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Note: This article has a LOT of good pic's to download,
but it is well worth the time!!

STONE AGE HAND-AXES

by W.J. Kowalski



1. There were no handaxes at the beginning of the Pleistocene, and none at the end, but for one million years in between this was the tool of choice for stone age man. Although everpresent in stone age culture, the exact purpose and use of this tool remains a mystery.

The Pleistocene lasted from two million years ago to the present., which is called the Holocene. At the beginning of the Pleistocene primitive man was already using fire and making stone, bone, and wooden tools. He wore animal skins scraped clean with stone scrapers, cut in straight lines and stitched together with leather laces.

The reason handaxes seem to have no specific purpose is probably because they served a general purpose. They could be used for cutting meat, scraping skins, chopping wood, digging holes, hammering bone or wood, and perhaps as a last resort defense against wild animals -- perhaps sort of a Stone Age Swiss army knife. The proliferation and abundance of handaxes suggests that perhaps everyone had one. As techniques for making handaxes slowly improved over the millennia, these same techniques would have led to new types of specialized tools, ultimately making the handaxe obsolete.



The handaxe appears almost everywhere that early man appears (see image at left), with the exception of the very far east. Ultimately the handaxe was replaced by an array of specialized tools, and may have ceased to have any value beyond that of pure tradition and culture. Perhaps every boy who came of



age was given his own handaxe, or perhaps they came to have only ritualistic use. Some late handaxes were excellently manufactured, but seemed to receive little actual use. A number have been found that were deliberately driven point first into the ground and left, for unknown reasons.

Handaxes come in many shapes and sizes, and many styles unique to cultures of specific periods and in specific geographical areas.

Almost all handaxes have a point, are sized for the hand and shaped to be held. Almost no handaxes have notches for mounting. Attempts to dramatize Stone Age man as a crude and warlike savage often show handaxes mounted as oversized spearpoints. Such comic personification says more about our violent modern culture than it does about this pristine world



of teenage hunters (average age 19) who spent their time on beaches and riverbanks. They rarely lived beyond the age of 35, not because of hardship, but more probably because of disease, since even minor cuts could cause fatal infections.

These youthful cavepeople made fine stone tools, works of art, and spears and arrows for hunting, but they made no weapons for killing other humans until about 26,000 BCE, perhaps when leaders (older males?) became predominant. The

hunters of the stone age enjoyed abundant game during warmer climates, hunting many species to extinction. They had the time to create the most excellent stonework and wall paintings, circa 100,000 - 20,000 BCE. It has been noted before that the quality of stone age art has not been exceeded today -- only our technology has improved.

1. At the right is an early chopper from about 2,000,000 BCE. Chopper industries preceded handaxes but led directly to them as tool-making methods evolved. Choppers, also an all-purpose tool, were the first stone tools to be made rather than 'found'.



Acheulean
Handaxes from
Saint-Acheul,
France. Dated to
the Lower
Paleolithic, Riss
glaciation, or
approximately
1,000,000 to
300,000 BCE.



Primitive
Abbevillian
handaxe from
Olduvai,
approximately
1,000,000 BCE.



Acheulean
handaxes from
Sbaika, Algeria.
Made by homo
erectus. Dated to
the Riss glaciation.

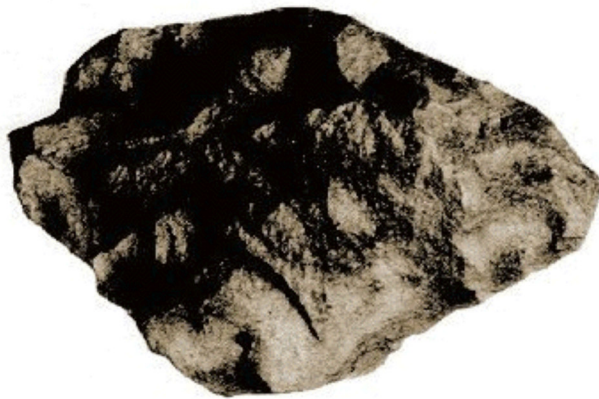


Crude Acheulean
handaxes from
Sbaika, Algeria.
From about
1,000,000 to
500,000 BCE.

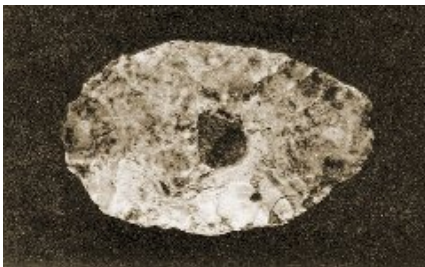




Crude handaxe
from Abbevillian
culture. Found in
Abbeville, France.
Perhaps from
1,000,000 to
500,000 BCE.



Large Padjitanian
handaxe from
Java. About
750,000 BCE.



Almond shaped
handaxes from the
Late Acheulean.
Found near St.
Acheul, France.
Perhaps from
about 300,000 to
100,000 BCE.



Upper Acheulean
handaxes from
Kalambo Falls,
northern Rhodesia.
Approximately
100,000 to 200,00
BCE.



Small Micoquian
handaxes from La
Micoque, France.
From 100,000 BCE.



Medium sized
Micoquian
handaxes from La
Micoque, France.
From 100,000 BCE.



Large Micoquian handaxes from La Micoque, France. From 100,000 BCE.



Small handaxe made from rock crystal. Late Mousterian, about 100,000 BCE. From Kulna cave, Moravia.



Small handaxes. Late Mousterian, about 100,000 BCE. From Kulna cave, Moravia.

