

ON THE DISCOVERY AND REGIONAL CONTEXT OF AN EARLY BRONZE AGE FLINT DAGGER AT MELLOR, STOCKPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1998 the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit and the Mellor Archaeological Trust have been involved annually in community partnership excavations at the Old Vicarage, Mellor, Stockport (SJ 9818 8890). The excavations have been centred on a high promontory (*c.*730ft. AOD) which projects westwards from the Pennine uplands and overlooks the River Goyt and the low lying and comparatively flat lands of Greater Manchester and the Cheshire plain (Fig. 1). So far the excavations have revealed evidence for a multi-phased site first utilised during the Mesolithic period with peaks of settlement activity during the Iron Age and Romano-British periods and another during the twelfth-fifteenth centuries AD (Roberts 2003; Noble *et al.* 2004; Noble *et al.* 2005; Noble and Thompson 2006).

During the 2004 excavation season a remarkable example of an Early Bronze Age flint dagger was found. This find appears to be the third example from the whole of the Greater Manchester area. The dagger was discovered at the interface between the subsoil and boulder clay geology and could not be associated directly with any archaeological feature. However, the immediate area was densely packed with archaeological features including numerous curvilinear gullies and inter-cutting pits (Fig. 2). A total of 19 curvilinear gullies was discovered during excavation in the area, at least some of which would appear to be roundhouse gullies measuring between 9m and 14m diameter. The pits in the area, possibly numbering in the hundreds, exist as an amorphous swathe of inter-cutting features to the north and north-east of the gullies. When excavated, eight of these small pits produced a total of 410 individual stones weighing 121kg of which *c.*55% were fire cracked. Four charcoal samples were taken from these nearby features. Two gullies were sampled which produced dates from the Early Bronze Age and the Late Iron Age. The sampled pits produced dates from the mid-late Bronze Age and the mid-late Iron Age. It is possible therefore, that later intrusive Iron Age activity has effectively masked any potential Bronze Age archaeological features which may have been associated with the dagger, due to their similarity in form. Given the density and repeated nature of later activity in this area it is quite possible that the dagger had been disturbed from its original context.

