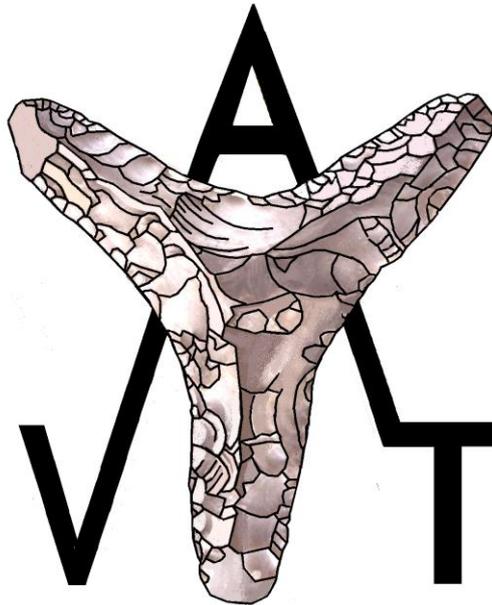


The tribrach:



The logo of the Vectis Archaeological Trust (2017) The earliest symbol of identity on the Isle of Wight

The Vectis Archaeological Trust has adopted the tribrach as its logo as a means of presenting a truly ancient and unique flint masterpiece that is easily the earliest identity symbol the Isle of Wight can display. While the Isle of Man has its three-legged triskele that is some seven hundred years old, the Isle of Wight has its tribrach that was artistically crafted as a lasting symbol some four to five thousand years ago. Sadly, up until now, it has remained largely unseen and surely uncelebrated.

Discovery

Back in the middle of the nineteenth century an extraordinary flint object was found on the Isle of Wight. This was a large and heavy three-armed flint artefact skillfully knapped in the form of a 'Y'. Due to its three branching arms, this unique find was promptly described as a 'tribrachial implement' or 'tribrach'.

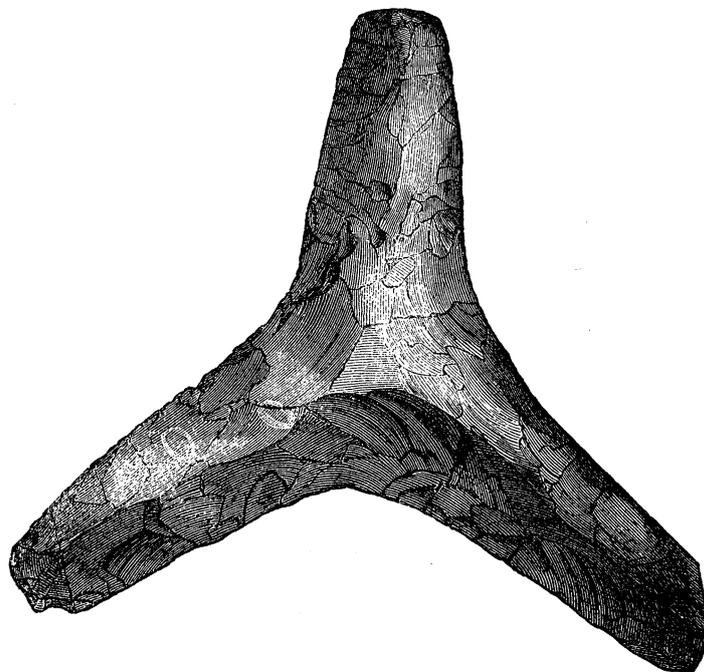
In 1871, an engraving of the tribrach was published by Colonel Lane Fox in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries. The finder of this item was the then late Dr G. A. Martin of Ventnor. A thorough enquiry established that it had been found on a beach at Ventnor probably after 1849. Because of the object's fine and undamaged condition, it was suspected that it had tumbled from a recent cliff-fall.



1. The tribrach: a unique prehistoric flint masterpiece of the Isle of Wight

Early studies

After its first publication in 1871, the tribrach continued to attract attention. In 1873 it was examined by Albert Way and illustrated in the *Archaeological Journal*. In 1897 it was figured in John Evans' classic work on the *Ancient Stone Implements of Great Britain*. This was a time when antiquarian collecting was still in vogue, and because the finder was dead authenticity and provenance had been queried by Albert Way and Lane Fox after conflicting labelling had apparently occurred in Ryde Museum.



