

A FOREIGN STONE AXE FROM THE THAMES AT SYON REACH, MIDDLESEX

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DESCRIPTION (J.M.)

The perforated axe illustrated in Fig. 1 and Pl. 1 is of compact grey stone, almost black on the burnished exterior. The near-cylindrical butt droops, and the slightly curved upper side is longer than the sloping, flattened lower side, setting the end of the butt at an angle to the edge of the blade. The butt end shows no sign of wear.

In front of the butt, the axe expands into a well-defined, rounded socket, projecting about 4 mm above and below the body of the axe and tapering in width from 35 mm on the upper side to 33 mm on the lower side. The straight-sided shaft-hole that penetrates the socket expands in diameter from 18 mm on the upper side to 20 mm on the lower side.

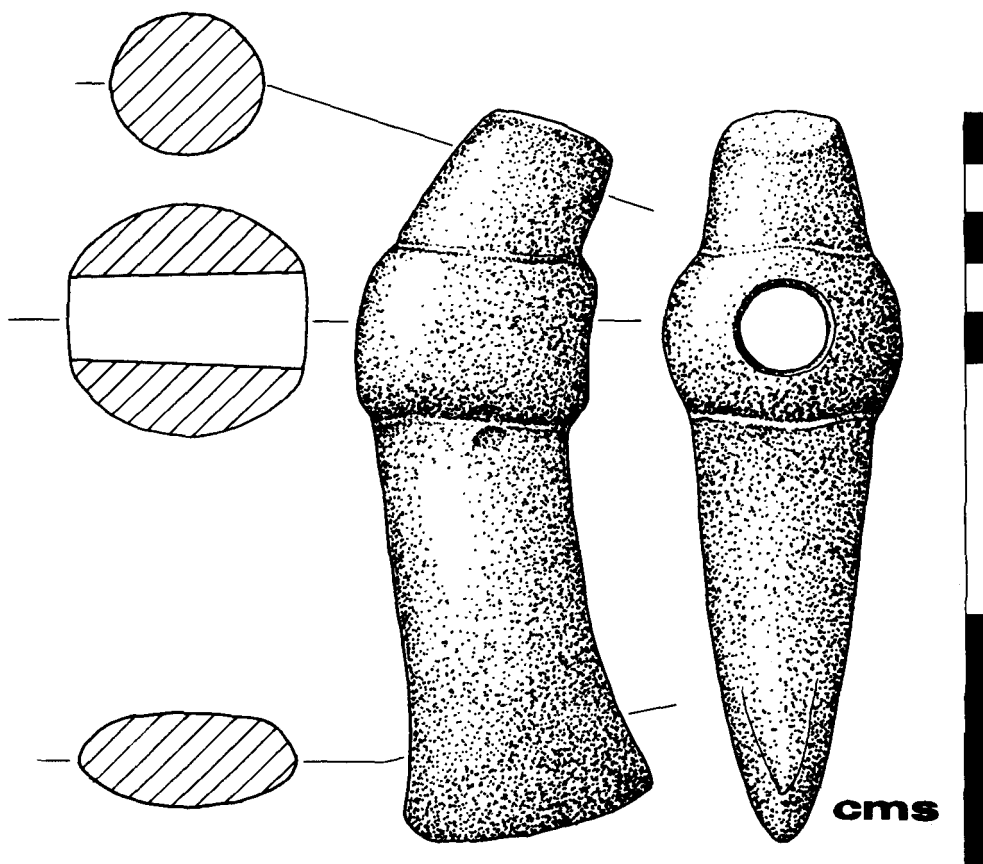


Fig. 1. Stone axe from the Thames at Syon Reach. (2/3). (Scale in 5 and 1 cm. divisions)