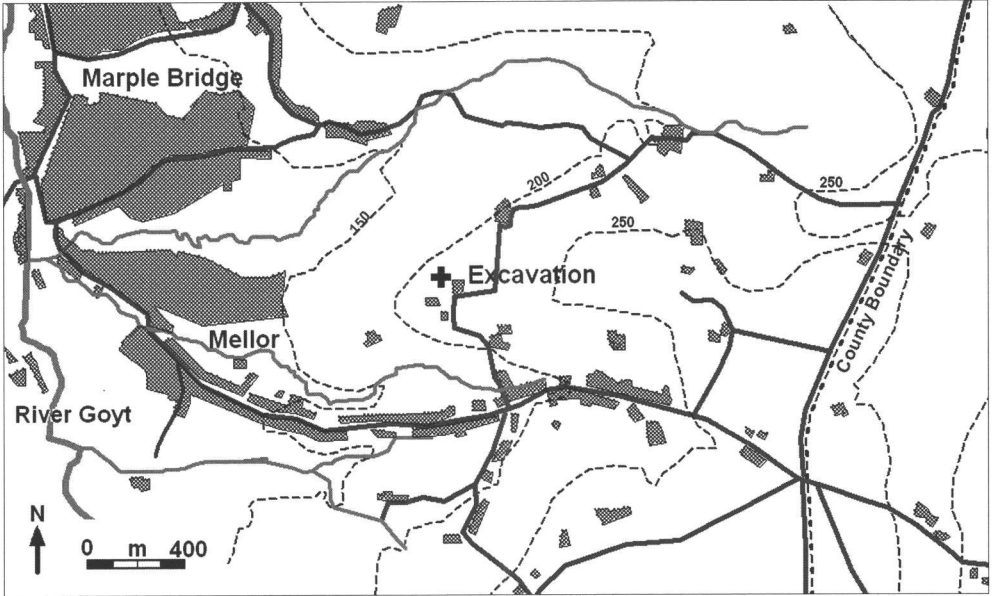


Fig. 1: Location map for Mellor

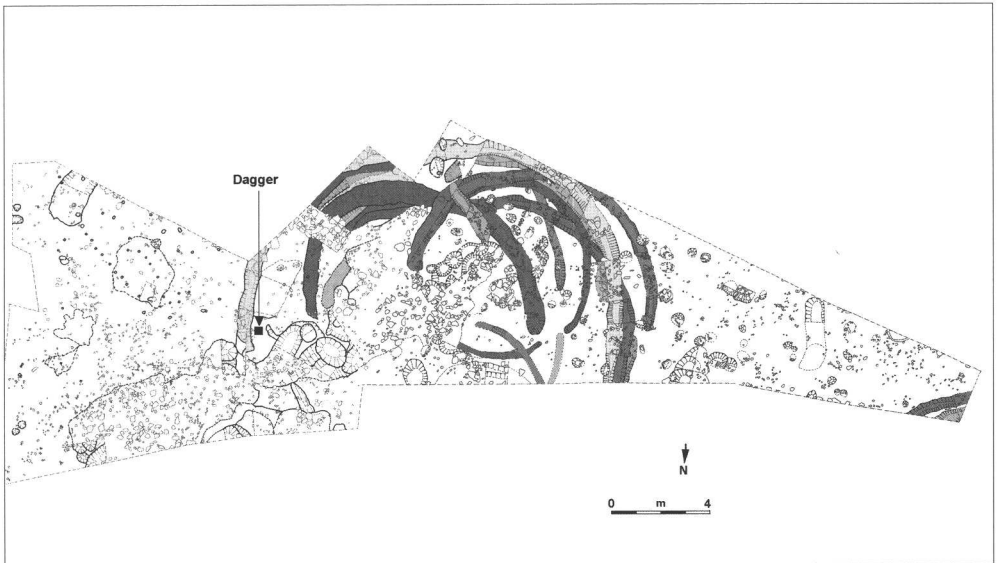


Fig. 2: Location of the dagger find and surrounding excavated features.

