TWO SETS OF TWINS RE-UNITED IN OXFORDSHIRE

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ABSTRACT

Two pointed handaxes (here termed ‘demi-ficrons’) and two cleavers from the Upper Thames are described. The very close similarities between the two pairs suggest that they may have been made by temporally/culturally linked communities despite the physical separation of the findspots by up to 44 km. Other examples of possible ‘twinned’ artefacts in the region are listed, and the implications for hominid range and occupational duration are explored. It is suggested that twinned artefacts, along with other stylistic varieties seen in the UK, may be attributable to specific phases of occupation.


Keywords: Demi-ficrons, cleavers, Upper Thames, artefact pairs

INTRODUCTION

This is a story of two pairs of artefacts: two cleavers and two demi-ficrons (defined as handaxes where the sides are very slightly concave on at least one side in the plan view), that were all found in separate circumstances in the Upper Thames. They are remarkable because of the striking similarities of the members of each pair, even though their findspots were far apart.

The word ‘twins’ is used here to describe artefacts of the same typology (in this case, demi-ficrons and cleavers) which share similarities over and above their basic typologies, in size, precise shape, style of manufacture and other characteristics, as listed below.

THE CLEAVERS

In the autumn of 1989, shortly after the opening of the Cassington/Yarnton gravel pit northwest of Oxford (NGR: SP 477112), R.J. MacRae found a large flint cleaver on the reject pile, at least 18 km from the nearest raw material source in the Chilterns (MacRae 1987, 1994). In 2004, the author happened to be in discussion with a collector, Brian Beveridge of Gloucester, who said he had a flint cleaver from the R. Constant pit in South Cerney, Gloucestershire (approximate NGR: SU 057965). No information is available about the exact context of either handaxe, but the gravels at both sites are Devensian floodplain deposits, overlying London Clay bedrock. No Acheulean artefact has ever been retrieved from within these Devensian deposits: all have either been resting on the pit floor, partly embedded in the (Oxford Clay) bedrock, or from the reject heaps. Therefore it is concluded (cf. Hardaker 2001 & 2003) that there is a pre-Devensian lag deposit underlying the main Devensian gravels, and this is the source of any Lower Palaeolithic artefacts from these apparently Devensian sites. Mac’s cleaver was from the rejects; the South Cerney provenance is not recorded, but it seems

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most likely that both come from the pre-Devensian lag deposit at the base of the gravels. A comparison of the two artefacts is shown in Table 1, and they are illustrated in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Cassington cleaver</th>
<th>South Cerney cleaver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size (mm)</td>
<td>195x126x45</td>
<td>183x113x41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape</td>
<td>broader towards tip</td>
<td>broader towards tip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaver formed by</td>
<td>tranchet both sides</td>
<td>tranchet both sides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape of tip</td>
<td>rounded</td>
<td>rounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butt</td>
<td>méplat to one side*</td>
<td>méplat to one side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear</td>
<td>very rolled</td>
<td>rolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge damage</td>
<td>modern at tip</td>
<td>ancient at tip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydration of arêtes</td>
<td>one side only</td>
<td>one side only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour</td>
<td>ochre and ironstain</td>
<td>mainly ironstain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>unworked platform on one side</td>
<td>unworked platform on one side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortical surface</td>
<td>15% random both sides</td>
<td>5% random one side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findspot</td>
<td>Adjacent to Thames</td>
<td>Adjacent to Thames</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The cleavers compared. *A méplat is a flat area left unknapped on the side of a biface.

The artefacts were found approximately 44km apart from each other. No local flint of the size or quality needed for such large artefacts can be found, hence the assumed Chiltern source. Not only are cleavers rare in this part of Britain, but both are also well above the average size for Acheulian items. The similarities look rather too many to be coincidental. In particular, the
angles of the tranchet blows are identical. Making a cleaver involves an advanced chaîne opératoire, paramount amongst which is the planning and execution of the blow that makes the cleaver end. The flat cortex on both faces indicates that both artefacts were made from tabular flint. The similarity in colour is noted although no firm conclusions can be drawn from this. To imagine that such parallel results would have been executed by two individuals separated by many generations and different lithic cultural traditions seems unlikely, suggesting that the artefacts are both from a culturally related group.

