

The symbolism of stone work-axes (based on material from the Daugava Basin)

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The simple stone axes called 'work-axes' represent one of the most characteristic artefact categories of the Early Metal Period. These have been found in settlement site excavations and occasionally at burial sites, but the great majority are stray finds. Although the number of finds of simple stone axes from the territory of Latvia is considerable, so far they have not been treated in detail. The most extensive description was published by J. Graudonis in 1967 (Граудонис, 1967, с. 82–84.).

My interest in stone work axes was aroused in the course of research on the settlement pattern of the Daugava Basin and changes in this settlement pattern in the Bronze and Early Iron Age.

Of all stray finds of stone artefacts, which include mattocks, mace-heads, celts and grindstones, shaft-hole axes form the most numerous group. A proportion of these axes can be classed as battle-axes. These are generally from 11–12 to 17–18 cm in length. On the whole, the battle-axes are very carefully made and symmetric, which gives some foundation for the view that their significance was more symbolic than practical (Loze, 1996, 34. lpp.). Battle-axes are characteristic of the Late Neolithic, but derived forms, i.e. axes that have lost some of the features mentioned, may be dated to the Early Bronze Age.

It is quite difficult to determine the number of battle-axes found in Latvia, because a strict boundary cannot be drawn between axes showing all of the characteristic features and those axes that have largely lost these features. If only the former are included, i. e. so-called early battle-axes, the number is reckoned as 20–30 (Loze, 1996, p. 34). The chapter in the book *Archaeology of the Latvian SSR* on the Late Neolithic gives a figure of 120, evidently including late battle-axe forms (LA, 1974, p. 48). In the Daugava Basin around 30 such axes might be added.

Whatever the number of axes included as battle-axes, depending on the various features considered, it is considerably smaller than the number of simple stone axes. These are smaller than the battle-axes: about 70% are 8–12 cm in length. The simple axes tend to lack a

carefully formed body – they are often asymmetric and less carefully made. The simplicity of the form and the markedly broadened blade permits them to be regarded as tools, and in consequence they are referred to as work-axes (LA, p. 81).

In terms of find circumstances, work axes may be divided into two groups. The first includes axes found at Early Metal Period living sites – hillforts and open settlements. Hillforts have been more extensively excavated than open settlements, and the number of work-axe finds at hillforts is accordingly greater. Thus, Doles Ķivutkalns hillfort produced 98 whole and fragmentary axes (Fig. 1:1–4), 30 were found at Kokneses Mūkukalns, 26 at Īdeņu Brikuļi, 11 at Lielvārdes Dievukalns and four at Katlakalna Kļauģukalns. Single stone axes and axe fragments have also been found at several other excavated hillforts where habitation began in the Early Metal Period (Daugmale, Asote, Madalāni and others). There are also isolated finds of axes and axe fragments from open settlements such as Kerkūzi, Vilmaņi I, Plāteri etc. (Baks, 1991, p. 130–174). It should be emphasised that settlement sites produce mainly fragments of broken axes, intact examples being rare. On the other hand, grave inventories from the Early Metal Period are very poor and often entirely absent. Out of about 30 excavated Early Metal Period cemeteries in Latvia, only Salaspils Reznas has produced two stone axes: one of these is a rare form – a double-bladed axe, the other being a work-axe (Graudonis, 1961, p. 35, tab. I : 10, 24). Altogether, excavation of settlement sites in the Daugava Basin has produced about 200 work-axes, mainly in a broken state.

Stray finds of work-axes represent a second group. Most commonly they are found in fields in the course of ploughing or harvesting, less commonly during other digging work – while digging ditches, potato pits, foundations etc. Recovered by non-specialists, these axes usually are not accompanied by a detailed account of the find circumstances. For most of the finds of stone axes that reach museums we know only the name of the

farmstead or village in whose land or fields they have been found. Only occasionally is the find-spot recorded more precisely, within the limits of a particular farmstead. For a proportion of stone axes, we have only the name of the parish or former estate.

