A Possible Mesolithic Stone Axehead from Scotland

Alan Saville

One of the enigmas of the early prehistoric record in the U.K. is the presence of edge-ground stone axeheads in abundance in the Mesolithic period in Ireland (Woodman 1978) and to a lesser extent in Wales (David 1989), and their absence in Scotland and England (except perhaps in the south west; Smith 1987, 26). The Scottish situation is the most enigmatic, since, while England has plentiful Mesolithic flint axeheads and picks, there appear to be absolutely no unequivocal examples of flint or stone core-tools with cutting edges in the Mesolithic of Scotland (notes 1 & 2).

However, recent examination of the collection of stone axeheads in the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh has isolated one implement, which has no typological resemblance to any Neolithic stone axehead from Scotland nor to any more recent tool-types. This implement (Fig. 1; cat. no. NMS: AF 1029) is formed on a naturally elongated pebble of sandstone. Longitudinally it is slightly curved, and in section it is a flattened oval. It has been modified at the butt by bifacial flaking to produce a thin, straight base. At the cutting edge the modification comprises bifacial grinding, subsequent to bifacial flaking, the scars of which are still visible where the deeper hollows have escaped grinding. The body of the axehead is unmodified. The base is hardly abraded at all, and has certainly not been hammered nor worn by use. The dimensions are: max. length 145 mm; max. breadth 34 mm; and max. thickness 20 mm. The width at the cutting edge is 32 mm, at the butt 25 mm. The implement weighs 152 grams.

Despite a superficial resemblance, because of the nature of the blank, to the Mesolithic bevel-ended tools of the 'Obanian' on Scotland's west coast (Lacaille 1954), this is in fact a distinctly different tool-type, primarily because of the steep, 70° angle of the cutting edge, but also because of the way the butt has been worked. The best description for this tool must be a pebble axehead (or chisel) with bifacially ground edge.

Information on the provenance is limited. The axehead was donated (Anon. 1966) to the former National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1965 by Miss R. Dunlop, as part of a collection of stone tools from the Dolphinton area on the Lanarkshire-Peeblesshire border SW of Edinburgh. This collection was formed in the 1890s by Miss Dunlop's father, Thomas Blair Dunlop. The axehead has the inscription "found at Cambwell" in faded black ink on one face. This is presumably the Cambwell at NGR NT 070400, 7.5 km SSW of Dolphinton and 3.5 km NE of Biggar. This locality is just on the Peeblesshire side of the old county boundary (now in Tweeddale District, Borders Region).
and it would make the findspot of the axehead a distinctly inland one, the nearest modern coast being the Firth of Forth at Edinburgh, some 45 km to the NE.

The particular morphology of this implement appears to have few direct analogies among the Irish Mesolithic axeheads, except insofar as many of the Irish examples do feature a cutting-edge on otherwise unmodified pebbles. Closer comparison can be made with some examples from Wales (e.g. a fragment from Stackpole Warren: David 1990, fig.6.17), but these tend to be the examples from undated contexts, which are only tentatively identified as Mesolithic.

These factors, together with the fact that this tool is so far unique in Scotland, make it very difficult to suggest a date or cultural milieu; there is always the possibility that it could be an aberrant singleton from any period. However, and albeit subjectively, a Mesolithic ascription would seem more likely than any other in view of its general character, and the purpose of its publication here is to invite comment and perhaps flush out some parallels from Scotland or elsewhere.

Notes:
1. The possible exceptions as Mesolithic finds would be the flint core-tools from Fair Isle and Morton, both in the collection of the National Museums of Scotland.

The implement of grey flint from North Haven, Fair Isle (cat.no. NMS: ABB 1) was published as a Mesolithic core axe (Cumming 1946), and on typological grounds it is very difficult to dispute this assessment. Its dimensions are: L.120 x B.45 x Th.26 mm (weight 132g), and it would, for example, fit within the range of smaller core-tools from the River Thames studied by Field (1989). However, in the absence of any other indication of Mesolithic settlement on Fair Isle (as on the Shetland Isles in general), it would seem rash to suggest this as an indigenous Mesolithic find, even though the details of provenance are precisely given.

