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**A Stone Battle-Axe from Wotton-under-Edge, and a Review of  
Battle-Axe and Macehead finds from Gloucestershire**

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# A Stone Battle-Axe from Wotton-under-Edge, and a Review of Battle-Axe and Macehead finds from Gloucestershire

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The battle-axe shown in FIG. 1, A and PLATE I was dug up in 1969 from the garden of 5 Oatground, Sinwell, Wotton-under-Edge (NGR ST 7636 9320). The finder, Mr T.A. Smith, recently encouraged his son Nicholas to show the axe to his teachers at Katherine Lady Berkeley's school, where Mr P.K. Griffin recognized the significance of the object and passed it to one of the present writers (A.S.) at Cheltenham Museum for documentation. As the axe remains in the private possession of Mr Smith the opportunity is taken here to describe it in detail, and at the same time to review other finds of unpublished perforated stone implements from Gloucestershire.

The Wotton battle-axe is in good condition, complete except for slight recent damage on one side of the upper part of the cutting edge. The remaining intact portion of the cutting edge is



**PLATE I**

Wotton-under-Edge battle-axe. Photograph: A. Saville.

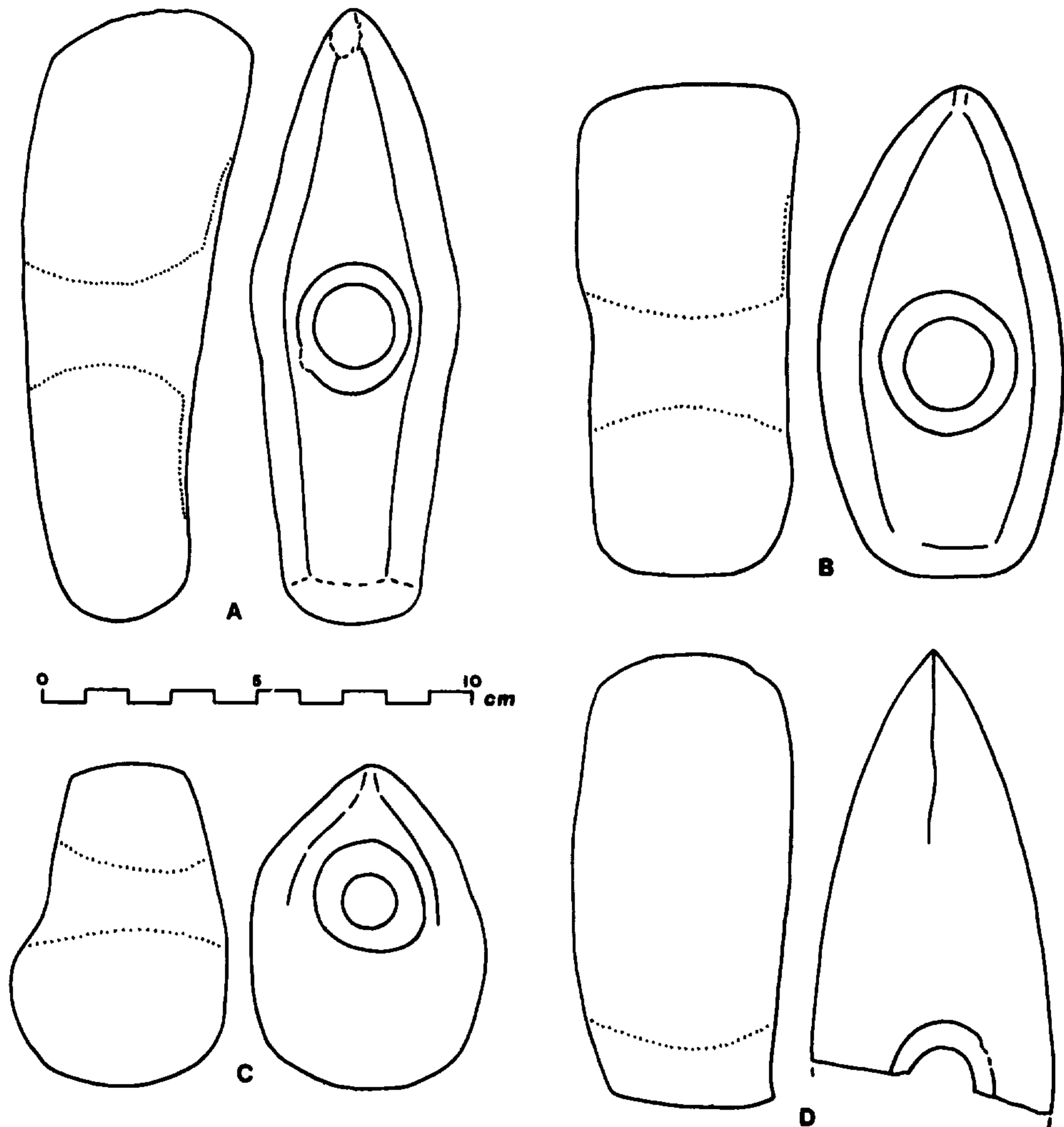


FIG. 1 A. Wotton-under-Edge; B. St Briavels; C. 'Rylands', 2 Grange Road, Gloucester; D. 'Near Gloucester'.

blunt and rounded. The axe appears to have been shaped by pecking, and the surface is smooth all over and was probably originally polished. In side view the axe has an asymmetric profile, with a drooping blade. The butt is rounded and hammer-like, appearing almost circular when viewed end-on. Viewed from above the axe is markedly 'boat-shaped', with the maximum width occurring at the perforation. The perforation itself is of 'hour-glass' type in that it expands towards the upper and lower surfaces, but