This article deals with 598 stray finds of work-axes from the Daugava Basin. For 448 we have the name of the farm or village where they were discovered, but 150 have only the name of the parish. This figure does not include 11 axes found at hillforts that have not been excavated and can thus only nominally be classed as stray finds. These figures indicate that stone work-axes are quite common finds. Accordingly, the total number of axes can only be estimated, since there is no doubt that a significant number of such finds have not ended up in museums. The archive of the Archaeology Department of the Latvian History Museum has numerous records mentioning stone axes found on farmsteads, but later lost. Also, quite a large number of these axes are still kept in country schools, having been brought by pupils, and serve as teaching aids.

The problem of dating stray finds of stone work-axes can be resolved by making use of similar finds from excavated sites. Most of the stone shaft-hole axes from the more extensively excavated Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age settlement sites in the Lubāna Plain, most notably the Abora I site (Юзе, 1979, p. 69, tab. XVII–XIX), can be classed as battle-axes in terms of their form. However, this site has also produced a couple of stone axe fragments corresponding in form to simple work-axes. Work-axes are widely represented among finds from early hillforts. Since these hillforts were inhabited in the Late Bronze and Earliest Iron Age, i. e. in the 1st millennium BC, these chronological limits can also be taken to apply to the work-axes obtained as stray finds. Taking into account the finds from Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age settlements and from Late Bronze Age/Earliest Iron Age hillforts, we may conclude that simple work-axes began to spread at the end of the Late Neolithic or at the beginning of the Bronze Age. They were most widely used in the Late Bronze Age, and began to disappear with the introduction of iron axes at the end of the Earliest Iron Age, i. e. in the final quarter of the 1st millennium BC.

The wide distribution of simple work-axes and their considerable number in the Bronze Age can evidently be explained in terms of a growing practical need for such implements. The Bronze Age was the time when, along with stock-keeping, agriculture also became more important. Since the work-axes characteristic of the Bronze

Age have mostly been found in the ploughsoil of fields, there is good reason to consider that they were used to cut trees and bushes in the course of clearance for agriculture.

In this paper I would like to touch on a question that has so far not been the subject of attention. This is the question: *how did these axes end up in the place where they have been discovered?*

There is no foundation for considering these stray finds of axes as belonging to the inventories of graves that have been destroyed, since at the find-spots, numbering in the hundreds, bones of burials have never been found, nor have other artefacts that might have come from grave inventories. Also, as already mentioned, stone axes are not characteristic finds at the excavated Bronze Age burials. In certain cases stone axe finds might be explained by the presence of an open settlement.

Since there are quite a large number of broken axes among the stray finds, it has been suggested that they were broken in use and were abandoned as worthless fragments at the working location, i. e. in the plot being cleared. However, intact axes considerably outnumber broken ones. Thus, in Riga County, out of 119 axes from the Daugava Basin 94 were intact and only 25 were fragments of work-axes. In Jēkabpils County, 103 out of 136 axes were intact and 33 were broken. (These figures are approximate, since in several cases the stone axe finds are known only from archive records and the condition of the find cannot be established with certainty.)

Since the intact work-axes considerably outnumber the broken ones, there is no foundation for considering that they could have been lost accidentally in the course of clearance work (Graudonis, Urtāns, 1961, p. 144). Although the production of a shaft-hole axe did not take a whole human lifetime, as was thought in the 18th century, experiments have shown that, depending on the hardness of the stone, production of an axe would have required 10–30 hours (Малинова, Малина, 1988, p. 140). Thus, a stone axe was quite a valuable item, not readily left unretrieved if it were to fly off the haft.

We may assume that after a long period of use, in the course of which the axes were regularly sharpened by grinding the blade and thus changing the form of the axe (shifting the centre of balance, symmetry etc.), they gradually lost their effectiveness as tools and were in the end discarded as useless. This has not been tested experimentally, but is not supported by the fact that there are among the axe finds a considerable proportion of unworn examples in very good condition.