The tool from Morton Farm, Tayport, Fife (cat.no. NMS: ABB 3), is in an altogether different category. This is a large pick, again of grey flint, whose dimensions are L. 181 x B.59 x Th.33 mm (weight 319g), with a lenticular section created by careful bifacial flaking. The wear and chatter-marking of the remaining cortex show this to have been made on a very large piece of beach (or similar) flint. Details of provenance are scanty (Anon. 1968, 201); it was a surface find from the same farm as the well-known excavated Mesolithic site at Morton. Coles (1971, 314) briefly mentions this implement, which he classed as an axe, as possibly having been part of the Mesolithic industry, but this is problematic. The implement, which has a retouched, pointed terminal and is strictly speaking a pick rather than an axehead, tapers at the base and is symmetrically leaf-shaped in planform. Such a tool is hard to match from dated contexts, but in terms of its overall character a post-Mesolithic milieu would be the best guess.

2. It should also be mentioned that the Mesolithic in Scotland does have other heavy, bladed tools in the form of red-deer antler mattocks (Clark 1956). These tools undoubtedly possess cutting edges and can be surprisingly heavy-duty; the well-known Melvillewood mattock weighs 511g. Recent experiments with a replica "type A" mattock (Smith 1989, 276) have shown it to be perfectly capable, when used hauled in axe-mode, of chopping through wood (P. Cave-Browne, pers. comm.).
Acknowledgements

Numerous colleagues have commented on the Cambwell axehead; all are thanked, in particular Trevor Cowie. I am indebted to Andrew David for the opportunity to examine the Nab Head axeheads and for access to his unpublished thesis, and to Patrick Cave-Browne for information on his antler-mattock experiments. The Cambwell axehead was drawn by Marion O’Neill.

References


Lithic Studies: An Irish View

Dave Field

A joint meeting of the Lithic Studies Society, the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, and the Ulster Museum was based successively in Cork and Belfast from 8-12 September 1994, organised by Peter Woodman and Liz Anderson in Cork and Sinéad McCartan in Belfast. Lecture sessions were complemented by field trips to the Dingle peninsula, the Blackwater valley, Ballygalley, Tievebulliagh and Mount Sandal.

This conference provided a window through which the outlook seems healthy and comprehensive enough, for while Ireland lacked the imetus that county societies gave to lithic studies in Britain during the first half of this century, workers are consequently able to approach familiar problems with a fresh approach, and there is much enthusiasm for doing so.

Peter Woodman in his introduction to the lecture session in Cork provided the historical background, by returning to base and considering the study of museum collections. Such studies are much easier in Ireland than in Britain, basically because there are fewer museums, and archaeological material is curated in only a few of these. Of course problems occur with this material and great caution is required in analysing it. He demonstrated in particular how the provenance of early finds in turn influenced subsequent collectors and their suppliers. Nevertheless, as in Britain, and providing one is aware of the problems, the study of these collections can be useful. In this respect the existence of the townland, a subdivision of the parish and a most useful land unit, gets round the British problem of, for example, where to place an axe marked simply 'London'.

He went on to explain how the traditional view of occupation around the rivers and known flint-bearing deposits in the north-east of Ireland is slowly giving way to a more considered one. A number of fieldwalking projects elsewhere in Ireland were providing more balanced results, demonstrating that much flint is to be found in the south.

There is still a problem with the Irish Palaeolithic. A single handaxe sits in the National Museum with an uncertain provenance. Peter Woodman’s Irish Quaternary Fauna project breaks new ground by dating faunal remains from a number of cave sites. As those on the field trips saw, Shandon Cave is now largely destroyed by road building, but the early descriptions of cartloads of bones being paraded through Cork is tantalising. Kilgreany Cave, partially excavated earlier this century, is in the path of a rapidly approaching quarry face, and warrants fresh work. The human skeletal material assigned to the Neolithic has now been supplemented by cattle radiocarbon-dated to the same