

ABORIGINAL PREHISTORY: INTERPRETATION OF ARTEFACTS

BY

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It is often intriguing for members of the general public to understand how past life-styles of prehistoric peoples have been reconstructed by archaeologists and prehistorians. This article is intended to give some insight into the process with reference to the tribes who lived in the coastal part of the Hunter Valley, the Worimi and the Awabakal.

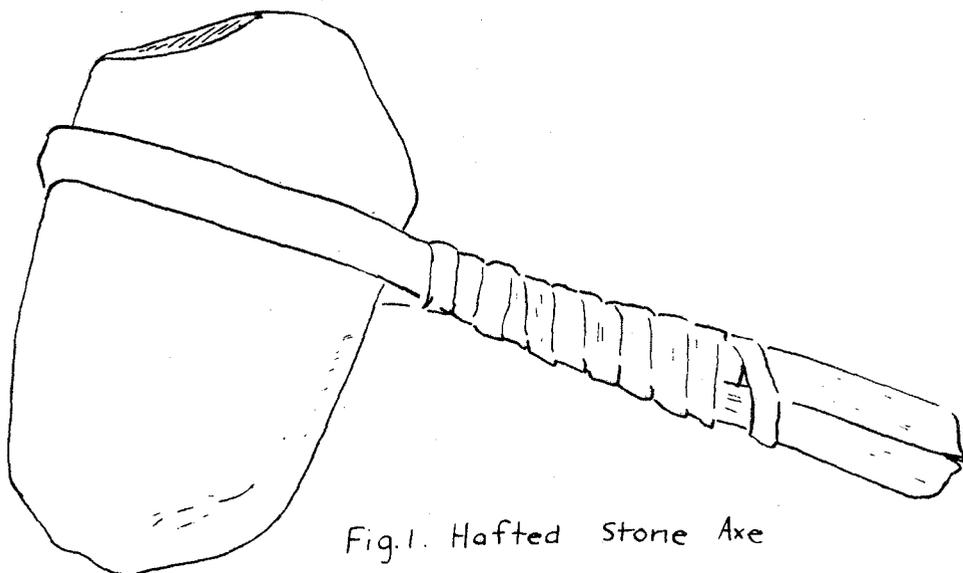


Fig.1. Hafted Stone Axe

Once an artefact* is excavated or found it immediately poses questions: how was it used and for what was it used? There are two sources of evidence, the archaeological and the ethnohistoric, which are complementary and sometimes contradictory.

The archaeological evidence consists of the material remains of previous life-styles of aborigines that are found lying on the surface or have been excavated by archaeologists. It is characterized very much by chance survival and discovery. Very rarely has any organic material, like wood or fur, survived into the present, and then only in ethnographic collections. Exceptional soil conditions are required for organic material to survive long periods of burial.

* Artefacts are small items of peoples' culture; portable objects manufactured or created by man.

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Thus it is that items of stone, bone or shell are the most likely artefacts to be left for discovery. This has been so in rock shelters or middens where the aborigines had settled for extended periods of time. In regular places of occupation, such as caves or camp sites, the occupation period extended over long time periods.

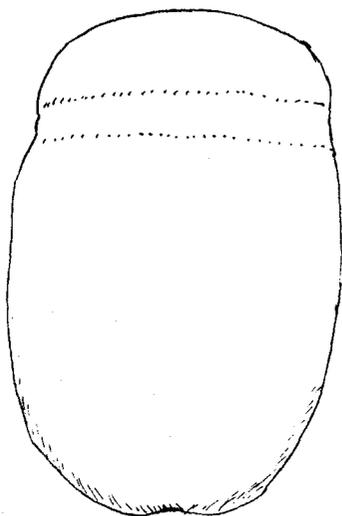


Fig. 2 Axe Head ($\frac{1}{2} \times$)
Ground edge, grooved;
Well polished.
Cape Hawke