***2. The Isle Wight tribrach published by John Evans in 1897.
Its equilateral appearance is misleading.***

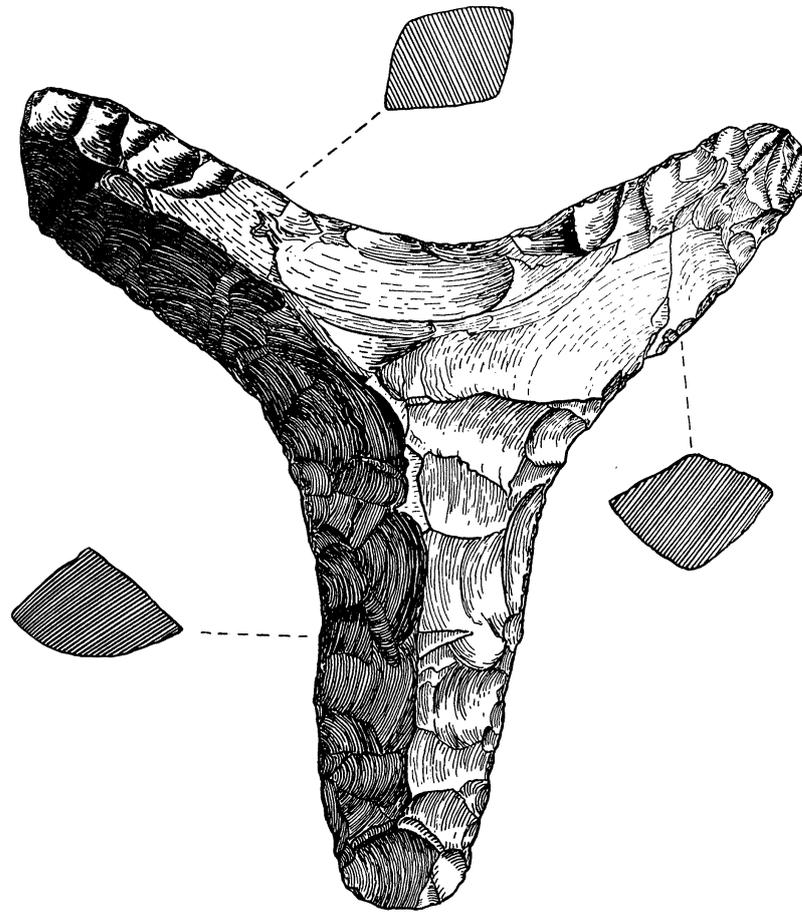
In 1941 the tribrach was re-drawn by Hubert Poole, an acknowledged authority on flint implements on the Isle of Wight. After a careful evaluation of all the evidence Poole satisfied himself that the tribrach was found on Ventnor beach and that this had almost certainly occurred after sometime after 1849 when Dr Martin published his book on the climate and the history of the area. He also carefully considered the muddling of the labels in the former museum at Ryde.

Poole observed that the grey colour of the flint matched well with other prehistoric flint items found on the Island but he disagreed with the earlier account by Way that suggested there was fine microfossil evidence to suggest that this flint had specifically come from the Upper Chalk. The flint nodule would certainly have been big, at least some 0.35m across. He also cited some other examples of flint items of tribrachial shape while recognising that all of these were much smaller and were, essentially, trimmed flakes that offered no significant comparison. (Recently, a further small item of this kind has been reported in Hampshire, Basingstoke.)

A prehistoric masterpiece in flint

The important questions concerning this unique object are really, how old is it and why was it made? In earlier descriptions it has been observed that the Isle of Wight tribrach looks like three flint axes all formed together. The axe analogy is helpful because it focusses our attention on the flaking (knapping) technique by which this object was crafted. The long central shaft is roughly triangular in cross-section; this could make this relatively heavy object easier to hold. The two upper arms or horns are sub-rectangular in cross-section and slightly more robust.

Both types of cross-section can be found in various Mesolithic tranchet axes that appear on the Isle of Wight and elsewhere in Britain during and after c.6000 BC (or BCE). The tribrach shows steep flaked sides similar to Mesolithic practice but we see no characteristic single flaked cutting edge at any of the three tips; neither do we see the careless zig-zag edge that is usually produced by crude Mesolithic alternate flaking



techniques.

3. *The Isle of Wight tribrach illustrated by Hubert Poole in 1941.*

How old is the tribrach?

Axes with steep angular sides and a rectangular or a equi-lateral triangular cross-section persist though much of the Neolithic period when their edges are more often trimmed to a neat straight line. This is reasonably achieved in the tribrach, as well as some trimming of its three tips that seem to be intentionally blunt rather than sharp. Under the magnifying glass, no evidence of use or wear can be seen on any of the edges or surfaces.

The steep angular sides of the tribrach appear to have been struck with the use of a hard hammerstone but once the general shape had been roughed out, it appears that its maker reached for a hammer of antler, bone, or very hard wood to complete the task of flaking his creation into its final symmetry and elegance. The scars of these secondary flakes show shallow skimming.

What does the tribrach represent?

For the use of this object, Hubert Poole pointed out that the first engraved illustrations showed the tribrach in an unlikely upside down position. He also considered previous suggestions of a weapon to be highly unlikely. Although the object appears robust, it is heavy, relatively unwieldy and can be easily broken. A description as a tool or 'implement' seems inappropriate.

Poole's conclusion that this was a symbolic, item conveying status and identity is reasonable. Its size, he suggested, seemed well suited to being carried on the head of a

staff, although its central knapped shaft might be better suited to being simply held aloft as a symbol of power or authority. His further suggestion that its upper arms might symbolise bull horns is also attractive. Male bovine livestock could be extremely important amongst Neolithic farming communities. The power of the bull and its highly charged masculinity has ever been difficult to deny and has often permeated human customs and thinking.

Much later, the bull cults of Minos and Mithras are well known to us and as well as the visceral cultish entertainments that still persist today. Whether it be the rodeo or the bullfight, mastery over the bull's awesome horns has ever been the object of these activities. On Wight, an ancient respect for this idea still lives on in the Island's annual Gilten Market when the year's prime bull with its gilded horns is paraded for all to see.

Where is it now?

Since its discovery, the tribrach has endured a chequered history. Donated by Dr Martin to Ryde Museum it was displayed for a while until the museum was ignominiously abandoned by the town in the early twentieth century. Many artefacts were then dumped in the rain in the town yard but the tribrach found its way to auction, where it was rescued by Mr G. W. Colenutt who presented it to Carisbrooke Castle Museum in 1933. In 1980 the archaeological collections of the Castle Museum passed into the care of the Isle of Wight County Council where a fledgling museum service that has struggled to display its collections ever since.



The tribrach is best seen as a handheld symbol

Further reading

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