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Some thoughts on quality and skill in Early Bronze Age axes

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Some thoughts on quality and skill in Early Bronze Age axes

Maikel H.G. Kuijpers

Keywords: quality, skill, material culture, Early Bronze Age axes

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to think about quality differences between objects that are the result of different levels of skill of the maker, because such observations rarely seem to be the subject of a well-demarcated analytical approach. For example, compare the axes in figures 1, 2, and 3. I suspect little disagreement on the observation that there are differences between them in symmetry of the blade and flanges, the blade facet, sharpness of the flanges, the overall finish, and obviously decoration. I would probably also get away with arguing that the first axe appears sloppy and the third very skilfully made. In fact, in last year's *metaaltijdenbundel* exactly this latter remark was made and axe 3, the flanged axe from Hilversum-Hoorneboegse Heide, is described as an “excellent piece of workmanship” (Butler, Theunissen & van Os 2014, 20). I do not necessarily disagree, and the following is not meant as a critique, but such a judgement is intriguing and I wish to take it as the starting point for a brief reflection on skill and quality. I will only provide some thoughts here that may help to untangle these related concepts as this is not the place to go into detail (but see Kuijpers 2014). This paper is meant as an incentive for the study of skill and quality in archaeological objects in general, and despite that my reflections are based on Bronze Age axes, I take the analysis of such concepts to be of interest for material culture studies as a whole.

Disentangling quality and skill

Quality and skill are entangled concepts, but the relationship between them is not straightforward. Typically, a skilfully made object is regarded to be of high quality (and vice versa). The Hilversum axe – a *Prunkbeil* according to Butler, Theunissen & van Os (2014) – is a good example where this association seems to play its part. What I wish to emphasise in this paper is that in this commonly made association an important aspect slips under the radar: purpose. I will attempt to clarify this by picking apart what we are actually doing when this association is made.



Figure 1 An Early Bronze Age axe, type Saxon (Mayer 1977, 78 № 247), from an unknown context; found near Pichl (Austria). (Photograph by author, courtesy of National History Museum Vienna).

The entanglement between quality and skill arises from an understanding of skill as the ability to do something *well*.¹ This means that skill in the making of something is partly dependent on the cultural reference of what is considered well-made (viz. quality; Kuijpers 2013, 140; Stout 2002, 705). Consequently, what we see is that skill tends to be inferred from an intuitive (modern) judgement of the quality of a prehistoric object, which often boils down to an uncritical appreciation of things made by our technologically savvy ancestors, something which Dobres (2006, 29) has unflatteringly described as “Wow!, Ooooh Ahhh” judgements. Not only should these not be taken as a valid argument about the skill present in a prehistoric object, they also do not clarify what this skill is. Instead, such interpretations tend to immediately address the social value of skill and are

1 Two examples that define skill as such are the Oxford dictionary and Dictionary.com (accessed 23/02/15).



Figure 2 An Early Bronze Age axe, type Saxon (Kibbert 1980, 159 № 324), from an unknown context; found in Nordhessen (Germany). (Photograph by author, courtesy of Philipps-University Marburg).

expressed by drawing links to the status and identity of the maker (e.g. the idea of a specialist smith).

I argue that there is *always* skill involved in the making of things, irrespective of what is considered quality and the (social) value given to such quality. To prevent the conflation of skill and quality, I propose an analytical separation to be made between: 1) the practical aspects of skill, i.e. technical skill, 2) the recognition of this skill as quality, and 3) the additional understanding of skill as a social value, i.e. the researchers' interpretations of what skill *means* in a given society. I will briefly define what I mean for each of them but the focus of this article is on the recognition of skill as quality.

Here, I regard technical skill as the distinct relationship between maker and material that is acted out via tools and techniques, typically seen in any craft. I have written about this relationship elsewhere in detail (Kuijpers 2014 and forthcoming) and it suffices here to say that a skilful practitioner will bring out the

