

## Report on **Axes Bold as Love: Imported Neolithic Axe-Heads in Britain**

by *Dr Katharine Walker FSA*

This lecture was given on Zoom, and Katharine explained that the title refers to an album by Jimi Hendrix, *Axis Bold as Love*, which she listened to while writing her PhD thesis. Polished stone axes, the focus of Katharine's study have been seen as significant artefacts since the time they were first made: in the raw materials used, in their forms and their uses and how they were deposited. Many axes came into Britain originally as part of the process of 'Neolithization', between 4000 and 2400BC, but they have also been imported over the years since that time. The origins of individual pieces differ and identifying them took a great deal of work: some were brought in as ethnographic examples; there are fakes and forgeries or replicas from recent times; and others came in through collectors' networks.

Katharine's sources include museum collections in Britain and Europe, especially France; catalogues of imported axes held in local authority Historic Environment Records (HERS) in Britain; records of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS); a search of regional archaeological journals; and a comprehensive archive *Stone Axes in Britain* (compiled by Mike Pitt for his PhD), held at the National Monuments Record (NMR), Swindon. She identified four main types for her study: polished Alpine jade axes; Breton axes made in fibrolite and dolerite; flint axes from Denmark, often with natural layers exposed as 'bullseyes'; 'Scandinavian' types, with square section butt ends, which have been widely collected. It was not known which were brought over in prehistory, or whether they may have been collected during travels etc.



*Polished Jadeite axe-head from near Sweet Track (3086BC). K Walker*

Jade Axes (most numerous - sample 119): sourced from quarries on Monte Viso and Monte Beigua in the Italian Alps, published by Pierre Pétrequin et al (2013), which makes it possible to identify when they were made. It is thought these mostly arrived in the early Neolithic period, but one was found in a late Mesolithic context at Vauxhall, a crossing point of the Thames. The axes are widely spread across Britain, but no more than two found together: the mode of deposition is often a watery context, flood plains and marginal areas, sometimes in burials. One was found near the Sweet Track (early Neolithic wood causeway on Somerset Levels); at Carnholy chambered tomb, Scotland; stray finds such as the Thames at Staines, Surrey; Snettisham, Norfolk; and at Hambledon Hill, Dorset near to the chalklands.

Breton axes (less common): the quarry source is identified as Sélédin near Plussulien, where debitage is still visible. Only a handful were found in Britain: one example in Southampton, and others in Bournemouth, Isle of Wight, Somerset and Shrewsbury. They were discovered during field walking, in Bournemouth on a bank of earth, and the Isle of Wight example was found by a beach comber/metal detectorist.

Polished flint: Often referred to as 'Cruswell-Smerrick' type. The best quality axe-heads (four) were found in Scotland, which may have originated from Denmark, but experts do not agree so this is not conclusive. They are distinguished from flint found in Britain, where different types of flint occur in three main areas: northern (grey centre); southern province (brown shades); and the transitional province where the material contains black elements, used at a later stage for gunflints.

Scandinavian: These are identified by their superior quality, flatter in form with a squared base. It is fairly easy to date them, from c 4200BC in Denmark, and around 2400 to 2900BC in northern Netherlands. In later examples the bases are squarer. The British Museum has a collection of 1000s - the earliest found in Britain in 1872 by John Evans; Sir Mortimer Wheeler showed some in 1925, and later 20<sup>th</sup> century examples.

But Charles Burkitt has warned of fakes and forgeries among museum collections, and that find spots claimed to be from England would need to be checked (also mentioned by Mike Pitt). One man was jailed as a forger, but later he openly produced axe-heads (signed 'Flint Jack'), which became very saleable. Katharine looked at imported Scandinavian axe-heads in Durham, Hartlepool and Orpington, some of them associated with pottery but their origins are questionable (possibly from Belgium).

A few examples have been recovered from the North Sea (Doggerland) in significant places such as tidal islands – a Skipton trawlerman found one on Dogger Bank and early Neolithic flints were found on Brown Bank - which could have been deliberate deposits in prehistory.

For her final research sample, Katharine discounted any Scandinavian axe-heads which had definitely been brought to Britain in recent years, leaving a sample of 48. Axe-heads were found in rivers and small caches and during field walking. The axe-heads located in British museums do not resemble those found in Denmark museums. The British-made equivalent axe-heads appear to be working tools which are more crudely made, generally smaller and scarred, whereas imported ones are highly polished, ceremonial types. Some larger types (up to 15cm) found in the Netherlands were possibly made in Denmark and imported; while locally made examples from the Netherlands are smaller, using flint material which may have originated in Denmark and had been redeposited by glaciation.



*'Scandinavian' flint axe-head, label Yorkshire. Cover of **Axe-heads and Identity** (2018), by K Walker.*



*'Julliberrie's Grave' long barrow, Chilham, Kent (2012).  
Image: Wikipedia*

A case study: 1937 excavation on a private estate of 'Julliberrie's Grave' long barrow in Chilham, Kent, during an unsettled time before the outbreak of World War II. The find of a broken Neolithic Danish-type axe-head was widely reported, but following its discovery the excavation was abruptly closed, claiming that "the monument was proved to be Neolithic after discovery of the axe-head".

The finds were held by Canterbury Museum and Sir Edmund Davies (the landowner) but the axe-head is missing, although a report and drawing of the item is included in the archive. Subsequently this was used to verify other examples as it was found in sealed archaeology: but Katharine speculated it may have been a hoax plant towards the end of the excavation. It was associated with a dagger, which was later dated to 1900BC!

In conclusion, Katharine considers that Alpine Jade and Breton axe-heads were imported to Britain as 'sacred objects', and deposited in significant places. Most of these axe-heads came in during the process of Neolithization, while those of Danish and Scandinavian origin may have originally entered along the east coast of Britain. These imported axe-heads are still highly prized as symbolic objects, and they are most useful items of material culture for interpreting and understanding prehistoric societies.

*Sarah Hanna (with thanks to Mandy Kesby for her notes).*

See also - Katharine's book, **Axe-Heads and Identity**: an investigation into the roles of imported axe-heads in identity formation in Neolithic Britain. Archeopress £40 (2018)

**Questions:**

1. *Why did the axe-heads change in their style?*

A Probably stylistic preference. Denmark axe-heads have an identifiable progression which makes them easier to date. The jade examples were more elaborate and change with fashions because they were usually ceremonial. They could have been refigured elsewhere over time.

1. *How do you find out the material types when you cannot take samples?*

A It has been traditional to take a thin slice from the item, but this is obviously now very controversial. It is usually possible to investigate macroscopically. Unfortunately, stone can discolour/alter over time, and may not show the original colour as it can leach or bleach. With the jade examples, spectroradiometry was successfully used to find precise sources, but polished and ground surfaces are hard to see under a microscope.

2. *Do broken examples help with identification?*

A Yes, especially with flint where a modern break which shows the original colour.

3. *Was the spread of these materials always westward?*

A There has been a field trip to Brittany to look for evidence of English axe heads there, and an application was made for a joint research project. This didn't succeed but it hasn't been possible to follow this up in the present circumstances.

4. *Axe heads have gone missing during loans to other museums with one such being loaned to Taunton and then to Salisbury when it disappeared. Is this unusual?*

A Unfortunately it is fairly common and makes it more complicated to unpick the history.

5. *Any axe heads found in the New Forest?*

A Two British axes ones found in Burley but no others. Not many Neolithic finds in the New Forest generally, possibly due to it not being used for agriculture, but as soon as you get to chalklands, that changes and one has been found at Braemore (near Fordingbridge).