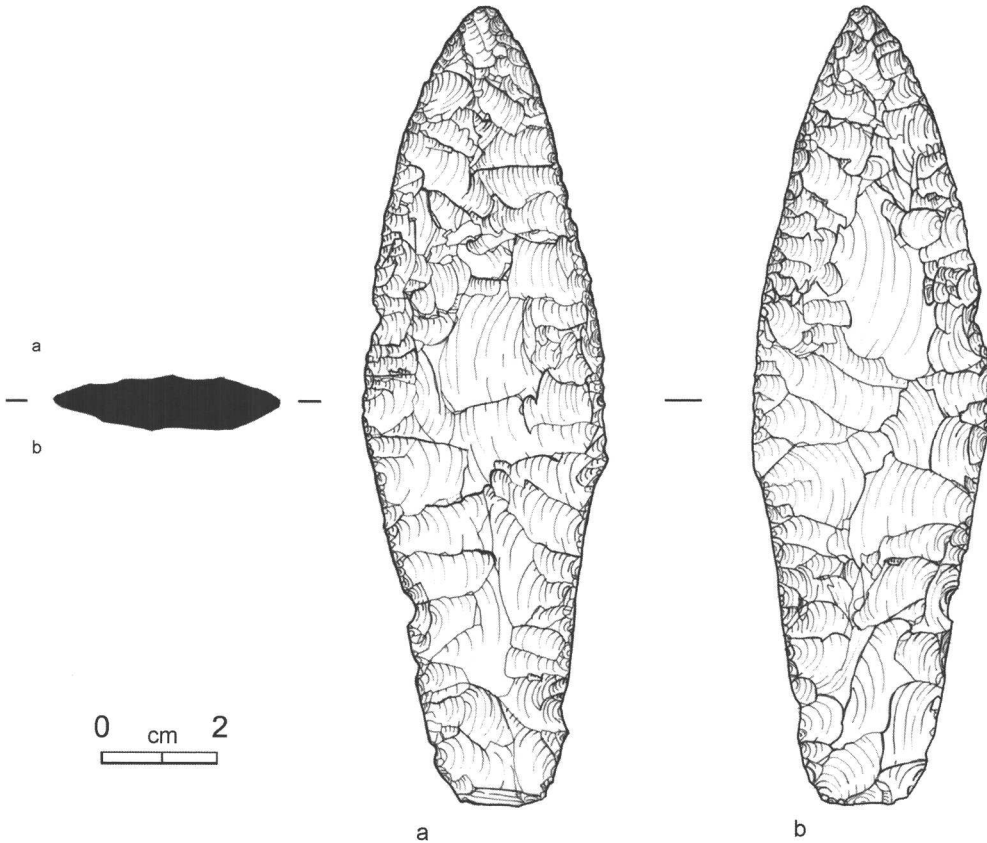


Fig. 3: The Mellor Dagger

DESCRIPTION

The dagger (Fig. 3), which is complete, has a maximum length, width and thickness of 140mm, 45mm and 13mm respectively and weighs 63.8g. It is made from a reddish brown translucent flint with no surviving cortex or primary surfaces except for a small, round patch of white patina located at the butt end of the tang. The latter may, however, be the result of differential discolouration around a small inclusion rather than primary surface. Post- depositional patination of the flaked surface has served to dull what must have been a visually striking, translucent red hue of the freshly knapped flint.

The source for the material is uncertain but almost certainly will involve a secondary source. Boulder Clay deposits east and west of the Pennines may contain flint nodules of sufficient size and quality. Translucent flint with such a red hue is, however, not generally found either in the Trent Valley or the East Yorkshire coast Boulder Clays. Brooks' (1989 and *pers. comm.*) work on the analysis of micro-fossils from flint thin-sections suggests a source west of the Pennines for visually similar material from the Early Neolithic assemblage recovered at Lismore Fields, Buxton.

There is a clear division in form between the blade and the tang for the handle. The blade is triangular in profile, one margin (Fig. 3a, left-hand edge) being slightly convex in contrast to the straighter but slightly sinuous opposing edge. The blade extends for approximately 76mm from the start of the tang to the blade tip along a centre-line and is on average 7mm in thickness. The tang is trapezoidal in profile, tapering from a maximum width of 45mm at the junction with the blade to *c.* 14mm at the squared butt end with a length of 64mm. Both faces of the blade and tang have been shaped by careful, overlapping thinning retouch. The pattern of thinning retouch scars on the tang appears less intensive and this is reflected metrically, the tang being on average 11mm thick. Towards the tip of the blade a sequence of relatively small and narrow thinning flake scars extend the full width of each face. In the centre of both faces of the blade the smaller thinning flakes terminate well short of the centre-line leaving the remnant scars of previous larger thinning flake removals visible. In cross-section the blade is slightly asymmetrical and the angles of the two blade edges differ: the angle formed by the two thinned faces along the convex edge falls in the range of *c.* 15–35° while the opposing edge is *c.* 20–40°. Along both blade edges the angles are least acute towards the tang. There is evidence for at least four notches in the edges of the dagger: one is located on the convex edge of the blade, *c.* 50mm from the tip, while the remaining three are on the tang edges. Whilst such evidence may, in part, reflect damage incurred, either pre- or post-deposition, it is probable that at least some of the notches were deliberately formed to facilitate bindings for a handle.

DISCUSSION

The appearance of flint daggers in the British archaeological record has long been associated with the occurrence of Beaker pottery (Grimes 1932; Shennan 1976) and, in particular, burials with Beaker associations. It has been suggested that flint daggers were manufactured in imitation of bronze daggers (Gerloff 1975) and that the use of flint in some contexts may reflect a differential access to bronze technology (Piggott 1973). Whatever is felt about the functional or prestige equivalence of metal and flint daggers in the Early Bronze Age (Bradley 1984, 88; Green *et al.* 1982, 499) there is a general consensus that for many areas access to such tools would have been through exchange networks with neighbouring and more distant regions. It has also been argued (Pierpoint 1980, 140) that at least some elaborate flint artefact types may have been manufactured by specialist knappers specifically for deposition as grave goods. The possibility that specialist knappers produced flint daggers for exchange has also been considered (Green *et al.* 1982, 500).