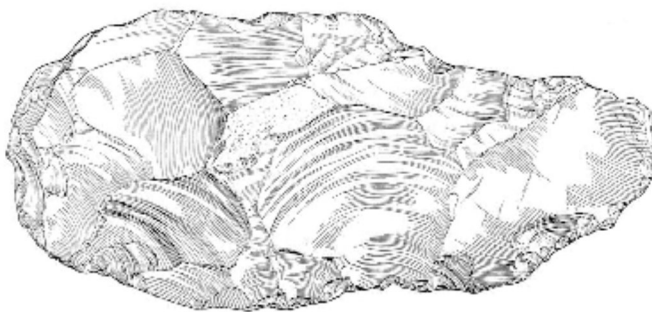




Upper Acheulean
handaxes from
Isimila, Tanzania.
From about
100,000 BCE.



Mousterian
handaxe from
Kulna cave,
Moravia,
Czechoslovakia.



Giant Acheulean
handaxe from
Norfolk, England,
over 6" long and
2.5 inches wide.
Most handaxes
were only 10 cm
long, but then
Homo habilis and
erectus were only
about 4 feet tall.



Larger, more
evolved Abbbevillian
handaxes from
Olduvai, Africa.
Approximately
500,000 BCE.

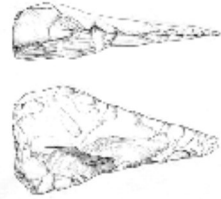




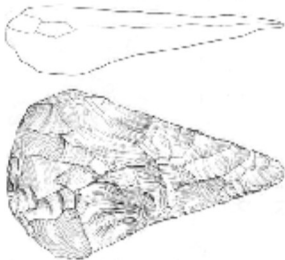
Small, crudely struck handaxes from Swanscombe, Kent, found in the middle gravels. Acheulean, perhaps 500,000 BCE.



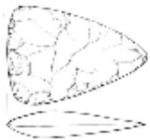
Pointed Clactonian handaxes from Swanscombe, Kent, England. This fine workmanship by a tool-making Neanderthal was noted by J.J. Wymer, who was also British.



Subtriangular Mousterian handaxe, about 500,000 BCE.



Triangular Mousterian handaxe, about 500,000 BCE.



Cordate Mousterian handaxe, about 500,000 BCE.



Acheulean cordate handaxe made of silcrete. From Elandsfontein, Cape Province, South Africa. Middle Pleistocene, 500,000 BCE.

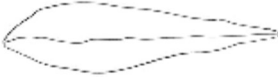




Middle Acheulean
handaxe from
Swanscombe.
About 300,000 -
500,000 BCE.



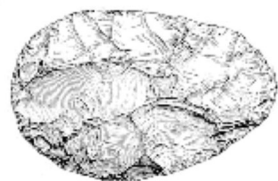
Elegant cordate
handaxe from
Hoxne, Suffolk,
England. Late
Acheulean, about
350,000 BCE.



Three views of a
backed handaxe
from the Upper
Acheulean,
approximately
200,000 to
100,000 BCE.



Ovate Acheulean
handaxe from
about 200,000
BCE. Found in the
dunes near
Abbeville, France.





Small Mousterian handaxe of Acheulean tradition. From Pech del' Aze. About 100,000 BCE.



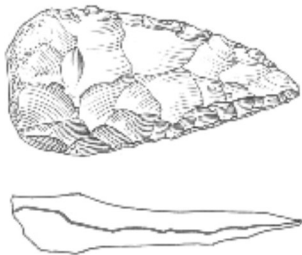
Handaxes from Perigord, France. The lower handaxe still has its point intact. Mousterian period. From the Perigord Museum.



Large handaxe of the Mousterian period. From the Perigord Museum.



Ovoid Mousterian handaxe. From the Perigord Museum.



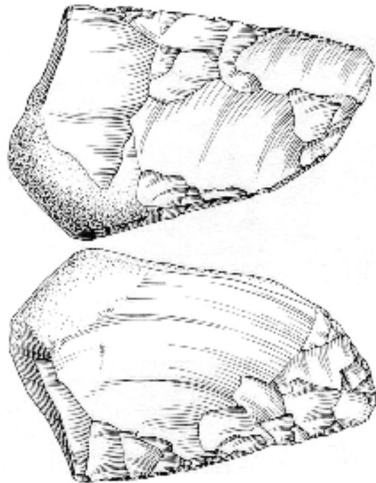
Mousterian handaxe from Volgograd, Russia. About 80,000 BCE.



Mousterian
Cordiform handaxe
of Mousterian
tradition. From the
beginning of the
Wurm glaciation,
about 70,000 BCE.
Note the increased
attention to detail.



East Gravettian
(Pavlovian) handaxe
from Dolni
Vestonice,
Czechoslovakia.
From about 30,000
BCE.



Two views of a
specialized type of
late handaxe called
a Prodnik, which
was a sort of
bifacial knife.
From Wylotne,
Poland, Middle
Paleolithic (Wurm
II) about 50,000
-30,000 BCE. Later
prodniks
specialized further
and became
different tools,
while handaxes
themselves became
rare and then
disappeared.



An advanced, or
'perfected',
handaxe from the
late Mousterian or
Early Aurignacian
(Perigordian).
perhaps 50,000 -
35,000 BCE. From
the Perigord
Museum.



Triangular handaxes of the perfected variety, Early Aurignacian. If the dating is correct, these are among the last handaxes that were made before the final diversification and specialization of fine stone tools made the handaxe obsolete.



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