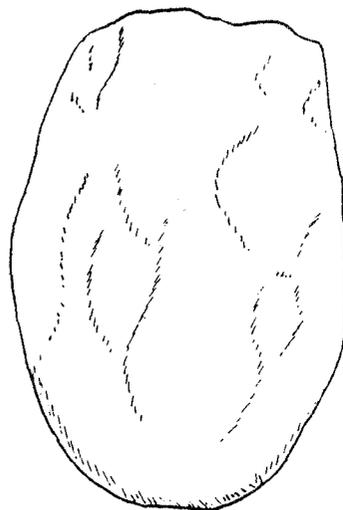
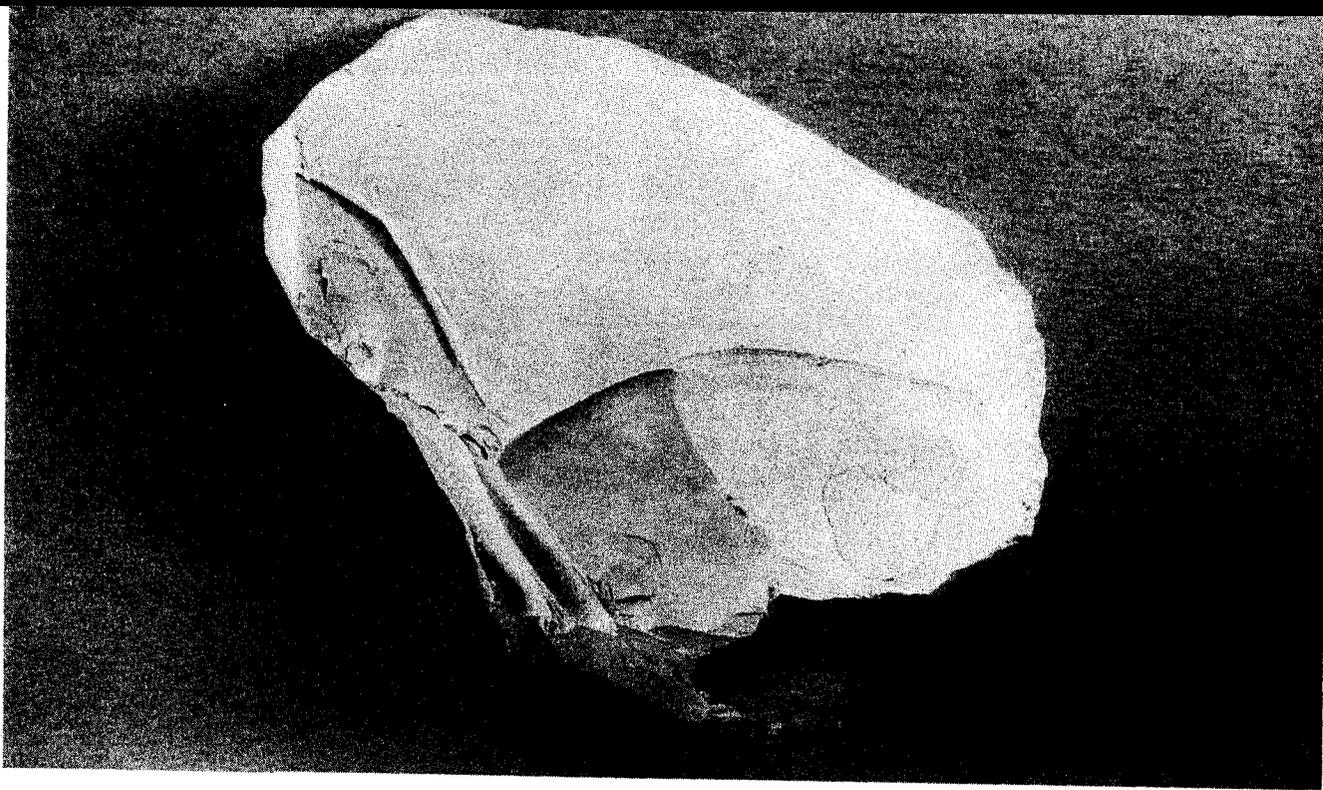