Under the model developed by Bradley and Hart (1983) for understanding variations in material culture during the second millennium BC between the limestone and gritstone areas within the Peak District, it is envisaged that relatively high-status communities emerged in the Carboniferous Limestone region. This 'core area' is seen as having been comparable in status to other such areas in Wessex and East Yorkshire. With some communities here having greater access to exotic prestige objects through exchange networks, this emergent differential in status became expressed partially through material culture. Amongst the range of prestige, high-status items being exchanged were flint daggers. Subsequently, a detailed critique of this interpretation of

the Peak District evidence has been put forward (Barnatt 1986: 1996, 78–80; Barnatt and Smith 1991). Rather than seeing exotic artefacts as symbols of status, emphasis is placed upon their potential for acting as expressions of lineage and descent within communities. However one views this debate, the discovery at Mellor is potentially relevant to discussions of Early Bronze Age society and exchange networks across a wide region.

Discoveries of flint daggers clearly associated with domestic sites are rare. Indeed, it is hard to find any documented examples from the region. There have been only two flint daggers found previously within Greater Manchester (Fig 4, 2–3). The first discovery was that made in 1924 at Ragstone, near Denshaw (Petch 1924, 46–7; Stonehouse 2001, 60). Though found in three pieces, together they formed a complete flint dagger measuring *c.* 140mm × 50mm which stylistically provides a close parallel for the Mellor dagger. The available accounts of the discovery provide no indication whether

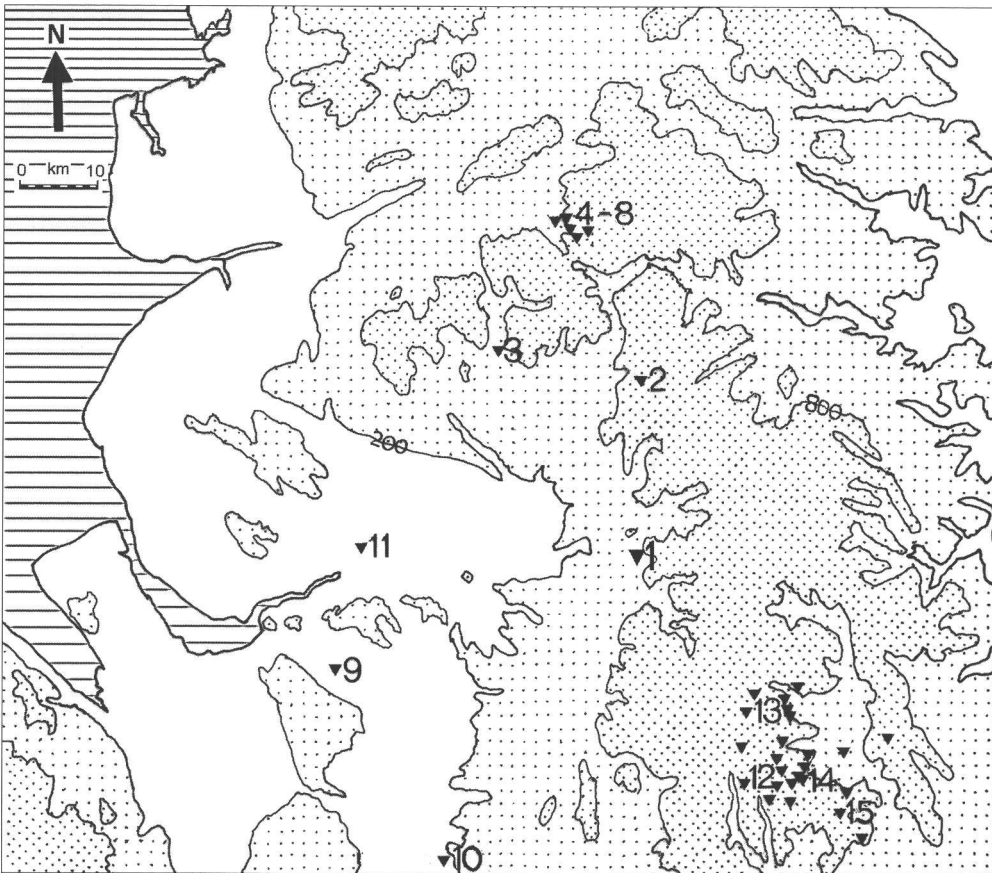


Fig. 4: Distribution of Early Bronze Age flint daggers: sites named in text: 1 Mellor; 2 Ragstone; 3 Whitelow; 4 Worsthorne; 5 Worsthorne Moor; 6 Rogerham; 7 Hazel Edge; 8 Upper Gorpel; 9 Acton Bridge; 10 Barford; 11 Winwick; 12 Green Low; 13 Nether Low; 14 Smerrill Moor; 15 Longcliffe.

