



### **SOLOMON ISLAND BATTLE AXE**

A fine chiefly battle-axe with an English, colonial, trade, axe-head. The axe-head is mounted on a hard wood haft carved to represent four frigate-bird heads with beaks and eyes inlaid with shell. The shaft is decorated with three bands of tightly woven cane.

Probably Roviana Island, Solomon Islands, Melanesia. Wood, iron axe, shell (nautilus) and parinarium paste with a fine patina of age and use. 102 x 16,5 x 2,5 cm. 19th century. The axe-head is stamped with the number 2 and was probably manufactured in Birmingham, UK circa 1848. An old illegible paper label is attached. Ex Virgil Wahl dit Boyer, Paris.

To give an idea on the importance of iron axe heads and their presence and trade in the Solomon Islands and New Guinea we can use both official British government information as well as journalistic reports from the second half of the 19th century.

A sub-enclosure in the comprehensive list of papers to and from the Imperial government concerning the labour trade gives some idea of the trade items contained in one man's box at the end of three years employment (Great Britain. House of Commons. Parliamentary Papers 1873: 247, 248). In the early days, men returned home with one musket, one fathom of Turkey Red material (a hard-wearing fabric dyed red using the root of the madder herb that would not fade or bleach in the sun, commonly made into shirts and shawls), 24 yards of navy blue serge, one white sheet, one axe, a 12-inch knife, a 10-inch knife, a six-inch knife, a belt and sheath, a pair of scissors and a comb, a mirror, four tins of powder (presumably skin powder) 3/4 lbs of beads, pipes, rings and four Jew's harps, two lbs of lead shot, one box of firing caps, two yards of grey calico, needles and thread, two lbs of tobacco, one 'mission' hatchet, matches, soap and scented oil, one blanket, one pair of trousers, and one shirt.

Men were keen to purchase playing cards, musical instruments like mouth organs and concertinas, and in addition to the tomahawks, files, knives and gimlets they brought saws, nails

and hammers, fishing lines and nets, cooking equipment, mirrors, razors, and matches (Graves 1983; The Brisbane Courier 9 December 1892: 5–6; Examiner, 12 February 1907: 7).

The sort of trade goods demanded by local people were practical implements, fishing gear, coloured calico, clay pipes and twist tobacco. Hatchets and tomahawks could be readily adapted into working tools and weapons but the main trade currency was tobacco.

One ton of copra cost traders about 25 tomahawks or 700 to 800 sticks of tobacco depending on quality.

At the same time, in 1887, 2 dozen Hurd's tomahawks at 30 shillings [£1/10/-] a dozen cost £3 from Hoffnung & Co, a large wholesale store in Charlotte Street, Brisbane (British New Guinea. Annual report 1887: Correspondence and Report of Special Commissioner, New Guinea, Respecting the Return of Louisiade Islanders to Their Native Islands: 4).

Tomahawks, hatchets and axes are the same type of functional blade but of variable size and format.

### **Literature:**

The significance of the frigate bird in the artistic depictions of the Solomon Islands seems to be varied and today not much seems to be recorded locally. Here we can see a specific importance of the frigate bird in relation to the fishing of bonito (Scombridae) and the bonito cult : ... "among the Sa'a people in southern Malaita, there is a definite reason for depicting the frigate bird because it is associated with the bonito cult. The catching of bonito (a favorite food fish) during certain times of the year is accompanied by ceremonies and rituals (Ivens 1927:30). Frigate birds, which follow schools of bonito, help fishermen sight the fish, so the frigate bird is a symbol of good fortune and has apotropaic qualities."

From : Ross, Kay. "Shell Ornaments of Malaita." Expedition Magazine 23, no. 2 (January, 1981): -.  
Accessed December 29, 2024.

<https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/shell-ornaments-of-malaita/>

The metal blade of the European axe was a highly regard prestige item used both in battle and as a tool, much more efficient than the stone blade axes of the pre-European times. These axe heads were traded in by visitors and merchants in the islands as well as being captured booty from raids on settlers or other local peoples. The various types of blades are not yet well identified yet there appears to be a standardization with many blades bearing a number 2 (indication either size or weight) stamped into one side of the blade as well as makers marks on some. Many of the blades bearing makers marks are identifiable as being made in Britain in Birmingham.

According to the accounts of Andrew Cheyne in 1844 (Shineberg 1971), Simbo people began taking iron axes to Roviana in exchange for hawksbill turtle shell. Which was then traded back to Europeans for more axes. European traders were giving one axe head in return for as little as 1.5 to 3 pounds of 'tortoiseshell' (Shineberg 1971:305). Quite quickly both Roviana and Simbo had a plentiful supply of iron axes, and stone blades were abandoned. Axes of entanglement in the New Georgia group, Solomon Islands, Tim Thomas, 2019

Missionary Walter Ivens recounted the effect of the new weaponry on the efficiency of these raids beginning in the 1850s and 1860s : The presence of English ships in the Solomons in these two decades, and the distribution by them of iron tomahawks, gave great impetus to the head-hunting. These tomahawk-heads were mounted on a long handle by the Rovoiana people and received the name kilakila (stone axe). The use of them spread as far south as Sa`a and Ulawa, and the name 'kilakila' went along with it ... Later on, head-hunting raids were made on Maana oba village on the island of Ngwalulu, on Malu`u in Suu, on Fokanakafo near Uru, and on Langalanga.