Fig. 3 Axe Head ($\frac{1}{2} \times$)
Ground edge, flaked pebble;
Hammerdressed.
Anna Bay

In the Hunter Valley there have been several archaeological sites surveyed and excavated, but only one has been excavated on the coast, at Swansea Heads. There has been a preponderance of stone artefacts recovered in these excavations, supplemented by bone from the inland Valley sites and bone/shell from the coastal one.* Besides these excavations that established a time sequence, surface collections have been made in the territory occupied by the Worimi and the Awabakal.

Since stone is the least perishable, it is on stone artefacts that we chiefly rely to reconstruct the life-styles of prehistoric aborigines (i.e. those aborigines who lived before information was recorded about them). The reconstruction is assisted by evidence from ethnohistoric sources (i.e. information written on the aborigines by the earliest observers before undue influence had been exerted on the aborigines' life-styles) which may be projected into the immediate prehistoric past.

* Swansea Heads earliest occupation level 7870 \pm 1115 B.P.: c.f. inland H.V. sites: Bobadeen 777 B.P., Sandy Hollow 2627 B.P., Milbrodale 2517 B.P.



This is an artefact whose use is relatively easy to surmise. It fits comfortably in the palm of the hand and has obviously been flaked to the required shape.



Plate 1 (above) shows the deliberately flaked back of the artefact.

Plate 2: The artefact is held in such a manner that the working edge can be used for a specific purpose. The smooth, worn working edge is clearly evident and is indicative of its use in the past. Therefore this artefact can be inferred to have been a large hand scraper.

Aboriginal Prehistory... (cont.)

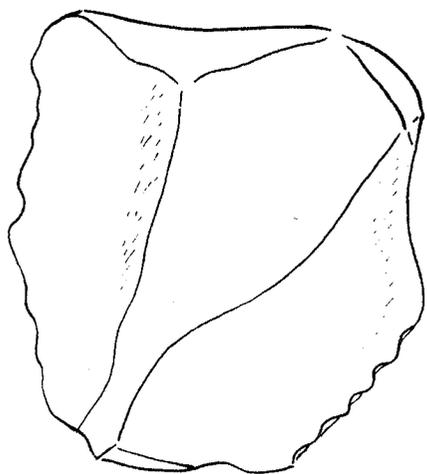


Fig. 4 Hand Cleaver ($\frac{1}{4}x$)
Awabakal Nature Reserve

Unfortunately the ethnohistoric evidence for the Worimi and the Awabakal seems to conflict with the archaeological evidence. In the ethnohistoric period the aborigines made a greater use of organic materials in their material culture: weapons, implements and utensils were made of wood, bark, bones, shells, skins, fur and the sinews of animals. The references to the use of stone are generalised and vague, with the exception of the stone axe:

"...they used stone hatchets, which were sharpened by other stones to a pretty fine edge. These had a groove worked near the head, around which they twisted a stock, to use as a handle..." (Dawson, p.202)

There is no doubt that this is referring to an edge-ground axe with a hafting groove (see Figs. 1 and 2)

"The large axes were beautifully ground and polished and an amount of trouble was taken in fixing handles to them. Years were often spent in grinding them and otherwise preparing them for use."
(McKiernan, p.890)

The proliferation of grinding grooves in the Hunter Valley attests to the assiduousness of the natives.

