

Stone Artefacts

Fact Sheet



Hafted stone axe (QE499). Image: QM.

Introduction

Aboriginal groups across Australia have manufactured and used a range of stone artefacts. These provide the earliest evidence of human occupation in Australia, extending back 50,000 years. If you find stone artefacts it is essential that you leave them in their original position. Stone artefacts are either flaked or ground into shape, or are made through a combination of these methods. Below are descriptions of the stone artefact types commonly used by Aboriginal groups in Queensland and across Australia.

Cores

A core is a block of stone from which flakes have been struck. It shows evidence of one or more flakes being removed from its surface and these marks are known as negative flake scars. Cores were usually discarded, but Aboriginal people also reshaped or retouched cores and used them as tools.



A core showing negative scar flakes. Image: Elspeth Mackenzie.

Hammerstones



A hammerstone showing damage at both ends. (QE9472/3). Image: Elspeth Mackenzie.

Hammerstones are hand-held stones that were used to strike flakes for Aboriginal tools from blocks of stone (cores). Flaking requires considerable force so the edges of hammerstones are frequently damaged due to this impact.

Flakes

Aboriginal people used hammerstones to strike flakes from stone cores. The surface to which force has been applied is called the platform. The impact of striking off a flake sent shock waves through the core which caused a distinct bulge on the flake's surface. This bulge is known as the bulb of percussion.



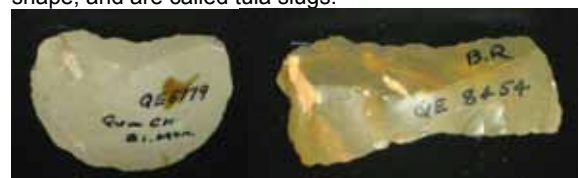
Left: A flake showing a bulb of percussion. Right: A flake showing re-touch along the bottom edge. Image: Elspeth Mackenzie.

Retouched Flakes

Retouched flakes were made by removing smaller flakes from the edges of a larger one through pressure flaking. This process formed a sharp edge that was used for cutting, scraping, engraving or gouging. Retouched flakes with a number of distinctive characteristics are often considered to be distinct tool types. Some of these tools are described below.

Tulas and tula slugs

Tulas are flakes that were retouched or reshaped at one end and on the back, leaving a sharp semi-circular edge. These tools have a broad straight platform and a prominent bulb of percussion. Tulas were commonly hafted (fitted) onto a wooden handle and Aboriginal people used them to gouge, chisel and cut wooden artefacts. Tulas are found throughout western Queensland, Central Australia and parts of Western Australia. Tulas were constantly reshaped until they were completely worn down by use and discarded. The discarded remnants are rectangular in shape, and are called tula slugs.



Left: a tula. Right: a tula slug. Image: Elspeth Mackenzie.

Backed artefacts

Backed artefacts are stone flakes that were retouched until they had at least one steep and relatively thick and blunt edge, opposite a sharp edge. This sharp edge was probably used by Aboriginal people for engraving or delicate cutting.



A backed artefact. Image: QM.

Points

Points are retouched flakes with edges that converge to a point. These pointed artefacts were either retouched on one surface of the flake, or on both the front and back. Points retouched on one surface are referred to as unifacial points. Those with retouch on both surfaces are known as bifacial points. Aboriginal people used points for stabbing, piercing and engraving. Unifacial points are found throughout the southern central Australia area, and bifacial points are located in the northern and north-western areas of Australia.



A stone point. (NY349) Image: QM.

Axe Heads and Hatchets

Aboriginal axe heads were generally made from volcanic rock. They began as large flakes, river cobbles, or cores of stone, prepared into a useable shape usually by hammer dressing then one edge was sharpened, usually by grinding. Sometimes hatchets and axes were hafted into a wooden or cane handle so they could be used for chopping and cleaving wood and bark.



A hafted axe (QE499), an edge-ground axe (NY354), a flaked axe head (NY404). Image: QM.

Axe Blanks

Axe blanks are unfinished axes that were rejected as unsuitable for final grinding. These are generally found at traditional quarry sites.



An axe blank (QE20119). Image: QM.

Grindstones and Mullers

Aboriginal grindstones and mullers were usually made from abrasive rocks, such as sandstone. Mullers were hand-held and were used with large grindstone slabs for dry and wet grinding of seeds, other plant material, and ochre. The surfaces of mullers and grindstones are worn smooth by usage, but often have many scratches. Some grindstones were used for processing a range of different plants, while others were highly specialised and aimed at specific plant types, such as incised grey slate morah grinding stones used to process seeds from the northern rainforests of Queensland.



A grindstone showing two smooth concave grinding grooves. Image: Elspeth Mackenzie.

Queensland Cultural Heritage Law

Aboriginal cultural heritage in Queensland is protected under the provision of the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003. Should you find an artefact scatter site, quarry, or artefact, please assist by not disturbing it in any way, and my immediately informing the relevant Aboriginal party for the area or the Cultural Heritage Coordination Unit at the Department of Environment and Resource Management on (07)3238 3835 (See also: http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/cultural_heritage/index.html)

Further Information

Hiscock, P., 1998. *Archaeology World's Stone Artefacts*. Australian National University, Canberra, <http://arts.anu.edu.au/arcworld/resources/stone.htm>

McCarthy, F. D., 1946. The stone implements of Australia, *Memoirs of the Australian Museum*, vol. 9.

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