

‘...lost in the *Sirius*...’? – Consideration of the Provenance of the Hatchet Head Recovered from the *Sirius* Wreck Site, Norfolk Island

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ABSTRACT. A ground stone hatchet head was found in the excavation of the *Sirius* which was wrecked off Norfolk Island in 1790. This paper explores the problems of establishing its ultimate origins, its cultural context and its historical significance. Historical, formal and petrological studies suggest a source for the raw material in the cobble beds of the Nepean River, New South Wales, and the inclusion of the hatchet head in a collection of ‘curiosities’ of an officer on the *Sirius*.

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An intriguing find from the recent underwater excavation of the *Sirius* wreck off Sydney Bay, Norfolk Island, was a stone hatchet head (SI 479). Its distinct form, size and raw material caught the eye of a diver working amongst the flint pebble ballast of Area I of the site (Fig.1). Many queries came to mind on examining this simple artefact when the excavation’s director, Graeme Henderson, sent it to us for comment. It would have intrigued Fred McCarthy with his lifelong interest in stone artefacts. Indeed, one of his early papers discussed artefacts from Norfolk Island and possible pre-colonial occupation by Polynesian voyagers (McCarthy, 1934). He also spent many years studying the culture of Aboriginal groups of the Sydney District, as well as trade and exchange in wider Australian contexts. These themes are all relevant to the puzzle of this artefact’s provenance; so it is a fitting topic for a volume honouring his contributions to Aboriginal studies.

The questions raised by this hatchet head (Fig.2) relate to its ultimate provenance and cultural context. How did this stone artefact become part of the archaeology of a late 18th century ship wrecked on an island that was uninhabited when the British occupied it in 1788? What were its origins? How did it come to be on board *Sirius* in March 1790? Should we accept without question that it was on board *Sirius* at that time? Several major options may be considered:

1. Given the find spot, associated with flint pebble ballast from the wreck of an English naval vessel recently re-fitted and ballasted in the Thames, the artefact could be a British Neolithic axe head which had become incorporated in Thames flint gravels.

2. The artefact could be Australian, an Aboriginal hatchet head, acquired by one of the ship’s officers for his collection of ‘artificial curiosities’ or, alternatively, the possession of an Aboriginal person from Sydney