Smaller stone artefacts are reported to have been used but the sources are not wholly explicit:

"They used a kind of small stone-axe as an adze; and they had still a smaller one, which was held in the hand and used for dressing spear handles and boomerangs." (McKiernan, p.890)

Apparently there was a greater use of shell by the Worimi and the Awabakal in the scraping of their spears and inflicting cicatrices on their bodies:

"The shafts of the spear were ... scraped carefully to the required thickness with shells...." (Scott, p.29)

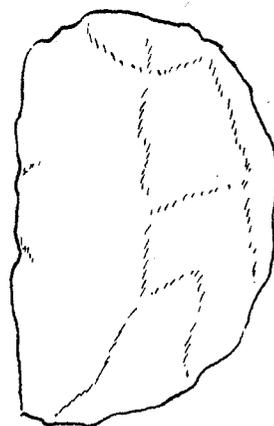


Fig. 5 Worimi Cleaver ($\frac{1}{3}x$)
Anna Bay

Aboriginal Prehistory...(cont.)

"He...scraped the point of his spear...with a broken shell and put it in the fire to harden." (Dawson, p.16)

"... both men and women [were] marked in various parts by raised scars: the process commences by making deep incisions on the chest, back, shoulders, or loins (never on the face) with sharp edges of shells according to the taste of the operators" (Dawson, p.319)

Stone wedges were used to knock out the initiates tooth

"...by...placing a piece of stone in the form of a wedge against it and then striking it sharply with a heavy stone." (ibid., p.321)

Some stone artefacts were labelled by early observers as 'knives' which implied their use as such for cutting purposes:

"...stone knives...were brought to a great state of perfection" (McKiernan, p.890)

"...by gashing with shells or knives." (Scott, p.29)

In the adjoining territory of the Wonnorua:

"...knives made of flint [were] used for cutting up meat..." (Fawcett, p.153)

McKiernan's information indicates that the 'knives' were well worked by the natives, but unworked primary flakes were also used:

"...chips of flint...were used in skinning animals...the sharp splinter of a stone served as a knife." (Fawcett, p.152)

Stone artefacts were used mounted on spears as barbs:

"The battle spear is made of the stem of the grass-tree, but often with the addition of pieces of sharp quartz stuck along the hard wood joint on one side so as to resemble the teeth of a saw." Threlkeld, p.67)

So according to the ethnohistoric sources stone artefacts were used for gouging, scraping, piercing and cutting purposes. There is little doubt as to the use of the edge ground axe with the hafting groove. (See article in H.N.H. Vol.7.) Its shape, size and cutting edge indicate in themselves that it was used for chopping purposes; the presence of a hafting groove makes this more positive. The handle made the stone axe a more efficient tool of the aborigine, and a highly prized one.

In the case of the hand-held axes or cleavers (see Figs. 4&5) the size and shape suggests their use. The presence of bruised

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edges supports the suggestion.

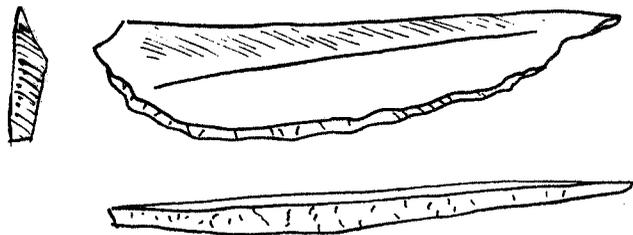


Fig. 6 Bondi Point (2x)
Awabakal Nature Reserve.

have been used for general cutting, or as barbs on spears (see Threlkeld's evidence above). The presence of traces of gum on the back supports such supposition.

Another method of deciding the use of a stone artefact lies in the evidence of use wear on them. When an artefact is used in a certain way, traces of wear will appear on the edge. This is sometimes very clear (as in Plate) and in other cases it is visible only under high magnification. Examination of the edge of stone artefacts often indicates secondary working, that is the edge has been given further attention, such as by being deliberately dulled or serrated. A dulled back in the Bondi Point as with the "elouera" scraper facilitates its use (see Fig. 8). The "elouera" scraper, characterised by its orange segment shape, may possibly have been used for dressing skins or paring bark and wood.

