



Socketed long-bladed axe

On display

Title/Description: Socketed long-bladed axe

Measurements: l. 780 mm

Accession Number: 996

Historic Period: Dongson period

This is a typical example of a *chandra*, which van Heekeren (1958: 9-10) calls a ceremonial axe and describes as having a 'graceful but asymmetric shape, and often with handsome decoration'. They are so fragile that they are not likely to have had any practical function, although on this example the edge appears to have been work-hardened in antiquity and it has a finely developed dark patina with only a little irregular corrosion. There is a broken lug for fastening to a haft.

Soejono (1972) puts these axes into his type VII, and in Glover and Syme (1993) they comprise type 15. Virtually all the pieces known are from Central and West Java, although at least one is said to have been found in Sulawesi. The National Museum in Jakarta has some splendid examples, especially one from Krawang (van Heekeren, 1958: fig. 5) which is very similar to this piece except that its shaft is finely decorated with spirals, rhomboids and fine raised lines. Van der Hoop (1941: figs. 56-7) illustrates four other Javanese examples in the National Museum, and at least seven axes are known from around Bogor in West Java, of which the largest, though broken, is 133 cm along the blade length and is similarly decorated. However, the finest example comes from Rembang in Central Java (van Heekeren, 1958: fig. 6, pl. 3) which has an elongated and stylised bird carrying an axe in its claws on the main blade. Van Heekeren attributes these pieces to the Dong Son culture, but today this term is used only for the material found or made in northern Vietnam from about 700 BC to AD 200, and no such axes have been found there. Nevertheless, he is right to comment that some Vietnamese bronze drums show schematic linear figures carrying rather similar axes, and that the Dong Son culture of Vietnam strongly influenced the style and form of ceremonial bronzes in Java around the start of the Christian Era.

It appears that no examples of these axes have been found in controlled and documented excavations, so their age and context can only be guessed at. The fine examples in Jakarta and in other public and private collections in Europe have probably come from heirloom collections, from casual discoveries by Javanese farmers, or from clandestine excavations for the antiquities trade. A sample taken from the edge of this axe by Peter Northover showed that it was cast from a ternary alloy (copper 84%, tin 12.6%, lead 2.2%), with arsenic, antimony and silver as minor elements. No detailed technical analyses of these axes seem to have been made, but the fine low relief decoration on some suggests they were cast by the lost-wax method, and not with the two-piece moulds used for plain axes (see no. 153).

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Dr C. op't Land, Holland, who found it with another near Bandung, Java, in 1947.
