

## **Some Preliminary Observations on the Mellor Flint Dagger**

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### **Notes:**

*Artefact:*

Dagger

*Condition:*

Unbroken

### *Dimensional attributes:*

Max length: 14.0cm

Max width: 4.5cm

Max thickness: 1.3cm

Weight: 63.8gm

### *Material:*

Brown/red translucent flint, with no surviving cortex or primary surfaces remaining except for a small, round patch of white patina located at the butt end of the haft. The latter may be discolouration around a small inclusion, rather than primary surface.

### *Material source:*

Uncertain, but possibly a boulder clay deposit in Cheshire/ Lancashire/ Merseyside areas – does not appear to be any of the known materials from East Yorkshire/ Lincolnshire or the Trent valley. It may, of course, be from sources much further away.

### *Form:*

The blade is triangular in profile, one margin being slightly convex and the other being straighter but slightly sinuous. The blade area extends for approximately 7.6cm from the tip along the centreline. It is, on average, 0.7cm in thickness. The blade has been shaped by careful, intensive, overlapping thinning retouch on both faces for much of the blade surface. The removal scars indicate the careful removal of relatively narrow thinning flakes. Along the central line on both faces the intensive, overlapping thinning becomes confined to a narrower area along the blade margins leaving a central area dominated by two or three large thinning flake scars.

The haft area tapers from the point of maximum width (4.5cm), which coincides approximately with the end of the blade, to a narrower (c.1.4cm) squared butt end, with a total length of c. 6.4cm. The haft is, on average, 1.1 cm in thickness. The haft has been shaped by careful thinning retouch, leaving a pattern of larger, regular thinning scars indicative of less intensive working than is visible on the blade.

Evidence for notching along the edges may relate to damage (pre- or post depositional). This is almost certainly the case for a small notch on the convex edge of the blade, c.5cm from the tip. Three notches on the haft edges may also relate to such damage, but they may also have been caused by a binding being wrapped tightly around the handle.

### **Discussion**

Typologically the dagger belongs to the Early Bronze Age, dating to the period between 2350 and 1500 BC. More specifically, daggers of this kind are a relatively rare form of artefact that has traditionally been seen as being associated with the appearance of Beaker pottery in Britain (Grimes 1932; Shennan 1976). It is widely accepted that in some respects the flint daggers mimic the metal daggers that are also a feature of particular assemblage groups at this time (Gerloff 1975; Green *et al.*, 1982, 499). Many have seen the appearance of this distinctive Beaker phenomenon as indicative of the development of a powerful social elite with access to scarce artefact forms and having links to the continent (Bradley and Hart 1983). Others have questioned this interpretation, viewing the appearance of these elaborate artefacts in burials as collective expressions of the identity and beliefs of small scale farming communities (Barnatt 1996). It is worth noting however that the occurrence of Beaker assemblages in the archaeological record changes through time. Initially Beakers are almost exclusively found associated with burials. Over time it would appear that Beaker pottery is found increasingly in domestic contexts (Whittle 1981).

Despite the large numbers of Early Bronze Age sites that have been excavated examples of flint daggers are few in number. The Peak District has a small number of examples, mainly from excavated burial mounds. Many of these discoveries were made during antiquarian excavations. At Green Low a flint dagger was found in association with Beaker pottery (Bateman 1848, 59-60; Marsden 1963). At Nether Low (Bateman 1848) a flint dagger was found was excavated from a burial on the original ground surface, but not associated with any pottery. Finds of flint daggers have been made from general surface collection surveys. Recently (Makepeace 2003) material collected from a ploughed field at Longcliffe, Brassington, included a lanceolate form of dagger, sometimes described as a spearhead. Interestingly, it was later recognised that upslope of the findspot was evidence for a ploughed-down burial mound. Unambiguous discoveries of flint daggers from domestic Early Bronze Age sites are rare, and thus far I have been unable to identify any examples from this region. This may indicate that such tools were highly valued, and were generally only discarded once they had been broken and, perhaps, reused for other tool forms. It might also suggest that where relatively complete daggers are found their discard was a deliberate and careful act of placement in a context that has subsequently protected them against post-depositional damage.

The discovery of this piece at Mellor follows the discovery of a small number of artefacts that belong to the Later Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age and which can be considered to be 'elaborate' or 'rare' tool forms. The dagger is

complete, showing only limited evidence of possible damage. It is also worth noting that very little general worked flint has been found that could be attributed to this period. The absence of such a general background of Later Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age flintwork would certainly suggest that there was no domestic settlement in the immediate vicinity. Instead of domestic activity the evidence may indicate that a burial group of the Early Bronze Age existed somewhere in the immediate vicinity and has subsequently been disturbed or destroyed. The presence here of an Early Bronze Age burial producing a small assemblage of elaborate and comparatively rare tool forms would provide an interesting parallel with the exceptionally rich barrow that was excavated on Mellor Moor, which also contained a small group of elaborate flint tools dating to the same general period.

The Mellor flint dagger is one of the finest and best preserved examples to be discovered in recent years. It should be subject to further study and analysis (see Green *et al.*, 1982). I would recommend that an examination for microwear and residues is undertaken with the further handling of the find limited as far as is possible. A detailed report presenting an analysis of the artefact, its excavation context, and discussing its wider significance should be published.

## References

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