the find came from a possible settlement, a burial site or was a truly isolated find. The second example came from the excavation of a ring bank cemetery at Whitelow, Ramsbottom (Bu'Lock 1961). At only 76mm this find, as reported, is unusually small and is described as a 'plano-convex tanged dagger' (Barnes 1982, 102), also somewhat unusual in form. All three finds in Greater Manchester come from sites located along the western edge of the Pennine uplands.

Stonehouse (2001, 60) has referred previously to the presence of '... a cluster of flint dagger sites...along the western edge of the Pennine watershed'. Certainly, a series of flint daggers have been reported from within a relatively small area on the high ground and moorlands to the east of Burnley (Fig. 4, 4–8). Examples have come from Worsthorne and Worsthorne Moor (Barnes 1982, sites 58 and 59), Roggerham (*ibid*, site 51; Bennett 1946, 15) and Hazel Edge (Jackson 1935). The latter two finds were described as being 114mm and 152 mm in length respectively. However, there are no further details available on the contexts from which they were recovered. At Upper Gorple reservoir another dagger was discovered during survey work undertaken in 1974 by West Yorkshire Archaeological Unit when water levels were especially low. This large (c. 165mm × 60mm) and skilfully worked dagger, which has a series of 4 pairs of opposed notches on the tang, was recovered from what appears to be a washed-out burial cairn (Yorkshire Archaeological Society 2008). As with the finds from Ragstone, Whitelow and Mellor, this notable concentration of daggers lies at the western edge of the Pennines, clustering around the 800ft contour. The absence of examples from the West Yorkshire Pennines (Faull and Moorhouse 1981) merely emphasises the western Pennine nature of this distribution.

Only a handful of flint daggers have been found within the lowlands of the surrounding region (Fig. 4, 9–11). In Cheshire a large flint dagger measuring 153mm × 31mm was found in 1974 at Acton Bridge, apparently found in association with some unspecified bones (Longley 1987, 79). In 1962 another dagger was recovered from a ploughed field at Basford (Hodgson and Brennand 2006, 48). A single flint dagger has also been found in the vicinity of the Winwick barrow group, north of Warrington (Cowell 1995; Hodgson and Brennand 2006, 43). Measuring 175mm × 54mm × 10mm and weighing 101g this extremely large example was made in a 'reddy-orange flint. . . probably of local origin' (Cheshire HER no. 575). These would appear to be the only finds of flint daggers from Cheshire, the lowlands of the Mersey basin or southern Lancashire. We should not be surprised, however, at the relatively small numbers that have come from lowland locations. In comparison with the uplands only a few prehistoric earthworks have survived the centuries of cultivation and urban development. Furthermore, in the Pennines a tradition of flint collecting from erosion patches and ploughed surfaces has long been established. Such different patterns in land-use, site survival and traditions of fieldwork may go a long way towards accounting for the contrasting numbers of flint daggers that have been identified.

In the Peak District a predominantly pastoral history of land-use has allowed significant numbers of prehistoric earthworks to survive including burial mounds. There has also been a long established tradition of artefact collection from surface disturbances and some of the earliest examples of systematic surface collection surveys from ploughed fields took place in the Peak District (Garton 1991). The distribution of Peak District flint daggers appears firmly concentrated on the Carboniferous Limestone upland (Hart 1981, 48–50; Grimes 1932, fig. 2) where Hart describes