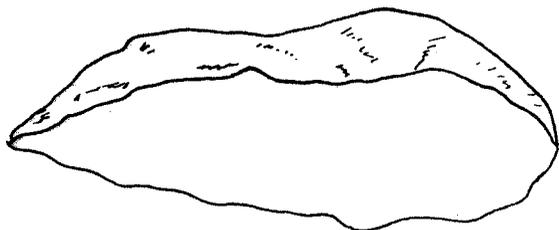


Fig. 8 'Elouera' Scraper (Actual Size)
Awabakal Nature Reserve

The small size and delicate workmanship of the Bondi Point (see Fig.6) poses a more difficult problem. It is characterised by a fine edge and a deliberately created back edge. The small size suggests that it was required to be hafted, as in Fig.7, to be put to good use. Thus mounted it could

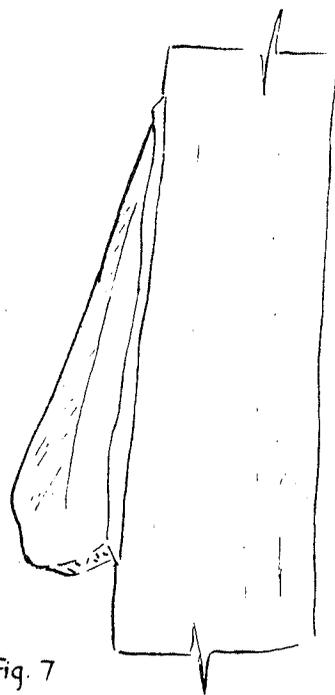
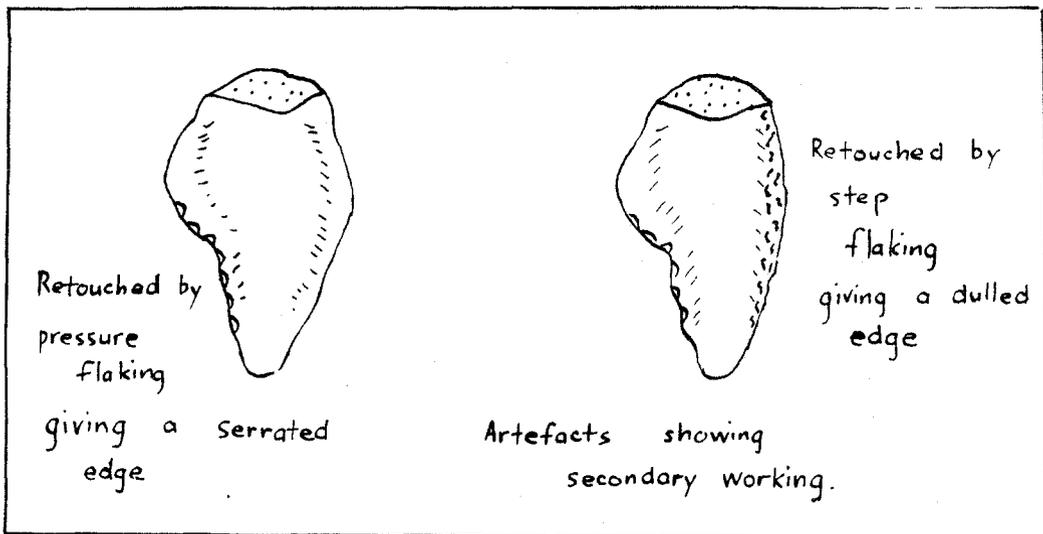
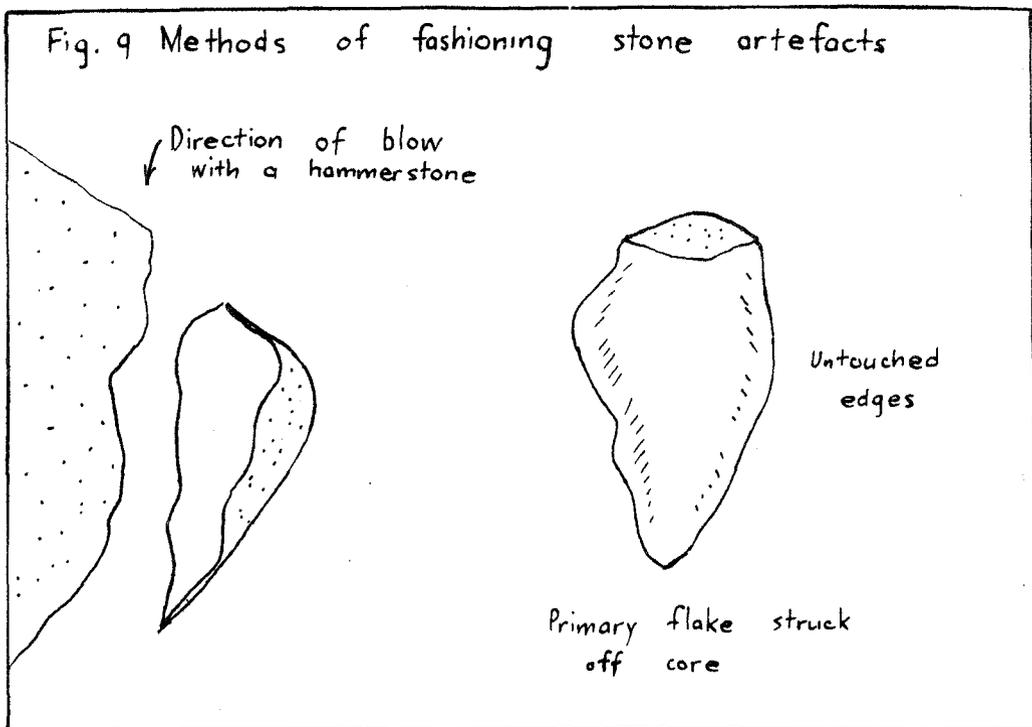


