

Recognising a Prehistoric stone tool

Throughout prehistory people made tools out of stone. This guide helps to work out if a stone is natural or if it has been shaped by a person in the past.

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Rocks

For thousands of years people in the past picked up pebbles and stones, or quarried rock, to work into the tools they needed to survive.

Stone survives well in the ground, unlike organic materials such as bone, wood or leather, and is often found on the land surface or during archaeological excavations.

Many prehistoric tools can be found today ... if you know what to look for!



Knapping

Knapping is the process of detaching small pieces of stone using a pebble or bone hammer to create a flake that can be made into a usable tool.

Making just one tool could result in many hundreds of waste flakes and spalls known as debitage.

The person making the tool would usually discard the debitage. This often survives to be found thousands of years later!



Features

When the pebble is struck with a hammerstone characteristic features are left behind. These scar the piece that is detached and the core (the part of the pebble left behind).

The point where the blow fell will have a small, crushed area and a round crack. Below this a cone shape spreads out to become a rounded swelling - this is the bulb of percussion.

Ripples radiate from the centre of the bulb along the length of the flake.



Human or Natural?

Similar features can be caused by the action of rivers, the sea, trampling animals or machinery. These can be separated from humanly worked pieces by looking for a combination of features.

Human tools will be more regular and patterned and have scars left by the removal of earlier pieces on one face and the bulb of percussion. A core will just have the depressions left after flakes are removed.



Stone tools

To turn a flake into a tool small flakes are detached from an edge to shape it – this is called retouching.

Tools with blunt edges such as scrapers, or sharp points such as arrowheads are made in this way. Retouching often involves pressure flaking – pushing small flakes from the unworked edge using a piece of bone or the tip of an antler tine.