them as being 'common'. Searches of the Derbyshire HER and various key published sources (Barnatt 1996; Bateman, 1948: 1961; Hart 1981; Marsden 1977; Howarth 1899) have identified reports of at least 22 flint dagger discoveries (Fig. 4), many of which resulted from antiquarian collection. Yet of these only 3 can be securely associated with excavations of burial mounds. This is despite the large numbers of excavated barrows of the Early Bronze Age, including many containing Beaker pottery (Barnatt 1996, 41–6). All three resulted from antiquarian excavations. At Green Low a flint dagger, 152mm long, was found in association with Beaker pottery (Bateman 1848, 59–60; Marsden 1963), while at Nether Low another example, c.114mm long, was found beneath and in contact with the head of a male crouched inhumation placed in a 'shallow depression' within the bedrock (Bateman 1861). A third example, also found associated with a Beaker, was recovered during Bateman's excavations (1861, 102–3) at Smerrill Moor and measured 121mm in length but has subsequently been lost (Abercromby 1902). Major Harris reportedly found a dagger associated with a crouched inhumation during excavations at Dimin Dale, Sheldon. However, the precise context of the site is not known and again the find has been lost (Marsden 1977, 113). Considering the total number of daggers found it is surprising that so few secure examples have come from the numerous burial mound excavations in the Peak District. There are, however, several other instances where it is suspected that daggers may have been found following the ploughing of barrows, or have come from the vicinity of known burial mounds. Most recently Makepeace (2003) has reported the discovery of a single flint dagger, measuring 108mm × 26mm, from a ploughed field at Longcliffe, Brassington. Here it was realised that there was evidence for a possible ploughed-down burial mound upslope from the findspot and within the same field. As Makepeace observes (*ibid.*, 62), we simply do not know how many of the other dagger surface finds have been derived from ploughed-out burials.

CONCLUSION

None of the flint daggers found previously in Greater Manchester or the surrounding region can be clearly and unambiguously associated with a domestic settlement site. A number do have clear associations with burials whilst others may have been derived from disturbed burials or have been found in the vicinity of funerary monuments. In some cases they may be genuinely isolated finds. In many instances, however, there is simply a lack of contextual detail. The Mellor find has come from a site which has produced very limited excavation evidence for Early Bronze Age activity. The nature of this activity is hard to determine, partly because of the impact of later, more intensive occupational activity on the site. It is likely that the original context in which the dagger was deposited was disturbed in this way. Certainly, the find cannot be directly associated with any of the recorded features. The possibility that it has come from a disturbed burial must remain open.

Viewed in its wider setting, the Mellor dagger would appear to be one of a series of finds from the western edge of the central and southern Pennine uplands, some of which appear to be associated with funerary sites. The extent to which they form a significant "cluster" is difficult to assess. Certainly, the eastern Pennines of West and South Yorkshire do not appear to have produced any examples while only a few have been reported from the neighbouring lowlands. A far greater number of flint daggers

have been found in the upland limestone region of the Peak District. Here it appears that flint daggers were sufficiently numerous and in circulation for significant numbers to enter the archaeological record, yet they have relatively infrequently been found as components of burial assemblages. This is somewhat surprising given the general portrayal of flint daggers as being an element in the 'Beaker package' (Shennan 1976) associated with burials of the period. At present there is insufficient detail to determine if there is a significant divergence in the depositional treatment of flint daggers between the lowlands, the western Pennine fringe and the Peak District. If they were uniformly valued as symbols of high status by all communities engaged in the same exchange networks we would probably anticipate finding shared patterns of deposition. Should divergence in deposition patterns be observed this might be seen as lending support to the view that the significance or meanings attached to such exotic artefacts was defined at the level of the local community. In such a case the meaning attached to these items might well have been constructed around concepts of identity, lineage and claims of descent rather than those of relative status and elitism. At this stage we cannot determine if these artefacts, or the manner in which they were discarded, embodied values and meanings determined at a local community level or if they were understood and shared by communities over much wider areas.

However we understand the patterns in their deposition, it would seem that Early Bronze Age communities living along the western side of the Pennine uplands acquired flint daggers, such as the example from Mellor, through exchange networks. This area is located in a geographically intermediate position between the western lowlands of Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and southern Lancashire and the uplands of the Pennines and the Peak District to the east and south-east. If at least some flint daggers were moving from source areas to the west into the uplands and beyond perhaps the communities occupying Mellor and other Pennine fringe locations were also intermediate in this process. The regional distribution of flint daggers and other exotic items will reflect the operation of the exchange networks within which they moved. Further investigations in this region should aim to develop our understanding of the extent to which Early Bronze Age communities at the interface of the lowlands and the Pennine uplands participated in these exchange networks.

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