

A Neolithic jadeite axe from Potterhanworth, Lincolnshire

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One of the great common fallacies people often have about the past is that our ancestors were insular in both their outlook on the world and their experience of life outside of their local communities. Presumptions that Medieval people never left their villages, or that Britain was cut off from the civilised world until the Roman invasion still abound, in spite of abundant archaeological and historical evidence to the contrary. Some artefacts categorically blow such misconceptions out of the proverbial water, such as this polished jadeite axe recently acquired by The Collection.

The Neolithic (c.4,000BC – c.2,300BC) is a fascinating period in British prehistory, marking the time when the hunter gatherer lifestyle was gradually replaced by a more settled way of life, leading to developments in crop cultivation, animal husbandry and the clearance of forests to support both of these activities. Axes were therefore important tools, and form a significant element of the archaeological record from the period. Neolithic stone and flint axes were polished to a smooth finish, an act which has caused much debate among archaeologists as it does not appear to be purely functional. Equally, the selection of certain types of stone was clearly a deliberate process. Approximately half of the Neolithic axes found in Lincolnshire are made from a greenstone quarried in Cumbria, at Great Langdale. This fine grained stone was selected for its particular properties, and the effort and expense required to transport the raw material (or perhaps partially completed 'rough outs') almost 200 miles by track and river to Lincolnshire were clearly seen as warranted to obtain this valuable and attractive stone. In comparison with the Potterhanworth jadeite axe, however, this journey seems positively local.

The Potterhanworth axe was discovered in 1975, and has been in a private collection since then. In 2007 the axe was analysed as part of an international French project, *Projet JADE*, which revealed its petrological origins. The jadeite was quarried in in the North Italian Alps, specifically in the foothills of Mont Viso. It is of a type of axe known as 'Puy', manufactured in around 4,000BC but possibly not arriving in Britain until a few centuries later. The axe shows some signs of reworking, suggesting that it may have been altered once it reached Lincolnshire.

The international trade connections required to support such long distance exchange of exotic materials cannot be underestimated, and must have made the axe an item of great value and prestige to the individual or community who owned and used it in Lincolnshire. It serves as a constant reminder that even the simplest looking objects can have surprising and international histories, and that we should never underestimate the ingenuity of our ancestors to obtain the materials they most valued, wherever they were to be found, and to maintain complex relationships with other communities.

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