A Guide to British Prehistoric Axes

Archaeologists use the words material culture to describe the objects we use in our daily lives. All the things that humans make and use can be described as material culture. From our homes and all the things inside them, to our clothes, cars, and street signs; if humans make something, it can be described as material culture.

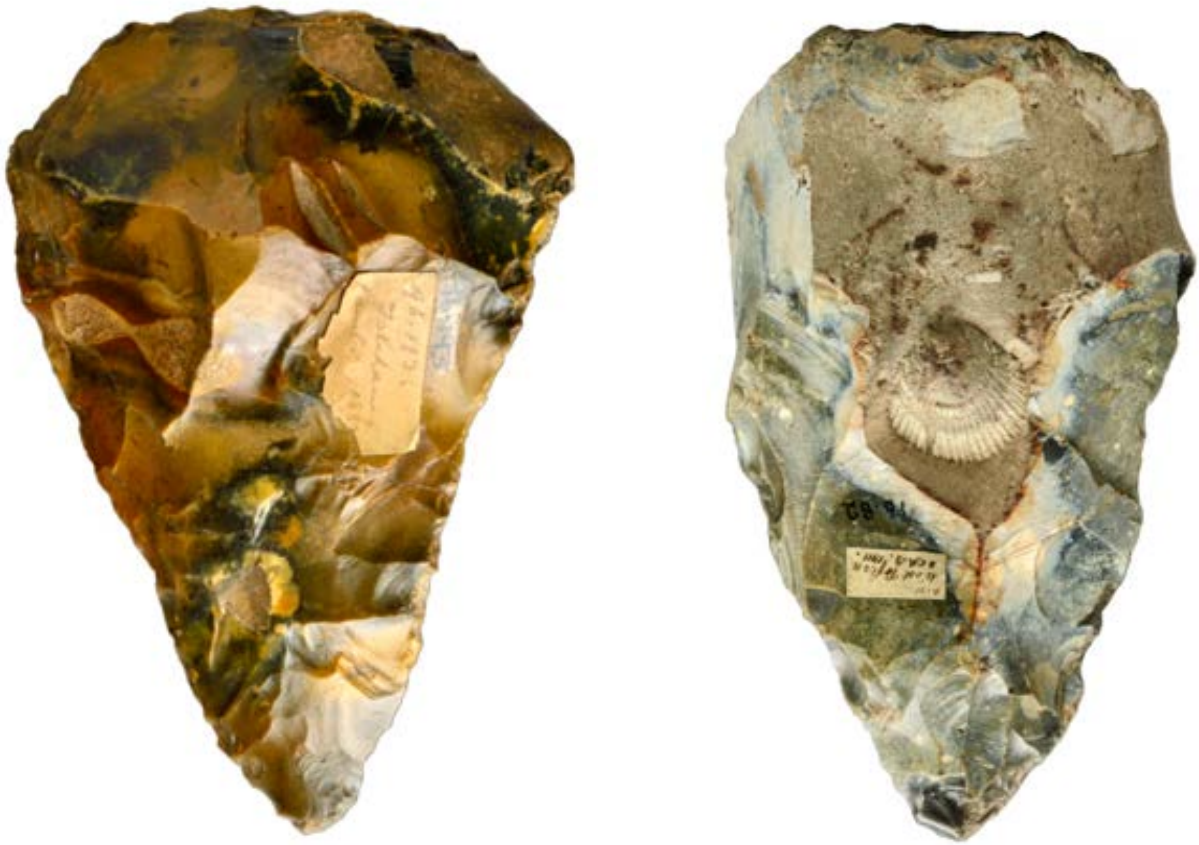
Archaeologists are interested in how material culture changes over time, because this helps them work out how old something is. For example, if we look at the images of mobile phones below, we can see how they have changed over time. They have become smaller and easier to carry, and we can now take photographs, send texts, and surf the internet, all things we could not do when mobile phones were first invented. We can identify which ones are the oldest and which are the most recent by how they look. We can do this with most things, and this is what archaeologists try to do with the objects they find during their excavations.

Mobile phones from the 1980s to the present day.

