

Monolithic Axes

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It is customary at the outset of a discussion to define the topic. Such a course is perhaps advisable in the present instance, as there might be some who will conclude that due to my long political experience I have chosen to speak about political axes—the kind that politicians are always grinding. I will admit an exhaustive knowledge of that subject, but monolithic axes are something different.

A monolithic ax is an ax—or hatchet-shaped implement—comprising both blade and handle, all cut from a single piece of stone.

The blade of a monolithic ax resembles many of the stone celts or wedge-shaped or ungrooved axes at one time in common use, especially among the southern Indians. The monolithic ax may be regarded as perpetuating the manner in which axes of this class were frequently hafted and carried by the prehistoric people of America for domestic and perhaps warlike purposes. The handle or hafting of the monolithic ax is of stone and of one piece with the blade, whereas the celt or ungrooved ax had to be hafted with a wooden handle.

The literature on the subject of monolithic axes is very scanty. Very few monolithic axes have been found within the United States.

Warren King Moorehead, writing his *Etowah Papers* in 1932, said: "Ten or twelve monolithic axes have been found in the central southern portion of the United States."

Jones, in "Antiquities of the Southern Indians," published in 1873, writes as follows about one monolithic ax: (Condensed quotation) "Professor Joseph Jones discovered in a sepulchral mound on the bank of the Cumberland river, opposite the city of Nashville, Tennessee, an ax of this class. The entire implement was cut out of a solid piece of greenstone. The handle is thirteen inches and a half in length, an inch and a half wide, and about an inch thick. At the lower end is a hole for the suspension and convenient transportation of the weapon when not in actual use. The ax is about six inches long, two inches and a quarter wide at the cutting edge, and an inch and a half broad at the other end. It is three-quarters of an inch thick."

The author, Mr. Jones, further says: "An implement precisely similar in material and construction was taken from a grave mound in York District, South Carolina, about ten years ago."

Warren King Moorehead, in "Stone Age in North America," on page 328 writes (condensed quotation): "Some years ago a colored man ploughing near one of the larger mounds at Moundville, Alabama, found a superb hatchet and handle carved from a solid mass, probably amphibolite, and highly polished. This hatchet was procured by Mr. C. S. Prince, from whom it was obtained by the Academy of Sciences of Philadelphia. The hatchet is 11.6 inches in length, with a neatly made ring at the end of the handle and there is a graceful, backward curve of the part of the handle above the blade."

Warren King Moorehead in his *Etowah Papers*, in discussing the exhumation of skeleton No. 50 in the *Etowah Mound* in Georgia, writes: "A beautifully worked monolithic ax something over a foot in length lay at the side of the burial. It was wrought from blue limestone and highly polished."

Writing further in the same volume, Mr. Moorehead says: "Another, but not so beautifully made, was found many years ago in Mississippi County, Arkansas, and is now in the collection of Mr. Morris of that county."

Some of these five specimens are mentioned in other publications, such as Thruston's "Antiquities of Tennessee," but no additional information is given.

A canvass of the museums and private collections would have to be made to learn the histories of all the ten or twelve monolithic axes that Mr. Moorehead says were in existence in 1932. The locality where some of these specimens were found has not been recorded and the description of them has not been given in any publication that is now available.

The particular specimens which I am scheduled to discuss today are not included among the ten or twelve mentioned by Mr. Moorehead. They were found September 28, 1935, in Big Temple Mound, near Spiro, in LeFlore County, Oklahoma. Four were found together, and according to style of construction were in pairs.

Big Temple Mound is one of a group of twelve mounds extending along a distance of about one mile on the Oklahoma side of the Arkansas river, about sixteen miles below Fort Smith. At the outset it was excavated unscientifically and for purely commercial purposes by several young men of the community. Local amateur archeologists manifested an early interest and watched the progress of the excavation and took many snapshots of material discovered. It is to be regretted that professional archeologists continued to be skeptical for such a long period about the remarkable discoveries made. In the meantime the several young farmers who had leased the mound were taking out truck loads of the finest prehistoric Indian artifacts ever found within the borders of the United States. The monolithic axes, about which I am speaking today, were among the many things unearthed. Finally, although belatedly, professional archeologists became excited and prevailed upon the State of Oklahoma to enact a law prohibiting all except certified archeologists from exploring mounds. The University of Oklahoma now has charge of the further exploration of Big Temple Mound. It is sincerely hoped that ultimately a comprehensive and scientific publication about this mound will be issued. When the farmer boys had control of the digging, from four to seven men were busy with spades and shovels. Now, under the direction of the University of Oklahoma, eighty-five W.P.A. workers are employed with spades and shovels. Much new material has been found and soon it will all be securely boxed up in the basement of one of the university buildings at Norman, Oklahoma.

