A BOUT COUPÉ HANDAXE FROM ENFIELD IN THE LOWER LEA VALLEY

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INTRODUCTION

This report discusses a Palaeolithic handaxe recovered during an excavation conducted at Plevna Road, Lower Edmonton in the London Borough of Enfield (TQ 3450 9345: site code PVA 99). The excavations were conducted by Pre-Construct Archaeology between August and November 1999 and revealed evidence of occupation dating from the Mesolithic to the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age, the findings of which will be reported elsewhere (Bishop, forthcoming). The handaxe was recovered from a Neolithic ditch feature.

DESCRIPTION

The handaxe is a sub-triangular or cordiform shaped implement (Fig. 1), which measures 115mm long, 86mm wide and 26mm thick. Its weight is 262g. Both faces exhibit refined all-over thinning with one face characterized by relatively small parallel removals, the other with larger and wider flake scars, removed centripetally. It has a slightly convex butt with distinct angles between the butt and the virtually straight lateral margins. It is finished with fine bifacial retouch to the butt and with marginal retouch concentrated on one edge on each face only, forming three fully developed and continuous cutting edges around its perimeter. Specifically, it has very close parallels with the distinctive handaxes known as Bout Coupé types frequently considered to date to the Middle Palaeolithic Mousterian.

The handaxe is made on a greyish brown translucent flint containing frequent lighter coloured cherty patches. No flint cobbles suitably large enough for its manufacture were observed within the gravel terrace deposits at the site, although as these can be highly variable it is possible that the raw material used for its manufacture was procured from similar deposits close by. Its surface exhibits some very slight rounding, possibly from wind polishing, extended handling or just through movement and settlement within its burial matrix, and it has experienced some slight chipping around its ‘point’ following recortication/deep patination. One face is fully recorticated and the other exhibits a dendritic or ‘basketwork’ pattern. Both the polishing and its distinctive recortication are frequently recorded on other Bout Coupé handaxes, although the significance of these features is uncertain.
As the implement was recovered from a Neolithic ditch, it is uncertain where it had been originally discarded. It may have been incorporated into the ditch from close by, such as through slumping of its edges, however, the excavator considered it to have been deliberately deposited, and therefore may have been found at some distance from the site and carried around before being deliberately deposited, possibly having been recognized as an exotic and unusual object. With these possibilities in mind, it must be regarded as unprovenanced, although the underlying geology of the site would not be incompatible with it originally having been discarded close by.

GEOLOGY

In the Enfield area, the western margins of the lower Lea Valley comprise wide Pleistocene gravel terraces frequently capped by brickearths of the Enfield Silt Deposit. During the Pleistocene, the whole area was dissected by numerous shallow river valleys, generally showing a west to east drainage pattern, many of which continued as prominent features throughout much of the prehistoric and historic periods.

Plevna Road was located approximately 1km west of the River Lea floodplain and its Pleistocene deposits consist of Leyton Gravels, a Lea equivalent of the lower Thames East Tilbury Gravels or middle Thames Kempton Park Gravels, the latter thought to be Middle Devensian in date (c. 45 000-30 000BP, Gibbard 1994). Overlying these are sandy silts of the Enfield Silt Deposits. Similar deposits, colloquially known as brickearths, are found extensively throughout the London region and beyond, and are polygenic and multi-chronological (ibid., 96-7), although
here they must be of Middle Devensian date or later. The level on the top of natural terrace deposits at the site varied between c.11-12m OD.

To the east of the site, beneath the floodplain alluvium, organic plant bearing beds containing cold climate or full glacial plant assemblages are present, known as the Lea Valley Arctic Beds or Ponders End Stage, and which have been dated to c.21 000-28 000BP (Gibbard 1994, 192). These were first identified at Pickett’s Lock, to the northeast, and may equate with, or pre-date, the Shepperton Gravels of the Thames Valley. As their exact relationship is uncertain, they have been termed Lea Valley Gravels (Gibbard 1994, 109).

**DISCUSSION**

Previously claimed *Bout Coupé* handaxes have long been regarded as typological indicators of the British Middle Palaeolithic Mousterian (e.g., Shackley 1977; Roe 1981). However, the lack of a definitive classification was criticised by Coulson (1986), who suggested that these implements could easily be subsumed into a variety of other biface classes of mixed chronological and cultural affinities. Classificatory uncertainty, compounded by a general paucity of reliable contextual associations, led to her questioning their value as typological or cultural markers (ibid, 54). Tyldesley’s comprehensive study of *Bout Coupés* (1987) also found major problems with stratigraphic provenance and cultural association, but concluded that if tighter definitions were employed, they could be used as typological markers for the Last Interglacial/Early Devensian. However, a recent survey (White and Jacobi 2002), which also emphasised the need for employing tight typological parameters, concluded that most of the rigorously defined *Bout Coupé* bifaces with reasonably secure provenances came from Devensian deposits, mainly from Middle Devensian OIS 3 contexts, and that many of the others either possibly or probably came from similarly dated contexts. This would be in accordance with a suggested hiatus in the occupation of Britain from the penultimate glaciation (OIS 6) to the Middle Devensian (OIS 3) (Currant and Jacobi 1997).

The biface described here may be regarded as a ‘true’ *Bout Coupé* type, conforming to both Tyldesley’s (1987) classification and Jacobi’s even more rigid definition (termed Coygan type handaxe; lecture given to Palaeolithic-Mesolithic meeting, British Museum 11/04/2003), exemplified by his suggested holotype of the larger *Bout Coupé* handaxe recovered from Coygan Cave (Aldhouse-Green *et al.* 1995, fig 24a). This would suggest a manufacturing date for this implement from between c.60 000BP and c.30 000BP, and that it was made by Neanderthals. However, White and Jacobi also warn that they cannot conclusively demonstrate that *Bout Coupé* handaxes only originate from Middle Devensian contexts, and that they ‘should not be used uncritically as a Mousterian marker fossil’ (2002, 123).
Although a more rigidly applied typological definition clarifies what is being discussed, the problem of a paucity of secure contextual associations remains. Unfortunately for Palaeolithic research, although this example was recovered from a secure context under strict archaeological conditions it is unlikely to be particularly informative with respect to the Bout Coupé temporal-cultural debate. It could have potentially derived from the Leyton Gravels, thought to be of Middle Devensian date, or from within the overlying brickearth, equivalent deposits having produced ‘true’ Bout Coupés in other localities (e.g., White and Jacobi 2002, 118). Alternatively, an origin from within the Lea Valley Gravels may be possible. Although highly fossiliferous, these have yielded few artefacts and their exact geological history is unknown. However, flakes attributed as Levalloisian in style have been found from similar deposits at Enfield Lock and Ponder’s End, as well as from further north in the Lea Valley (Warren 1938).

The distribution of the rigorously defined Bout Coupé bifaces is shown by Tyldesley (1987) to be restricted to southern Britain, and within the Thames Valley to be concentrated west of London and along the southeast London terraces and north Kent. This is the first ‘true’ example to have been recovered from the Lea Valley; an example recorded by Roe (1981, Table 20) from Hoxton, to the south of Enfield, was not accepted by Tyldesley or White and Jacobi.

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