its central portion is cylindrical, not angular, and is polished from hafting. The under-surface of the axe is dished. In colour the axe has a dark grey to dark olive surface (Munsell 5Y 4/1-3/2), while the exposed interior, where chipped, is a greenish black (5Y 2.5/1). The axe weighs approximately 460 grams, and its dimensions can be listed as follows (see Roe 1966, 200):

total length (L)	141 mm
maximum breadth (B)	49 mm
depth at hole (D)	42 mm
minimum hole diameter (H)	19 mm
distance from butt to centre hole (L <sup>1</sup> )	67 mm
max. width at cutting edge (D <sup>1</sup> ) (approx)	46 mm

The axe was sectioned across the broken part of the cutting edge, and has now been refilled. Dr W.A. Cummins, lately of the Department of Geology, University of Nottingham, has identified the stone as an ungrouped ophitic dolerite. The axe is numbered 1774/G 123 in the petrological survey records.

Battle-axes, which are a 'type-fossil' of the British early bronze age, are extremely rare finds in Gloucestershire. The only complete and archaeologically well-provenanced examples are those from Snowhill and St Briavels, while a third fragmentary example comes from the Gloucester area. Best known of these is the battle-axe from the famous round barrow grave-group at Snowhill (SP 0923 3321; O'Neil and Grinsell 1960, 130) recorded by Greenwell (1890, 70–72; see Ashbee 1960, plate 17b, or Thomas 1965, plate 142, for photographic illustrations; the axe is in the British Museum, WG 2129). The Snowhill battle-axe is important within British prehistory because of its association with a three-riveted ogival bronze dagger, a tanged-and-collared bronze spearhead, and a crutch-headed bronze pin. The battle-axe itself typifies the Snowhill Group (Stage V; Roe 1966, 212) or Developed form (Roe 1979, 23), with crescentic butt and blade, and is made of Group XII rock, a picrite from the Shropshire/Powys border (1502/G 94; Evens *et al.* 1972, 263).

