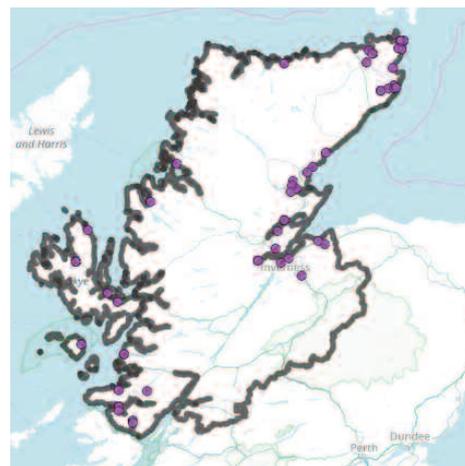


Stone Axes

Period:	Neolithic (c. 4000 – c. 2500 BC)
Material:	stone (flint and sandstone but other stone types also used)
Composite item:	other materials include a wooden haft, binding, twine or sinew and resin glue

Stone axes are some of the most recognizable Neolithic artefacts in Scotland. They can be made from a variety of stone types by grinding or knapping. Flint axes are made by knapping – a process of striking a stone with another piece of stone or antler to knock off flakes until you have an object of the size and shape you desire. Flint can take a very sharp edge which makes it very effective, but there are very few flint sources in Scotland.



Flint and other polished stone axes on display at Inverness Museum

Axes made from other stone types can be ground into shape, such as the genuine example from the box. The damage to the edge suggests that this was used, despite its relative bluntness. The stone used is not always local. There are axes found in the Highlands that were made from stone sourced in Perthshire, the Lake District, Northern Ireland and the Alps.

Although these are very useful items they were not always for practical tasks. Some axes were polished to a glassy smoothness which took many hours to achieve but added no practical benefit. One example from Kinbeachie on the Black Isle is too small for practical use at only 4cm long.

Study of known Neolithic quarrying sites shows that people frequently bypassed easily accessed material, instead opting to quarry from striking locations with commanding views that are very difficult to reach.

The axeheads would have been hafted in different ways according to how they were to be used. Artefacts like these could have had a variety of uses, from felling trees to carving out canoes or roughing out wooden artefacts. Some very fine examples have no evidence of having been used at all, and it is thought they may have a symbolic use.

Why would a craftsperson take hours to make a polished axehead which was never used to cut anything?



Jadeite axehead from Berriedale, now in Inverness Museum. These beautiful axeheads were from stone quarried in the Alps, and may have been brought with some of the new Neolithic settlers into the Highlands.

See also:

CT Flint Knapping

CT Stone Pecking

When? Neolithic

Additional Image: Polished Neolithic Stone Axeheads

The Experimental Archaeology: Learning about Craft and Technology in the Past project was funded by Historic Environment Scotland and the Heritage Lottery Fund (now National Lottery Heritage Fund).

© Highland Archaeology Services Ltd

v1

