

New find challenges 'simple' Australian artefacts assumption

April 9 2014, by Geoff Vivian



Ground-edged axes like this one were found at a site near Windjana Gorge in the central Kimberley. Credit: Chris Langeluddecke

Purposely sharpened or 'retouched' stone axes evolved in Australia thousands of years before they appeared in Europe according to researchers studying the south-east Asian archaeological record.

They found 30,000-year-old flakes from ground-edged [axes](#) at a site near

Windjana Gorge in the central Kimberley.

In a recent paper with Professor Sue O'Connor, UWA archaeologist Jane Balme says the evidence collected challenges common assumptions about paleolithic innovations.

"The suggestion that all innovation has to come from the Old World is not true because clearly ground-[stone axes](#) were created here," Prof Balme says.

She notes that they were also made in Japan at a slightly later date, by people who would have had no contact with either Australian Aborigines or people in Africa and Europe.

Prof Balme says retouched axes are just one example of material culture developing independently in various parts of the world, as people have always evolved new technologies to meet their needs.

"We're not really sure what these ground [stone](#) axes were used for but probably for chopping trees and related plants.

"If you've got plants as a major ... source of resources for technology then you have one of these axes."

She says migrating game was common in Europe, so hunters chasing those herds probably developed the stone points often found in European excavations.

"A lot of the articles we refer to in this paper are relatively recent, by Europeans, but they still talk about stone artefacts in Australia as being not as complicated as those in the old world," Prof Balme says.

"The point of the paper was to discuss how something that looks simple

is actually very complicated."

She says archaeologists often over-rate, durable and easy to find stone's importance.

"Stone is not the only technology when we are thinking of those sorts of societies.

"In the early societies most of the technology was probably made from plants."

She gave the example of spears which were probably made out of wood.

"If in Australia the first people that came here came from an island technology, fishing was probably a very important part of their economy," she says.

"So string is going to be important for people who want to exploit those resources, whereas it might not be somewhere else."

"We have to be aware that stone was such a small part of peoples' [technology](#), that it's not necessarily representative of the entire setting.

"It may appear simple but other areas could be very complicated."

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: New find challenges 'simple' Australian artefacts assumption (2014, April 9) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-simple-australian-artefacts-assumption.html>

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