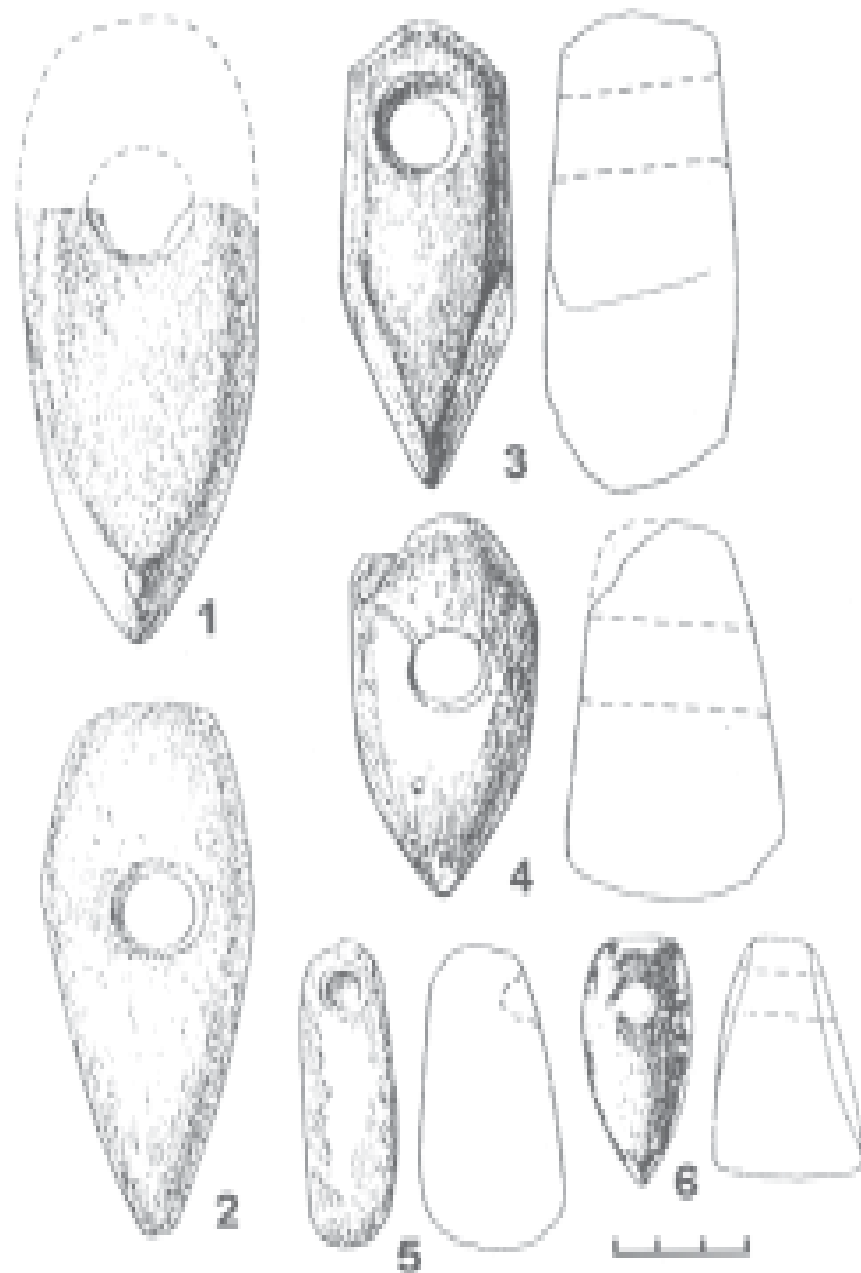


Fig. Stone work-axes from Kivutkalns hillfort

Pav. Akmeniniai kirviai iš Kivutkalno piliakalnio

These considerations show that the stray finds of stone work-axes cannot easily be explained in rational terms. However, the maker and user of a stone axe was not only an economic man – ‘Homo Oeconomicus’, but also a religious man – ‘Homo Religiosus’, and perhaps even more the latter than the former. Thus, the attitude of the people of the Early Metal Period towards the surrounding physical world was also determined by irrational motives

rooted in ideology. In terms of archaeological finds, such attitudes and actions are best seen in funerary ritual, but of course this was not the only such sphere. Particular segments of the ideology of the period appear in archaeological material also as material symbols, although the semantics are not always sufficiently clear. In our case, the axe – a weapon and tool – also had an important role as a symbol and a magical object, as may

be seen from folklore and from archaeological evidence.

