

Shorter Notes

A mace-head from Orkney

by J B Kenworthy

Among the collection formed by the late J C Henderson of Fyvie, Aberdeenshire, and conditionally bequeathed to the Anthropological Museum, University of Aberdeen, in 1949 is half of a fine later neolithic mace-head, accession no. 1256. This is of the Orkney pestle type, with a waisted outline and having its minimum breadth at the perforation, as defined by Roe (1968, 148-9). Unfortunately the only provenance given for the object is 'Orkney', and there is no record of how it came into Henderson's possession.

The remaining, front, half of the mace-head (fig 1) is 46 mm in length and 45 mm broad at maximum decreasing to 36 mm at the break, by 40 mm broad decreasing to 32 mm at the break transversely. The cross-section is oval. The diameter of the cylindrical perforation (which is slightly everted at each end) has been of the order of 20 mm. The surface of the mace-head has been well smoothed, and the mottled green and white rock has obviously been chosen for its aesthetic qualities.

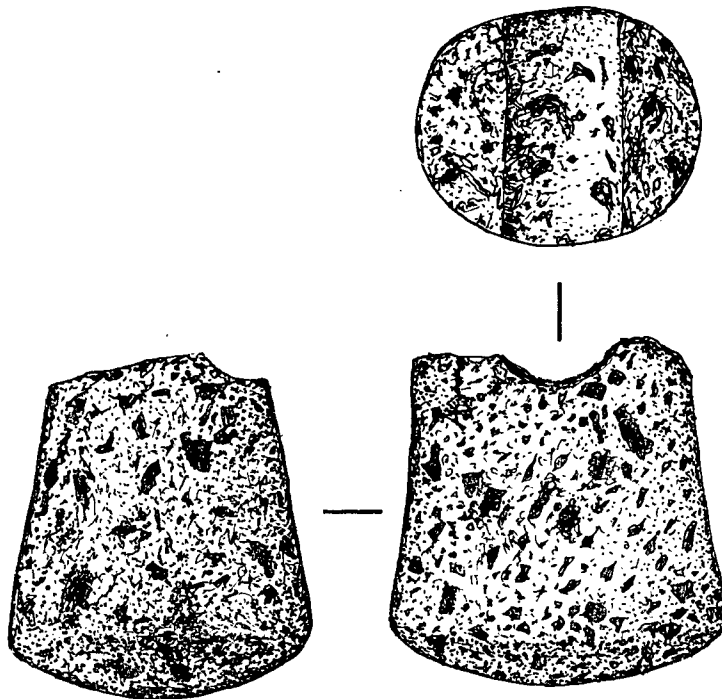


FIG 1 Mace-head from Orkney (scale 1 : 1)

The rock is a coarse-grained quartz diorite, containing hornblende, quartz and plagioclase. Such rock does not occur *in situ* in Orkney, but it would quite possibly occur as boulders in the local Old Red Sandstone conglomerate. The nearest *in situ* occurrences are in Shetland and in various localities in the Scottish Highlands.

The fragmentary state of the mace-head may be noted. Dr Roe (1968, 151) has pointed out that broken mace-heads are of common occurrence, 18 out of 24 ovoid and pestle mace-heads from Orkney being fragmentary, and has suggested that the breaking may well be intentional. This conclusion seems to be warranted, but a note of caution is necessary: as Callander (1931, 94) commented, the majority of the Orkney mace-heads have occurred as stray finds, without association, implying in all probability that we are not dealing with a burial ritual, if breakage is indeed for some ceremonial or ritual purpose. It is thus not possible to speculate on the original context of the mace-head, but, despite the lack of associations, it may be considered an interesting addition to the Orkney group.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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REFERENCES

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