**THE DEMI-FICRONS**

MacRae was also responsible for the discovery of the (then) third largest handaxe ever found in Britain — which he termed a ‘demi-ficron’ following Cranshaw (1983) — at the pit called Gravelly Guy on the banks of the Windrush valley (a tributary of the Upper Thames, NGR: SP 407057) in 1986 (MacRae 1987). In his later years, Mac, a dedicated hunter-down of all things Palaeolithic, confided to me that he had in the 1960’s visited a person in Witney who possessed a similar, large handaxe, but the person would not part with it and he couldn’t now remember where they lived. In 2004 the present author by chance met another collector, Alan Garner, of Chester, who said he had a large flint handaxe that had come from a family in Witney. They told him it came from Amey’s pit in Standlake, close to the Thames, in the late 19th century. This pit (NGR: SP 386019) is approximately 4.4 km from the Gravelly Guy site. The handaxe had been handed down in the family until Alan acquired it in 1970. He has kindly supplied a photo, and the two items are reproduced in Figure 2. The Witney handaxe is probably the same one Mac had seen years before. It can be classed as a demi-ficron following the definition above, as the edges are slightly concave when viewed against a straight edge. A comparison is shown in Table 2.

The very large size of these two artefacts sets them apart from all other finds in the Upper Thames. In the Gravelly Guy assemblage of 68 handaxes, no other item approached the 269mm length of the demi-ficron — the next longest was a mere 190mm. Even the Wolvercote assemblage could only boast one giant at 244mm. These two artefacts are the largest found in the Upper Thames beyond the Chilterns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Gravelly Guy demi-ficron</th>
<th>Witney demi-ficron</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size (mm)</td>
<td>269x113x47</td>
<td>259x110x50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape</td>
<td>demi-ficron</td>
<td>demi-ficron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>tabular flint</td>
<td>tabular flint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tip</td>
<td>small rounded</td>
<td>small rounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butt</td>
<td>crudely worked</td>
<td>crudely worked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear</td>
<td>well rolled</td>
<td>rolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour</td>
<td>dark yellow ochre</td>
<td>dark yellow ochre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortical surface</td>
<td>30% at butt</td>
<td>20% at butt one side, centre on other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flip Test index</td>
<td>3.10 (Figure 3)</td>
<td>2.06 (Figure 4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: The demi-ficrons compared**

The Flip Test (Hardaker & Dunn 2005) measures the symmetry of the handaxe as a numerical index (Figure 3 & Figure 4). For these two artefacts the results both lie within the range assessed as of high or very high symmetry. The Witney example is the more symmetrical, but there is considerable similarity in the workmanship: although both are skilfully worked with thin tips, more attention could have been given to detail. For example, on each item there are
irregularities in the plan view that could have been knapped away. Once again cortex on both faces indicates the use of tabular flint. The same comment about colour applies as for the cleavers.

Incidentally the Witney handaxe has one distinctive feature: a ‘bi-necked’ point. It may not be contemporary with the rest of the working — the colour of some of the removals is lighter — and its purpose is unknown. Similarly worked points on British handaxes have been recorded from Furze Platt (Cranshaw 1983: 191) and Whitlingham, Norfolk (Sainty 1927).

The occurrence of these two sets of ‘twins’ prompts some questions about Palaeolithic behaviour in the Upper Thames region.

![Figure 2: Gravelly Guy demi-ficron (left) & Witney demi-ficron (right)](image)

**CALLING ALL TWINS**

How many more ‘twins’ might there be in this region? A few others that share close stylistic affinities can be listed:

1. A solitary handaxe from Devensian gravels at Linch Hill near the confluence of the Windrush and the Thames, although not sufficiently similar to be regarded as a twin, compares in style with several of the Gravelly Guy finds some 2.5km away (Hardaker 2003).
2. MacRae recorded three handaxes found close to one another at the Gravelly Guy site
in Oxfordshire that he thought were similar enough to suggest the same hand had made them (MacRae 1988: 130).

