

The Cylindrical Stone Adzes of Borneo

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ABSTRACT. This paper provides a descriptive review of a class of stone tools from the interior highlands of Borneo that are formally defined in this paper as ‘cylindrical stone adzes.’ The implements discussed are all housed in the archives of the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, Malaysia. They form part of an ethnographic and archaeological collection that was largely compiled by Tom Harrisson during his tenure as Curator of the Sarawak Museum from 1947 to 1966. These tools have been described and discussed in previous publications and I add detail to these descriptions that includes a technological and functional assessment. The results of this study show that these tools are a type of hafted stone adze used to process the starchy pith of sago palms. These tools were not in use during the historic period and may have been abandoned within the early first millennium AD, associated with a decline in the role of sago as a food staple.

Introduction

This paper provides a review and discussion of a category of stone tools unique to the highland interior of Borneo that have been variously classified as specialised tools for processing sago (Collings, 1949; Harrisson, 1951a, 1951b), or as tools for cracking hard-shelled nuts (Sellato, 1996). Amongst the indigenous communities of the Borneo highlands, these implements are frequently classified as *batu perahit*, ‘thunderstones’ or ‘dragon’s teeth’ (Janowski and Barton, 2012): items that have not existed in the living memory of these communities, but have now re-entered the human realm, imbued with supernatural agency and referred to by the Kelabit and Lundayeh people as *lalud*, or life force (Janowski and Barton, 2012; Janowski, 2020). As an object with a living history, some of these tools have been all of these things at one time, or, in their current role, one thing in all times. As museum objects they rarely see the light of day and live on catalogued into obscurity. It seems fitting then, in this volume, to tackle the complexity of these object biographies and to bring these items into full publication for the first time.

The tools discussed here were collected in the field by Tom Harrisson (the original curator of the Sarawak Museum

from 1947 to 1966) or sent to the museum on his request (Harrison, 1951a). At the time of their collection, locals who discovered them had no knowledge of their age or function and regarded them as items created by spirits or natural forces in past times (Janowski and Barton, 2012; Janowski, 2020). These tools are polished, tapered cylinders of stone with a smooth concavity or cup at one end, and a flat, rounded or ridged decoration on the butt (Fig. 1A–D). They vary in size up to 184 mm and 178 mm in total length (Fig. 1A,B). All tools are relatively consistent in their girth (c. 36 mm), ranging between 39 to 54 mm at the cup end. A feature of the entire assemblage is the consistency of their cylindrical shape and their smooth exterior finish (Fig. 1A,B). Most of the tools are fashioned from quartzite, a raw material known to outcrop on the fringes of the upland regions (Harrison, 1949: 134). A few are made from igneous stone, outcrops of which occur on the southern extremes of the highland region. All pieces in the study sample are well made, with many hours in their initial shaping and final smoothing. They are so well done, that it is not possible to determine what the initial tool blanks were. Did they begin their journey as tools from elongate pebbles? Hand-hewn from larger blocks of stone? That part of their lives remains a mystery.

Keywords: Borneo; stone adzes; swamp sago; hill sago; usewear studies; residue studies

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Received: 19 November 2020 **Accepted:** 30 November 2020 **Published:** 12 May 2021 (online only)

Publisher: The Australian Museum, Sydney, Australia (a statutory authority of, and principally funded by, the NSW State Government)

Citation: Barton, Huw. 2021. The cylindrical stone adzes of Borneo. In *From Field to Museum—Studies from Melanesia in Honour of Robin Torrence*, ed. Jim Specht, Val Attenbrow, and Jim Allen. *Technical Reports of the Australian Museum Online* 34: 149–167.
<https://doi.org/10.3853/j.1835-4211.34.2021.1749>

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