The St Briavels battle-axe (FIG. 1, B), which has not previously been published, was found during ploughing at Roads Farm (SO 578 052) in 1978 and is now in the City Museum, Gloucester (26/1978). Typologically, with its convex outline and a blade that is slightly deeper than the butt, this axe can be classed as a Stage II or Early form. The axe has been sectioned (1747/G 119) and shown to be of Group XVIII quartz dolerite, from a source in the Whin Sill, northern England.

The third provenanced example (FIG. 1, D), again previously unpublished except in list form (Roe 1966, 234), is recorded as having been 'found near Gloucester' and is now in the British Museum (1914, 8-8, 1). It is made of flint, a very unusual material for making battle-axes, and is represented by its blade end only, having split in antiquity across the hour-glass perforation.

The Snowhill and St Briavels battle-axes are examples of standard British forms, and the Gloucester flint battle-axe, though unusual, can equally be accepted as of insular origin. This is not the case with the Wotton-under-Edge battle-axe, which is characterized by its asymmetricaly expanded, drooping blade, by its rounded butt, by its dished under-surface, and by its 'boat-shaped' outline. This combination of traits is not normally found among the standard British forms (Roe 1979, 24–25), and the drooping blade in particular is a non-British characteristic, which on the other hand is a common feature of later neolithic/early bronze age stone battle-axes in mainland northern Europe (Roe 1966, 227), particularly within the Corded Ware complex (see for example Harrison 1980, plate 4).

The Wotton-under-Edge battle-axe could perhaps be regarded as a somewhat debased version of type B1c in the Danish series, these being examples with a drooping blade at one end, a lozenge-shaped outline (which in the Wotton-under-Edge battle-axe is not strictly the case, since in plan view it appears rounded rather than angular), and a cross-section which is hollowed out on the under side (Glob 1945, 22; fig 3). The British Museum collections contain a Danish battle-axe of unknown provenance (Den 637b), which, though lacking the dished surface, otherwise compares reasonably well morphologically with the Wotton-under-Edge example.

This battle-axe, on macroscopic examination, appears to be made of dolerite. Struve, in his publication of comparable material from Schleswig-Holstein, illustrates another not dissimilar battle-axe, which he considered to be a non-symmetrical version of the Scandinavian type H (Struve 1955, Taf. 7, 6).

In a more recent assessment of material from West Germany, the B type of battle-axe is described under the heading of Jütländische Streitäxte Form B (Brandt 1967, 50, Abb. 2, Taf. 7, and Karte 14), and two comparable examples are recorded in association with cord-ornamented pottery (Brandt 1967, 52–3 and Taf. 33, 1–3). Further studies have been made of such axes in the Netherlands, together with ones that are considered to be derivative forms (Addink-Samplonius 1968, fig 15), and it is perhaps to this area that one should look for a possible source for finds such as that from Wotton-under-Edge.

There is no reason to assume that the Wotton-under-Edge battle-axe is other than a genuine, prehistoric artefact, and the possibility of an ethnographic origin has not been considered. Taking the finding of the axe at face value, therefore, the following alternative explanations for its presence in the county may be proposed:

- A. it belongs to a British battle-axe type not previously recognized,
- B. it is a prehistoric foreign import, or
- C. it is a post-prehistoric, most probably modern, import as a collector's item, fortuitously re-buried at its present findspot.