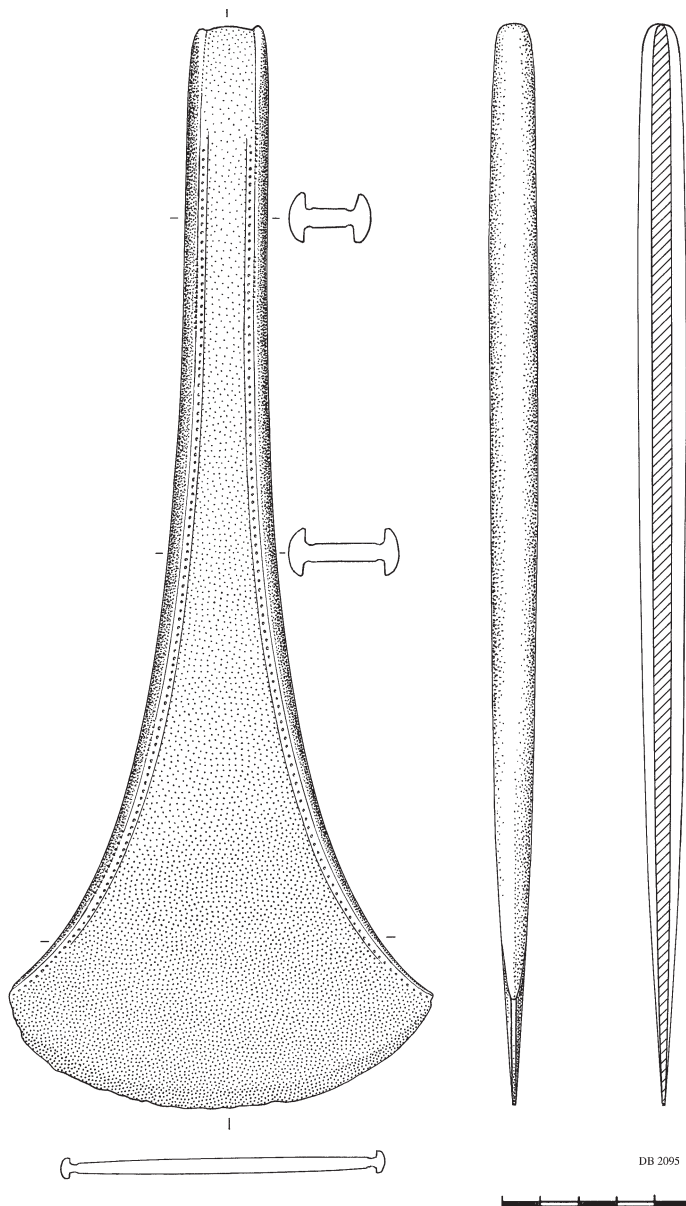


Figure 3 The Prunkbeil from Hilversum-Hoorneboegse Heide (Netherlands), a detector find (Butler, Theunissen & van Os 2014; drawing by Groningen Institute of Archaeology, Groningen, kindly provided by Liesbeth Theunissen).

qualities of a material, whereas the unskilled one might not even recognise them. Consequently, they respond differently towards the material and their resulting objects vary (in quality).

Skill as (a) quality is defined here as the *recognition* of the above mentioned technical skills (i.e. expertise) by other members of society, either in the practice itself or in the objects produced. This is dependent on the exclusiveness of the skill (see below).

The social value of skill, in contrast, entails an interpretation of how this expertise was valued and subsequently influenced identity and social status in a larger societal context. As such it is an explanation of the role of craftsmanship in a given society.

Recognition of skill as expertise and quality

It may appear excessive to specify a separate analytical concept for the recognition of skill as (a) quality. Yet, not only is it a prerequisite for the argument that skill has social value, the recognition of skill is also something we cannot take for granted. There are three points underlying this argument. Firstly, the above mentioned exclusiveness of a skill, which differs per social context. Secondly, different people may have different readings of skill. Thirdly, and perhaps most important for archaeologists, the recognition of a skilfully made object is dependent on the purpose of that object, by which I mean the intention of the maker.

Exclusiveness

With regard to craft we can safely assume that any craft activity would have been recognised as a technical skill that not everyone is equally capable of, consequently providing this skill with a certain (social) value. To what extent skills were recognised as a specialised expertise however, is dependent on the general standard of that skill in any particular period. To illustrate this point consider the perception of those who are able nowadays to make a fire from scratch without the aid of modern tools. They are instantly recognised for having an expertise (*i.e.* survival skills). Yet, we can reason that making fire would not have been regarded as a special quality in prehistory but rather mastered by many as part of a daily routine. In principle, underlying this interpretation is the assumption that the fewer people possess a skill, the more likely that skill is to be recognised as an exclusive expertise. Partly the reason why the metalworker is typically envisioned as a specialist is thus based on the assumption that metalworking skills were not widely available.

Experience

The second point that I take to affect the recognition of skill is experience. Hands-on experience or no experience at all with the craft under review will influence one's perception of the skills involved. Put simply, skill is read differently by a producer than a consumer of objects.² For instance, whereas a handcrafted golden ring may be seen as a beautiful, potentially meaningful, and skilfully made object to the layman consumer, a fellow goldsmith is able to see how the object was made and may notice small errors. What to a layman appears to be extremely difficult to make may, in fact, be a fairly easy job for a skilled craftsperson. Vice versa, features that a generic observer may not even notice, could potentially signal a high level of skill to fellow crafters.

2 I have serious reservations making a strict (modern) distinction between these categories for a pre-historic setting, but this is not the place for such a discussion and for the sake of the argument and clarity will do so.

The relevance of the above to archaeologists, who typically have little *practical* experience in working the materials they study, is that our own lack of understanding of the material in terms of what it affords, inhibits a thorough understanding of the skill that is needed to produce an object from it. As a result, there is a tendency to see most prehistoric objects as skilfully made. Experimental archaeology could take away some of this inexperience in practically working with material, but I think it would be erroneous to think that such experiments make us knowledgeable about material to the same degree and in a similar entangled manner as craftspeople (in the past). Craftspeople generally see their engagement with material as a lifetime of learning (Sennett 2008; Adamson 2007), whereas experimental archaeology only scratches the surface of that relationship. This, I argue, is why we need to work together with experienced craftspeople who have intimate knowledge of this relationship and the material they work with. They see the material they master and the objects made from it differently, and perhaps more completely than any archaeologists.