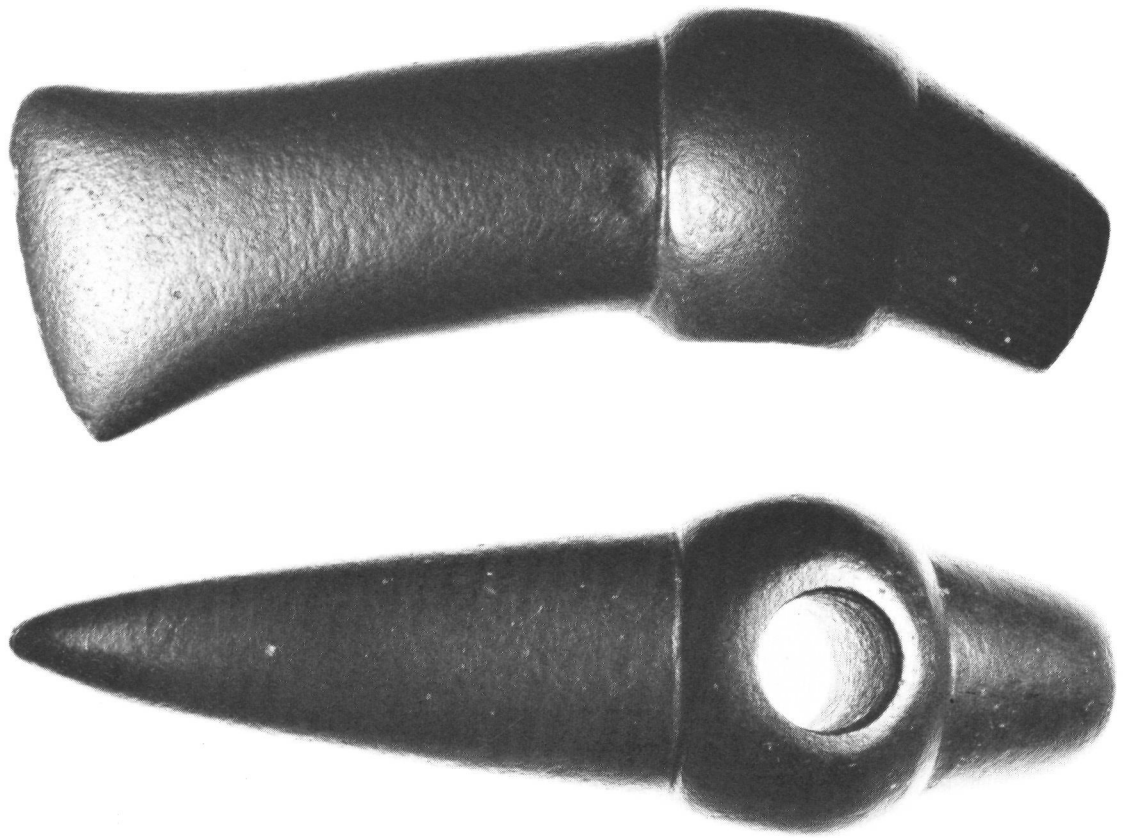


Plate 1. Stone axe from the Thames at Syon Reach. Length 144mm.

The blade portion, its section tapering from a very thick oval, curves slightly downwards on the lower side. The blunt, moderately expanded edge does not appear to have been used.

Overall length 144mm, width of blade edge 49mm, width and thickness of blade immediately in front of socket 38×36 mm, length of shaft-hole 44mm.

PETROLOGY

A thin section of the axe has been taken by Mr A. Forster of the Institute of Geological Sciences, London. Mr R. W. Sanderson of the Institute has very kindly examined the section and reports:

‘ . . . I have examined the thin section (registered number ENQ 2518) of the material composing the above axe. The rock is an amphibolised dolerite or epidiorite composed largely of subhedral, more or less prismatic crystals of a blue-green amphibole (probably actinolite) and minor chlorite flakes 0.06 mm or so long with occasional quartzose areas. Set in this relatively fine-grained groundmass are corroded, lath-shaped, brownish crystals of andesine ca. 0.4 mm long with inclusions of paragonite; and plates of the amphibole crowded with small grains of sphene. These amphibole plates aggregate in clots ca. 0.4 mm across and exhibit a subpoikilitic relationship with small feldspar laths. Elongate crystals ca. 0.2 mm long of clinozoisite are plentiful. Minor quantities of pyrite and sphene also occur.

I regret to admit that it has not proved possible for me to find comparable material from known outcrops . . . The rock is almost certainly not British as it differs quite markedly from the epidiorites which were used to produce the British stone axes . . . ’¹

HISTORY (J.M.)

The axe is in the Museum of London, Accession No. A.11961. It was bought in 1914 by the London Museum, one of the parent bodies of the Museum of London, and according to the London Museum accession register had been found in 1913 in the Thames at Syon Reach, the stretch of river in west London between Isleworth Ait and Kew Bridge, about three kilometres in length.

The London Museum almost certainly bought the axe from G. F. Lawrence (1862-1939), the Wandsworth collector and dealer who was Inspector of Excavations for the Museum from 1911 to 1926. Lawrence, as the handwriting shows, wrote the register entry, describing the axe as an ‘Axe Hammer (diorite) (of foreign type) Bronze Period’, a remarkable anticipation of the present identification.