How is this meaning reflected in our folklore? In Latvian folk song, the axe has two clear meanings – as a tool (most commonly for chopping firewood) and as a symbolic, magical object. The latter is expressed in folk songs where the fate of the axe is taken as being linked to the fate of the native land, and *vice versa*. For example, there is a string of folk songs describing how a soldier leaving to fight, hacks an axe into an oak tree. Whoever takes the axe will also take the land.

We may ask why the soldier, who might readily make use of an axe in time of war, should leave it hacked into an oak tree? Perhaps he had several axes? Or was this a special axe? Whatever the case, the magical power linking the axe with the native country, with the ability to defend it, was more powerfully expressed if the axe remained hacked into an oak tree in the native country, rather than being taken along by the soldier.

In general, in such songs, the axe is associated with decisive, dramatic and even crisis situations in human life.

How and why has the axe obtained such significance? The records of stone axe finds from the 1920s and 30s in the Archaeology Department of the Latvian History Museum contain many references to the popular name for stone axes – ‘thunderballs’, or less commonly ‘thunderbolts’, thus pointing to a connection with celestial forces.

Latvian mythological legends include a series of stories about Thunder (*Pērkons*) trying to strike down the Devil. For example, God argued with the Devil about who should rule the earth. God told the Devil that he would make Thunder strike him down wherever he might hide – in people, animals, in wood or water. The Devil and God are still fighting today. Wherever the Devil is hiding, Thunder strikes. At several places in Latgale in 1930 archaeologist R. Šnore recorded that the local inhabitants related how stone axes – ‘thunderballs’ – were found in places where thunder had struck.

These axes were also used by sorceresses for healing various ills. The poet Andrejs Pumpurs wrote of one such sorceress of the mid-19th century, called *Miļā māte* (‘Dear Mother’): ‘She had two quite large bags full of such holy relics. These contained all sorts of thunderballs, i. e. stone and bronze axes and chisels, and jewellery found in old graves...’ (Kursīte, 1999, p. 316). Archaeologist Pēteris Stepiņš in a 1938 report to the Board of Monuments wrote that a woman named Zelenka living in Saliena Parish

‘had a stone axe that she used in healing by means of charms’.

That the axe was regarded as warding off evil is attested by a belief recorded by P. Šmits that the Devil is afraid of axes (Šmits, 1940, p. 294).

The view that stone axes are ‘thunderbolts’, i.e. the results of the activity of supernatural forces, was widespread in medieval times over the whole of Europe – in Russia, Scandinavia, Bulgaria and Germany (Jensen, 2000, p. 129–130; Формозов, 1983, p. 5–6). Only in the 17th century did antiquarians become convinced that these objects were of human manufacture.

But how was it in the Iron Age and the Early Metal Period?

The fact that in the Early Metal Period stone axes were no longer given as grave-goods indicates that the ritual symbolism of the axe had changed. Evidently, the simple stone work-axes no longer expressed social status, but there are indications that they were thought to have certain magical properties. In this connection, mention should be made of a miniature stone axe found on Ķivutkalns hillfort. This piece is 5 cm long and has a 0.8 cm diameter shaft-hole. The axe is well polished and has all the characteristic features of a work-axe (Fig. 1:6). Also found there was a 6 cm long object of dolomite ground in the shape of an axe with an incompletely drilled shaft-hole (Fig. 1:5). In the view of the excavator of Ķivutkalns J. Graudonis, both finds are either children’s toys or objects of some other significance, and he suggests the possibility that they are cult axes connected with clearance farming (Graudonis, 1989, p. 24). Pointing in favour of the latter explanation are finds of miniature axes on Great Narkunas hillfort in eastern Lithuania, where they are made from granitic rocks, from limestone and even from clay. The excavator, R. Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė regards these finds as indicative of an axe cult in the Early Metal Period (Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė, 1986, p. 45).

The axes obtained as stray finds in Latvia also include certain examples with a length of only 6–7 cm, i. e. similar to the axes from Ķivutkalns. These small dimensions give reason to doubt whether they could have been used in clearance agriculture. Rather, they can be classed as miniature artefacts having a special symbolic meaning. Presumably, several axes made of limestone or sandstone are also symbolic pieces.