The inquiry generally is made with reference to any archeological specimen as to the culture classification, but the little that I shall say on that subject will be uttered with the greatest hesitation. That is a field of speculation, confusion and controversy that I am reluctant to invade. Perhaps I should protect myself by stating as the professional archeologist invariably does that it will require further exploration and study to reach a positive conclusion. Anyhow, some one might produce a tiny potsherd and then all other evidence would be knocked into a cocked hat and the culture would be fixed as woodland, middle Mississippi, Cumberland-Tennessee, et cetera as the case might be according to potsherd rules.

I shall with caution merely suggest that the presence of monolithic axes in a mound might indicate southern Mexican or Central American—perhaps even Mayan influence. If one examines the picture of the Elephant Headed God Chac, as shown in the Dresden Codex, it will be observed that this Mayan God has what appears to be a monolithic ax in one hand. Again,

maces, scepters, disks, decorated shells and other Mayan artifacts have been found in the several mounds where monolithic axes have been found. Such artifacts were found in great numbers in Big Temple Mound. However, I shall leave the question of particular culture for others to determine. I am content for the present to think of them as belonging to that one general culture as shown by unity of physical traits, unity of ideology, etc. of the people that held sway over America before its discovery by Columbus.

There is one attribute suggested by these monolithic axes that is not comprehended in the "Cultural patterns, phases, aspects, foci and components" of the professional archeologist, that is the attribute of beauty or art. Fortunately, that is, according to my way of thinking, there are some archeologists and collectors who have not been carried away by the present craze or style for scratching through rubbish and garbage heaps for fragments of pottery to the exclusion of all other remains and artifacts of primitive Americans. Persons under the spell of this craze for potsherds laugh in scorn at anyone as a person of perverted and monstrous tastes and mentality who seeks beauty in a prehistoric "relic" as they disparagingly term any artifact that shows skillful workmanship. Too often the professional archeologist in studying scraps from refuse piles in his attempts to establish cultures, loses the artistic appreciation that certainly was one of the fine characteristics of the prehistoric American Indian. Such so called archeologists fail to see the woods because the trees are constantly in the way. They are like the technical botanist who loses the beauty of the plants and flowers in tearing them to pieces in his efforts to classify them.

Perhaps I should admit it shamefacedly, but these monolithic axes are undoubtedly able to pass as pretty pieces. Undoubtedly the Indian who once possessed them thought likewise and valued them because of that fact. Some Indians were artists even if some archeologists are not. They could find in their back yard a rock or piece of stone which would serve to make an ax, a pipe, or other necessary tool. But they were not content with any piece of stone or the quality of workmanship that would merely serve the purposes of utility. They would travel hundreds of miles to find a rock that was pretty and would take a high polish and they would fashion that rock with all the skill of a modern lapidary into a thing of beauty. Doubtless they were thrilled and filled with joy as they viewed a masterpiece turned out by their own hands. We can gain a higher estimate of the character and the civilization of prehistoric Americans if we study what were their prized possessions instead of what they sent to the dump. The civilization of any people can best be judged by their parlors rather than by their alleys—or at least we should be fair and consider both and judge from both.

I admit that I like pretty pieces—pieces that show skill and a sense of symmetry and beauty in their construction. I like them because I believe the Indians liked them.

Many people who have visited Greece and Italy have felt elevated and inspired as they viewed the ancient sculptures, paintings and buildings of those two historic countries, although they did not know the names of the artists or the particular five foot square upon which they did their work or where some fine example of it was found after the passage of centuries and in leaving those countries they have exclaimed with the poet about "The glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome."

If we should contemplate with a proper sense of appreciation the genius and skill and artistic conception of the prehistoric American Indian we would be compelled to exclaim about the glory and the grandeur of the first Americans.