In 1929 Lawrence published the axe in his account of antiquities from the middle Thames, noting it as ‘A weapon of unusual interest . . . of foreign origin . . . I have not seen another implement of this type from England’. He lists it as a find from Syon Reach but does not describe the circumstances of its discovery. His rather elusive account seems to imply that the axe came from the foreshore at Old England, the locality on the left bank some 300-450 metres above the present confluence of the rivers Brent and Thames, immediately downstream of Syon Park².

This provenance, though based solely on information from G. F. Lawrence, looks reliable.

Lawrence, a keen, well-informed antiquary, had an intimate knowledge of the Thames in west London and the antiquities it produced. He does not claim to have found the axe himself but presumably bought it from the finder, as he writes of his middle Thames antiquities ‘ . . . all the objects noticed in this paper have passed through my hands and have come direct from the finders to me.’ His account shows that his suppliers were often boatmen and men engaged in dredging and embanking the river. Though it is not clear how closely Lawrence checked the provenances of specimens he bought, the chance that

the axe was a dealer's or collector's piece passed on to Lawrence with a completely false finding place seems remote³.

It seems improbable, too, that Lawrence himself deliberately invented a spurious provenance. Lawrence's multifarious activities await investigation, but the available facts and traditions concerning him indicate that he was basically honest, if imprecise, in recording finding places as he knew them⁴.

The axe, then, appears to be a genuine find from the Thames in the London area.

The fact that the axe is without known parallel in Britain, as Lawrence recognised 50 years ago, might suggest that it is a recent import somehow lost in the Thames. The Thames at Syon Reach, however, must be one of the likeliest places in Britain to produce such an ancient import, for the lower-middle Thames is extraordinarily rich in finds of Continental origin of roughly the date proposed for the axe, and the greatest concentration occurs at Old England where the axe seems to have been found. A good many of these acknowledged ancient imports are rare if not unique in Britain⁵.

There seems no convincing reason, therefore, why this axe should not be accepted also, both as a find from the Thames at Syon Reach and as a prehistoric import into the Thames valley.

DISCUSSION (B.O'C)

The Syon Reach axe is alien to Britain both in form and composition; it has been identified as a member of a group of continental axes known as *nackengebogene Äxte*⁶. These stone shaft-hole axes, characterised by a curved butt, were first discussed by Aberg⁷ and further accounts have been published recently by Brandt⁸ and Tackenberg⁹; Dutch finds have been studied by Mr S. H. Achterop of Assen who has very kindly allowed me to quote details from his unpublished research.

Our axe, with its curved profile and well-defined shaft-hole, which projects beyond the blade at both ends, belongs to Brandt's form 1b¹⁰, Tackenberg's variant 1¹¹, and Achterop's type Ba 1. This form is most common in western Lower Saxony, in Westphalia¹² and in the adjacent parts of the Netherlands, where it is included among the group of axes known as the Baexem type¹³. Mr Achterop informs me that there are twenty-five examples of his type Ba 1 axes from the Netherlands. There is a single example from Belgium, though in a collection which includes objects of dubious provenance¹⁴.

Nackengebogene Äxte are usually assigned to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age¹⁵ and they are quite distinct from earlier forms of polished stone axe. Polished stone axes were in common use in southern Scandinavia during the Late Bronze Age¹⁶. The axe from Baexem, Dutch Limburg, has part of its wooden shaft preserved and this contains bronze pegs¹⁷. The only associated finds, from Vesenbühren, Kr. Cloppenburg, and Heeslingen, Kr. Bremervorde, Lower Saxony¹⁸, were found with urns of MV-MVI date¹⁹, that is approximately 8th-6th century B.C. Tackenberg has suggested that stone axes were used in parts of north-western Germany during the Late Bronze Age because of a shortage of metal²⁰.