The absence of any known comparanda for this particular axe-type in Britain and its similarity with continental forms as described above, make explanation A extremely unlikely, but it is more difficult to choose between explanations B and C. Battle-axes were clearly prestige objects in prehistory, as reflected by their frequent deposition as grave-goods with burials beneath round barrows, and their function may have been exclusively ceremonial. As such they are less likely to have been casually lost in prehistory than items of everyday use, and this must be considered together with the fact that garden provenances are always somewhat suspect. The lack of association between the object and a prehistoric context must, in fact, favour explanation C. However, the possibility of the battle-axe being a genuine prehistoric import cannot be ruled out, given the existence of other, albeit poorly documented, cases (Roe 1966, 229; Smith 1924–5, 105), and given the increasing recognition of trade and exchange contacts across the North Sea and the English Channel during the later neolithic and early bronze age. Battle-axes belonging to the Single Grave culture were very widespread in northern Europe, and many different groups can be cited (De Laet 1979, 318). It seems not unreasonable that a few of the stone battle-axes associated with these cultures should have found their way as far as the British Isles. It is perhaps also noteworthy that in a sample of 40 battle-axes from the Netherlands, 75 per cent were ascertained to have been made of some kind of dolerite (Addink-Samplonius 1968, 236, table II). Another case may be cited of a battle-axe of a non-British type, again made of dolerite, but with a provenance that leaves authentication open to doubt. This battle-axe, which was in the collection of the late Alexander Keiller and is at present in the care of one of us (F.R.) pending transfer to a museum, is said to have come from a stone circle in Derbyshire. It can be assessed as another version of the Continental B type of battle-axe.

There is clearly a need here for further work, both to look in more detail at the kinds of dolerite used for battle-axes of this type, and also to compile an up-to-date corpus of 'foreign-type' battle-axes from Britain with reference to their possible European counterparts, to help evaluate the possibility of prehistoric importation. This could be of some considerable importance within the context of Beaker origins in this country.

A further unpublished find is of a flint macehead. This was found in undisturbed clay below

the topsoil of the garden at 'Rylands', 2 Grange Road, Gloucester (SO 8240 1500), and it is in the City Museum, Gloucester (57/1972). This macehead (FIG. 1, C) is atypical both in being made of flint and in its irregular shape. The entire outer surface is polished, but there are signs that it has been made from a pebble.

Macehead finds from Gloucestershire are not especially common. Of note, however, is half of an egg-shaped, Ovoid B macehead from Cam (SO 744 011), now in Bristol Museum, which was found in one of two pits which also contained sherds of Fengate ware (Smith, Roe and Westley 1968, fig. 4). This macehead is made, unusually, of limestone (1235/G 52). A half pestle macehead from Rendcomb (SP 003 107), which is in Cheltenham Museum (1945:36) is made of Group I greenstone from a source near Penzance, while a further Ovoid B macehead made of an olivine dolerite (1447/G 73) may come from the Rendcomb area, and is at present at Rendcomb College.

The Gloucester macehead is of interest as it belongs within an unusual category of maceheads made from flint nodules with naturally-formed holes. These have usually been worked into shape by flaking; the ultimate shape of the macehead depends to some extent on the piece of flint available, but these maceheads all approximate to the more spherical types of Ovoid macehead (Roe 1968, 149 and fig. 32, 9). In the case of the Gloucester macehead, flaking was not needed, but the nodule was somewhat pointed at one end, giving the impression of a short blade and possible battle-axe morphology, an effect that is fortuitous. The rounded cross-section is typical of an Ovoid macehead, and the implement may be further categorized as belonging within the Ovoid B group, a classification which is entirely consistent with the known typology of other flint maceheads (Roe 1968, fig. 30).

Fifteen examples of such flint maceheads have been recorded to date, and of these no fewer than eight come from the Thames valley within a short radius of London. There are also three further flint maceheads with a Wessex provenance; one is probably from Aldbourne, Wiltshire (Annable and Simpson 1964, 37 No. 41), while there are two others from Dorset, one from Handley Down (Pitt Rivers 1898, 109 and plate 263, 10), the other from Martinstown and in Tunbridge Wells Museum (the writers are indebted to Mike Pitts for information regarding this implement). Outliers include a find from the river Tay near Newburgh, Fife (Roe 1970, 225 and fig. 1), while a few flint maceheads with drilled holes are also known among examples in the Maesmore group, of which the most recently-recorded find is an elaborately ornamented specimen from Knowth (Eogan 1983, 45 and plate IIIb).

### *Acknowledgements*

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