Axes were important tools during prehistory and are still being made and used today. They would have been used for a range of activities from butchering animals to chopping down trees and woodworking. Some were even used for display, the equivalent today of owning something luxurious and valuable. They were also important in transforming the landscape of Britain as the first Neolithic farmers began clearing woodlands to make way for domesticated animals and crops. Like the mobile phone example above, the design of axes, along with the materials they were made from, changed over time and these changes are what archaeologists use to help identify and date different types of axes.

Palaeolithic Hand Axes: 500,000 – 200,000 BC

The axes below are made of flint and date from between 500,000 to 200,000 BC. They come from a time archaeologists call the Palaeolithic which means old stone age. At this time, a strip of land connected Britain to mainland Europe and the climate shifted between being warm or very cold. Archaeologists call them hand axes because they think they would have been held in the hand, rather than being attached to a wooden handle. Archaeologists can tell they were made in the Palaeolithic because of their shape and the cloudy colour of the flint. Flint only turns this cloudy colour after spending a very long time buried in the ground. Axes like these have been found next to the bones of extinct animals such as Woolly Mammoths, which is what led archaeologists to realise just how old they were.



The axe on the left was found in Cambridgeshire and the one on the right in Norfolk. If you look closely, you can see a fossilized shell in the centre of the axe on the right. Axes such as these may have been used in butchering large animals, and for breaking open their bones to extract the marrow from inside.

Palaeolithic hand axe held in one hand.

Palaeolithic hand axe held in two hands.

Mesolithic Flint Axes: 10,500 – 4000 BC

Archaeologists call these Tranchet Axes. They date from the Mesolithic and were made between 10,000 and 4000 BC. The Mesolithic was a time when the climate was more settled, and a greater variety of plants and animals began to appear across Britain. People survived by hunting prey and gathering fruits, nuts and berries. Families would move between different places, settling for a time before moving on. Both these axes are made from flint and are much narrower than those made during the Palaeolithic. Axes such as this may have been attached to wooden handles, making it easier to use them. They would have been used for a range of activities such as chopping down trees and woodworking.

Both these tranchet axes were found in Cambridgeshire.

Neolithic Flint and Jadeite Axes: 4000 BC to 2400 BC

The axes below date from the Neolithic, a time when people began growing crops and keeping domesticated animals like cows, pigs and sheep. It was also during this time that people began making axes with smooth surfaces. Archaeologists describe these types of axes as being polished or ground. Creating a smooth surface would have taken a lot of time and effort, as the axe would need to be rubbed against another hard stone surface, probably with a bit of sand and water added to act like sandpaper. Some axes, like the one below on the right, are finely finished. With its silky-smooth surface and refined shape, it is unlikely that this axe was meant to be used as an everyday tool or weapon. Made from a type of stone called jadeite, which may have come from as far away as the Italian Alps, it was probably a symbol of wealth and power, and showed how well connected its owner was to the wider Neolithic world.

Both these polished axes were found in Cambridgeshire.

Two different ways that a flint axe head can be attached to a wooden handle.

Bronze Age Axes: 2400 to 800 BC

Eventually, copper and bronze were used to make axes, which is why archaeologists call this time the Bronze Age. While axes made of copper and bronze are not necessarily stronger than those made from stone and flint, many different-shaped axes could be made and, because they were made using moulds, several axes could be made at the same time. Today we are surrounded by all sorts of natural and man-made materials from metals to plastics, but during the early Bronze Age objects made from copper and bronze would have been quite rare and owning one would have been like owning the latest smart phone or buying a new car.

Over time, using metal to make objects became more common, and more and more people would have had access to them. As with the development of mobile phones, people in the Bronze Age were always trying to make better axes, improving the way they were made and finding better ways to attach them securely to their handles.

Flat Axe: 1950-1750 BC

The beautiful bronze axe below was made by pouring molten metal into a flat stone mould, a process similar to pouring liquid jelly into a jelly mould and leaving it to set. Once it had cooled, it was taken out of the mould and sharpened before being fixed to a wooden handle. If you look closely, you can see a decorative pattern has been made on the surface of the blade.