3. Six of the Wolvercote plano-convex (‘slipper shaped’) handaxes give the same impression (Tyldesley 1986: 12–24, no’s 1–6).

4. Although not in the Upper Thames region it is worth recording that two of the andesite handaxes from Waverley Wood near Coventry also show remarkably close similarity (Keen et al. 2006: 460, Fig. 3a & b).

No doubt a full study of all the handaxes from the Upper Thames would reveal yet more twinned examples.

![Flip Test result for Gravelly Guy demi-ficron](image)

**Figure 3: Flip Test result for Gravelly Guy demi-ficron**

**HOMINID RANGE**

Such fragments of the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic imprint that have been uncovered suggest nucleated lithic scatters, often dense, with sparse lithic material in-between. That suggests hominids spent significant time at home bases and ranged outwards from them in their quest for food. But how far did they range?

Some of the above examples were found near to one another. But in three cases, their sources are far apart, separated by 2.5km, 4.4km and 44km. Assuming that the close similarities of these “twins” reflects an actual cultural connection between each pair, this offers an insight into hominid range. Obviously the greatest distance is the one that most interests us, because if our interpretation is correct it implies that a group travelled far further than we have seen in the Upper Thames so far. Hitherto the evidence for range in the Upper Thames has been
focussed on the distance that flint had to be carried from raw material sources. For example the flint implements at Stanton Harcourt were about 20km from the nearest flint raw material in the Chilterns (Scott 1998: 112). Similar distances separating implements from their presumed sources are seen in the handaxes from the Wolvercote brick pit (Lee 2000: 113), or the nearby Cassington pit (Hardaker 2001: 191).

Figure 4: Flip Test result for Witney demi-ficron

Figure 5: Map of Upper Thames findspots
Further afield, evidence from Boxgrove showed that in about 480,000 BP, handaxe roughouts were made at raw material source and then the handaxes were carried away for finishing and use elsewhere. Although we have no information at Boxgrove of the distance involved (Pitts & Roberts 1998: 163), it is clear that hominids were holding (or carrying in a receptacle) their tools while walking over considerable distances. The present examples show the same situation, but with artefacts more widely distributed, and much further away from the lithic source. The sequence of hominid movements between the source(s) and the two findspots cannot now be reconstructed; the main point here is to emphasise hominid mobility. In the Midlands there are cases of flint artefacts occurring even further from bedrock flint (Wymer 1988), but a more detailed examination of these finds is needed to establish whether the flint could be from local Quaternary deposits.

DOES ‘TWINNING’ OFFER ANY ARCHAEOLOGICAL MESSAGE?

Using stylistic affinities to point to the same group or individual having made items that are found spatially apart is a somewhat subjective operation, especially as there are many examples of excavated sites that display a wide range of styles within the site, and many widely separated sites that yield similar artefact forms. It may be argued that the perceived affinities are the product of an over-active imagination, or they could be purely coincidental; within the large time-spans when Acheulean toolmakers occupied Britain there could have been different occasions when similar shapes were produced. Two arguments can be advanced in response to this enigma:

1. The first relates to occupational phases, and offers the possibility of placing particular styles within chronological brackets. As the chronological jigsaw of the British Quaternary becomes clearer, it is more plausible to suggest periods of occupation punctuated by periods of human absence. Because of its insular position at the northernmost edge of the Palaeolithic world, Britain probably had more periods of human absence than the Continent, and this would provide, uniquely, a sequence of discreet occupation slots into which different sets of artefact assemblages may eventually be attributable. Since basic typology such as handaxe manufacture is too unreliable an indicator of chronology, we need to seek other evidence to assist in this task. A volatile climate, creating a wide variety of environmental conditions, coupled with physical isolation, offers the possibility that regional stylistic variants developed here. Within the British Lower Palaeolithic several of these can already be discerned, such as the Clactonian, the scrapers of High Lodge (Ashton et al. 1992) and twisted ovates. These variants are not quite the same thing as twinned artefacts but they represent another facet of the evidence contributing to our understanding of chronology — temporal and spatial isolation leading to specialised artefact forms. They may indicate social affinity over a wider region rather than just an individual or group. The subject of local stylistic variation within a generally standardised toolkit was discussed by Isaac (1977: 95–6), who referred to examples of similar situations occurring in modern surviving hunter-gatherer communities.