In view of these considerations, it seems very likely that in the Early Metal Period stone work-axes, in addition to their expressly practical functions, also fulfilled the

role of a talisman or amulet and were deliberately left in the ancient fields in order to protect them from the influence of hostile forces.

It is hard to say what the attitude was towards stone axes found in the Iron Age. In this connection, two stray finds should be mentioned. One of these is an Augšzeme-type axe found in Aišpuri village of Krāslava Parish, made from black fine-grained stone. One face of the blade has a 3.3 cm long groove (LVM, A.10656). The other find is a celt from Liguti in Durbe Parish with similar grooves on both faces (LM, 11847). Such grooves are also characteristic of Early and Middle Iron Age striking-stones. Evidently, in the Iron Age these stone axes had been adapted to serve a new function – striking fire. Does this show the practical nature of the Iron Age inhabitants in using accidentally discovered approximately 1000

years-old stone objects for their everyday needs? Do such examples not indicate a special attitude too? Perhaps already at that time these axes were regarded as magical objects of celestial origin ('thunderballs')? If so, their use for striking fire would seem particularly appropriate.

That people in the Iron Age paid attention to ancient stone objects is suggested by finds of such objects in settlement sites that do not have signs of occupation prior to the Iron Age. Thus, for example, two stone shaft-hole work-axes and a celt were found in excavations at Lokstene hillfort (Mugurēvičs, 1977, p. 60, fig. 42). Two stone axes were found on the hillfort even before excavation. Since the excavation did not produce other convincing evidence of habitation in the Early Metal Period (such as pottery), it may be suggested that these axes were used in the Iron Age – not serving household needs, but rather for magical purposes.

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LM = Collection of Liepāja Museum.

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AKMENINIŲ DARBINIŲ KIRVIŲ SIMBOLIKA (DAUGUVOS UPĒS BASEINO DUOMENIMIS)

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Santrauka

Darbiniai akmeniniai kirviai – vienas būdingiausių ankstyvųjų metalo laikotarpio radinių. Jū rasta kasinējant gyvenvietes (apie 200 vnt.), retkarčiais kapuose. Taču dauguma – atsitiktiniai radiniai. Dauguvos baseinā zināmi 598 atsitiktiniai tokiu kirviu radiniai. Dauguma ju surasti dabarti-

niuose laukuose, tad galima manyti, kad senovėje šie įrankiai būdavo naudojami kirsti medžiams ir krūmams ruošiant lydimą. Dalis kirviu išliko fragmentiškai, jie sudužo dar praecityje, tačiau dauguma (75–80 proc.) sveiki. Kyla klausimas, kodėl laukuose, kur nėra jokių gyvenviečių ar kapų

pēdsaku, randama tiek daug sveikų, tinkamų darbui kirvių. Nėra pagrindo manyti, kad jie pamesti atsitiktinai. Kirviui pagaminti reikėjo nuo 10 iki 30 val. darbo. Toks dirbinys buvo pakankamai vertingas. Nusmukusio nuo koto kirvio negalėjo neieškoti. Sunku racionaliai paaiškinti atsitiktines sveikų darbinių akmeninių kirvių radimvietes. Tačiau kirvis – ginklas ir darbo įrankis, sprendžiant iš tautosakos ir archeologijos duomenų, turėjo ir kitokią – simbolinio, magiško daikto reikšmę. Latvių liaudies dainose aiškiai išskirta dvejopa kirvio reikšmė – darbo įrankio ir simbolinio, magiško

daikto, susijusio su reikšmingais, dažnai kriziniais žmogaus gyvenimo momentais. Liaudies tikėjimuose akmeniniai kirviai, vadinami perkūno strėlėmis, turi antgamtinių savybių apsaugoti nuo piktų dvasių ir ligų. Atsižvelgiant į tas aplinkybes tikėtina, kad akmeniniai kirviai, be grynai praktinių funkcijų, taip pat atlikdavo ir talismanų arba amuletų vaidmenį ir sąmoningai būdavo paliekami laukuose siekiant šiuos apsaugoti nuo piktų jėgų.

Iš rusų kalbos vertė A. Luchtanas

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