This flat axe was found in Northern Ireland.

Palstave Axe 1500-1400 BCE

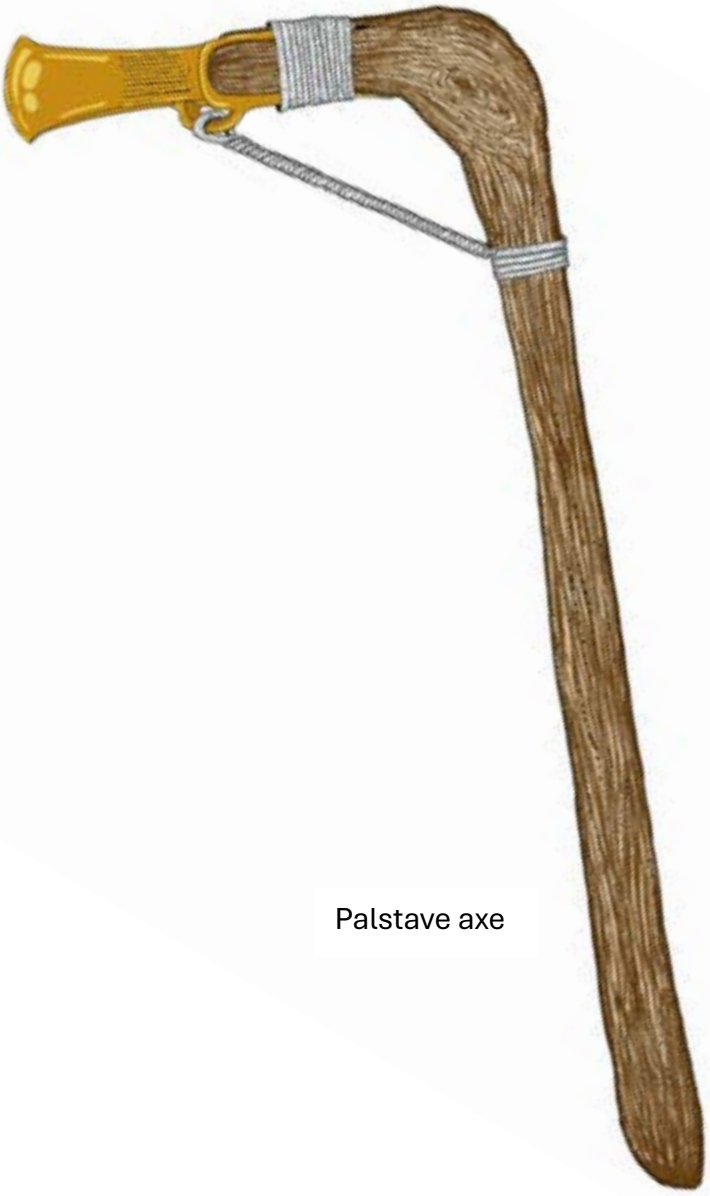
The next type of axe made during the Bronze Age, like the one shown below, is known as a palstave axe. These were made using two stone moulds that were held tightly together so the molten metal could be poured inside. This type of axe was designed to fit more tightly into its wooden handle. A cord could then be passed through the little hoop on the side and wrapped around the handle to stop the blade from moving when being used.

This palstave axe was found in Norfolk.

Socketed Axe 1000- 800 BCE

Over time, people continued to experiment with different ways of attaching axe heads to their handles, trying to find ways to make them fit more snugly so as not to come loose when being used. Eventually, they arrived at a design which allows the wooden handle to be inserted into the end of the axe, like the example shown below. They kept the little loop on the side to make it even more secure.

This socketed axe was found in Norfolk.



Palstave axe

Socketed axe

Bronze axe heads attached to wooden handles.

Guide to Exploring the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's Object Database

More information on prehistoric artefacts in our collection can be found by searching our website via the link below:

https://collections.maa.cam.ac.uk/objects/

The accession numbers for each of the objects featured in this worksheet are:

1951.394 A

Z 15507

1951.394 A

1916.82/Record 2

Z 15504

1907.915

1921.1023

1932.690 A

1932.690 B