Fig. 7
Bondi Point: mounted
in some gum

Aboriginal Prehistory...(cont.)

Although prehistorian archaeologists are fond of making much of the idealised forms of stone artefacts, which display a greater degree of perfection and reflect workmanship by the hunter-gatherers of Australia, it is salutary to note that there is always a vast proportion of excavated stone material made up of amorphous shapes and primary flakes (see Fig.9). Such stone artefacts would have been suitable for immediate use for cutting and scraping and then cast away. (See the evidence of Fawcett above) on the coast, where shell was freely available, apparently shell had largely superseded the use of stone artefacts in ethno-historic times.



Aboriginal Prehistory...(cont.)

However, it is likely that favourite stone artefacts that had been carefully and skilfully fashioned would have been treasured by their owners and prized for their longer lasting quality, as undoubtedly stone is more durable than shell. These would probably have received greater use when their owners wandered away from the ready sources of shell or stone. This could explain the apparent discrepancy between the archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence. Another explanation is that the early observations made were inadequate.

In the territory of the Worimi and the Awabakal the predominant type of stone used was chert, with minor quantities of other tuffs, quartzites and quartz. All these possess the property of conchoidal fracture which facilitates the striking off of suitable flakes that can then be further fashioned if so desired.

If the reader is interested in the possible techniques used by the aborigines the suggestion is made that if suitable chert rock can be located, attempts at simulating the tool making process could be tried. The reader will then be faced with the difficulties experienced by the aborigines. A warning is issued concerning possible cuts or damage to the eyes from flying stone chips.

 NOTE: Readers are reminded that the consolidation of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974, resulted in important new provisions for the protection of Aboriginal sites. It is now illegal to damage, deface or destroy a relic, the penalty being \$1,000 or six months imprisonment, or both. It is also now illegal to collect relics without a permit from the Service.

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