Detailed study of these variants has barely begun, but already White has argued that one of them, the twisted ovate, occurs predominantly in MIS 11 (White 1998: 103). Wenban-Smith has emphasised that the Clactonian is best explained as a British industrial variant specific to the early parts of MIS 11 (Wenban-Smith 1998). It remains to be seen where other typological/technological styles can be further used as temporal or spatial markers in the British sequence.

2. The second point is that when these items are placed next to one another, bearing in mind
they are all Upper Thames provenanced, the similarities are so close that one’s intuitive feeling is they are from the same hand or group, although putting this into words is an inadequate substitute for actual observation. We may note numerous other sites where large numbers of handaxes closely resemble one another. At the prolific Kalambo Falls site in Zambia, at Site B Floor 5, the handaxes are so similar they almost look as if they were cast in a mould rather than knapped (Clark 2001, or see the photograph in Bordes 1968: 70). This establishes that Acheulean tool-makers did seem to have definite types and sizes in mind, and adds credibility to the claim that twinned items might be from the same hand or group. Other examples of ‘family likenesses’ from sites in Britain include the ‘classic’ plano-convex handaxes from Wolvercote near Oxford (Tyldesley 1986), the ovates from Warren Hill in Suffolk (Smith 1931), the twisted ovates from Rickson’s Pit, Swanscombe (Burchell 1931, 1934) or the pointed handaxes from the Middle Gravels there (Roe 1981: 72–76). If we can identify a particular composer or artist simply by hearing or seeing their work, it should also be possible to recognise the hand of an individual tool-maker when certain conditions are met. These conditions are geographic and temporal proximity (within tolerances as in the present examples), and precise, detailed similarities in the workmanship. The fact that the tools were made by pre-*sapiens* hominids a long time ago is irrelevant: they are all part of a handicraft that is the hallmark of the human creative process. The author is of the opinion that a single individual made the cleavers and another the demi-ficrons, but even if the same individuals were not responsible, a social link, in family groups or inherited skills, seems to be implied.

It is easier to appreciate why we can today recognise artefacts of striking similarity from different places if the actual number of occupations was very few: groups within a region made similar items because they were ‘contemporary’, meaning that they belonged to linked generations or groups, though the length of the generation chain and the size of the group are of course unknown. If occupation had lasted continuously for hundreds of thousands of years, would we really be lucky enough to spot these ‘twins’ amongst thousands of generations of occupants? The identification of these linked artefacts would fit with a scenario of relatively short occupations, although more corroborative evidence is needed to firm up this case. We have little idea how far, spatially or temporally, an apparently regional typological custom, such as the demi-ficron shape discussed here, might extend. Widening the enquiry to include Continental sites would be essential in taking the subject further.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The identification of two sets of remarkably similar demi-ficrons and cleavers from the Upper Thames region, widely separated spatially, prompts the suggestion that they may have been made by culturally and temporally-linked societies. They may have been closely contemporary, or sharing an inherited network over several generations. It is argued that the existence of these and other similar examples from the Upper Thames and Midlands may imply that occupations were of limited duration in the Lower Palaeolithic.

The possibility that Acheulean hominids in the Upper Thames ranged further than had been previously shown is proposed, but this is based on a single instance of separation by 44 km and needs further corroboration. It is proposed that the occurrence of artefacts of similar appearance may be a part of a wider phenomenon of locally specialised artefact forms, such as the Clactonian, High Lodge scrapers and twisted ovates. The increased chronological precision now becoming clear in the British Palaeolithic, coupled with the unique position of Britain (as opposed to the Continent) in having clearly separated occupation periods, allows us to ask whether such specialised forms can be attributed to any of these periods.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Alan Garner and Brian Beveridge for kindly allowing me to publish their finds, and Professor Derek Roe for reading the draft of this paper and making a number of helpful comments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


