it is likely to have come from a minimally disturbed, sub-surface capture point, though further field evaluation is necessary to determine its precise original context. One might speculate that the “impoverished” Mousterian of Southern Britain might actually be well represented amongst surface finds from elevated capture points away from the river valleys – partly reflecting historical research bias, but also perhaps a different pattern of landuse to that practiced by Lower Palaeolithic hominins. The challenge remains, however, how to contextualise and date such finds, in order to build up a more complete picture of Late Neanderthal behaviour in Britain.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks are due to Mr Neil Burrows for the loan of the handaxe to GH, and to Mr Vince Burrows (no relation!) for bringing the handaxe to the attention of Dover Archaeological Group and the authors. BS would like to thank Dover Archaeological Group for their exceptional work in discovering and researching the Palaeolithic archaeology of the high ground in East Kent.

REFERENCES


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