The Syon Reach axe was imported into Britain from the Netherlands or north-western Germany, probably at some time during the second quarter of the first millennium B.C.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. Letter of 18th November, 1977.
2. G. F. Lawrence 'Antiquities from the Middle Thames' *Archaeol. J.* 86 (1929) 78-80, Pl. VI B3.
The axe is briefly discussed in F. E. S. Roe 'The Battle-Axe Series in Britain' *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 32 (1966) 229, 235, No. 127, Fig. 8B.
3. Lawrence *op. cit.* in note 2, 69-98, esp. 69-70, 73-75, 90, 95, 98; C. E. Vulliamy *The Archaeology of Middlesex and London* (London, 1930) 84, 211. More is known of Lawrence's rather piratical methods of buying and disposing of finds from City building sites: R. Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (London, 1965) 9-10; W. F. Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (London, 1968) 219-220.
4. Note 3 above; obituary of Lawrence in *Daily Herald* 24th February, 1939. The following assessment of Lawrence's activities by a distinguished modern archaeologist summarises present knowledge about him: '... Lawrence may not have been too particular in checking the authenticity of provenances but there can be little doubt that the majority of Lawrence's discoveries were genuine and that the tribute paid to him by Whimster [i.e. Vulliamy] ... was well-founded.' John Wymer, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain* (London, 1968) 276. (I am indebted to Mr Geoff Marsh for pointing out this reference). For evidence that Lawrence's specimens did sometimes carry false provenances v. Geoff Marsh 'Nineteenth and twentieth century antiquities dealers and Arretine ware from London' *Trans. London Middx. Archaeol. Soc.* 30 (1979) 125-129.
5. C. B. Burgess 'The later Bronze Age in the British Isles and north-western France' *Archaeol. J.* 125 (1968) 1-45; Lawrence *op. cit.* in note 2, 69-98; R. E. M. Wheeler 'Old England', Brentford' *Antiquity* 3 (1929) 20-32; E. M. Jope 'Daggers of the Early Iron Age in Britain' *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 27 (1961) 321; F. Celoria 'A Late Bronze Age Pin from Brentford' *Trans. London Middx. Archaeol. Soc.* 25 (1974) 278-281; B. O'Connor 'Six Prehistoric Phalerae in the London Museum ...' *Antiq. J.* 55 (1975) 215-226; B. O'Connor 'A Late Urnfield Pendant from the Thames at Old England' *Trans. London Middx. Archaeol. Soc.* 29 (1978) 146-147.
6. K. H. Brandt 'Nackengebogene Äxte vom nordwestdeutschen Typ' *Bremer Archäologische Blätter* 6 (1973) 23, 43 No. 217.
7. N. Aberg 'Die nackengebogene Äxte und die Rhombenäxte' *Praehistorische Zeitschrift* 8 (1916) 93-108.
8. Brandt *op. cit.* in note 6, 5-42.
9. K. Tackenberg *Die jüngere Bronzezeit in Nordwestdeutschland. Teil II. Die Felsgesteingeräte. Veröffentlichungen der urgeschichtlichen Sammlungen des Landesmuseums zu Hannover* 19F (Hildesheim 1974) 12-30; 'Ergänzungen zu den Abhandlungen von K. H. Brandt und K. Tackenberg über die nackengebogene Äxte Nordwestdeutschlands' *Nachrichten aus Niedersachsens Urgeschichte* 45 (1976) 31-44.
10. Brandt *op. cit.* in note 6, 6-11.
11. Tackenberg (1974) *op. cit.* in note 9, 13-16.
12. Brandt *op. cit.* in note 6, Karte 2; Tackenberg (1976) *op. cit.* in note 9, Abb. 1.
13. P. J. R. Modderman 'Stenen bijl met ijzernen schachthuls uit de Waal bij Nijmegen' *Berichten van de Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundige Bodemonderzoek* 14 (1964) 69; J. J. Butler *Nederland in de Bronstijd* (Bussum 1969) 85, afb. 39; S. J. de Laet *Prehistorische kulturen in het zuiden der Lage Landen* (Wetteren 1974) 289.
14. A. Lecomte 'Zwei postneolithische Streitäxte aus der Provinz Ostflandern' *Helinium* 15 (1975) 162, Abb. 2.
15. Brandt, *op. cit.* in note 6, 26-31; Tackenberg (1974) *op. cit.* in note 9, 25.
16. E. Baudou *Die regionale und chronologische Einteilung der jüngeren Bronzezeit im Nordischen Kreis. Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis. Studies in North-European Archaeology* 1. (Stockholm/Göteborg/Uppsala 1960) 47-54.
17. F. C. Bursch 'Een steenen hamer uit midden-Limburg' *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden Nieuwe Reeks* 21 (1940) 16-18.
18. Brandt, *op. cit.* in note 6, 35, No. 64, Abb. 3, 2; 36 No. 91, Abb. 8, 2.
19. Brandt, *op. cit.* in note 6, 26-27; Tackenberg (1974) *op. cit.* in note 9, 14-15; Tackenberg (1976) *op. cit.* in note 9, 39-40.
20. Tackenberg (1974) *op. cit.* in note 9, 47-48.