Purpose

The third point that needs to be discussed here relates to the question “what was considered quality?”. An assessment of the general level of technical skill in a large assemblage of artefacts, and especially the allowance for mistakes and faults, may give us some insights into what was regarded ‘well enough made’ to be accepted by society, and thus seen to have sufficient quality and/or suitability.³ However, we must be careful not to make this interpretation solely on the aesthetic appearances of an object, but take into account what the object was supposed to do, and how it was made. Returning to the three axes in the example (Fig. 1-3), we compare them to each other to define their quality, but unconsciously we are also making a comparison to what we think is the intended design or *purpose* of these objects (cf. Pye 1995, 50); in these instances an *axe*. On top of this, we also seem to hold a limitation as to how far the shape and appearance of an axe can divert before it is not regarded as a standard axe (tool) but, instead, a special object – in this case a *Prunkbeil* (see below). It appears that our interpretation of what the object *is*, influences how we judge its quality.

To what are we comparing?

Evidently, any claim about the craftsmanship of an object is firstly in need of an interpretation of the intention of the maker, which is best done by analysing its production recipe or *chaîne opératoire*. The second step, I argue, should entail an exploration of the overall quality of the type of object studied, which means we need to have a substantial amount of them. This is rarely the case, however. Partly because the objects that draw our attention are the anomalies like the Nebra disc (Meller and Bertemes 2010), ceremonial dirks (Fontijn 2001), *Prunkbeilen* and

3 I thank Stijn Arnoldussen for making me aware of the subtle but important distinction between quality and suitability in this context. It adds another layer to an already complex problem but is relevant as it indeed appears that some low quality axes were deemed suitable for their purpose anyway (see Kuijpers 2014).

what more that we consider to have been special. Such objects provide equally fascinating as restricting insights into Bronze Age society. On the basis of their uniqueness they tend to highlight exceptional narratives of specialists, elites, and warriors, but this often happens at the expense of thousands of common objects and everyday life and (metal) production in the Bronze Age. Hence, I advocate that if we aim to understand skill and quality in its prehistoric context, it is important to not only study exceptional pieces, but especially common objects. It is in this latter group that we can make explicit the comparison that is tacitly part of any judgement on skill and quality.

Returning once more to the Hilversum axe (see Figure 3), I would argue that to accurately address its quality and craftsmanship, it would be necessary to compare its production recipe to that of a *normative* Early Bronze Age axe (*cf.* Figure 1-2). This is possible with the use of a *chaîne opératoire*, but the information needed for the methodology to work is largely drawn from a metallographic sample, from which the production techniques of a metal object can be captured. This way we can argue for its supposed uniqueness and excellent workmanship from an evidence-based position.

Lacking metallographic information we can work only with the axe's morphology and decoration – representing just a few aspects of its *chaîne*. From these it is already apparent that the Hilversum axe deviates from the wider corpus of EBA axes, as was noted by Butler *et al.* as it is the very reason why the axe stands out. Yet, there are two points I wish to raise here. First, I argue that the deviation-argument is typically employed intuitively and as part of the standard process of our typological method. It is important to realise that this method employs referents, by which I mean that archaeologists make use of the fact that most objects *reference* other objects in shape and form; a quality that Sørensen (2015, 89) has dubbed “inter-object citation”. This reference, I argue, can also be made with regards to a generalised mental concept of an object, *i.e.* an idea(l). I maintain this point because what is *necessarily* implied in the archaeologist's recognition of exceptional and non-functional axes is the existence of a clearly defined conceptual axe, for which we hold an ideal. In other words: a *standard* from which we decide that too strong a departure means that the axe is not to be regarded as a normal axe any more.

The second point consequently comes forward; whereas Butler *et al.* (2014, 31) consider the Hilversum axe a *Prunkbeil* because it *lacks* close parallels and through a comparison with other oversized axes, I reason that there is a more fundamental comparison being made here. This needs some explanation. In my opinion, the lack of close parallels is the result of a typological exercise taken too far. This results in identifying similarities and differences (*e.g.* Butler, Theunissen & van Os 2014, 24-30), but without substantiating what these similarities and differences mean and, more importantly, why they should matter beyond the point that we are able to apply typologies on the basis of them (*cf.* Sørensen 2015, 85). Instead, I argue that the Hilversum-axe is an exceptional *Prunkbeil* because of its *reference to a standard* Early Bronze Age flanged axe. How else, for instance, is the knowledge that it is oversized constructed? Exceptionality can only manifest itself through a reference to what is considered normal. I advocate that we need to make this standard, against which we are comparing, explicit. Moreover, it is interesting

to reflect for a moment on this specific type of reference, in which the prehistoric metalworker *purposefully* diverts from (and elaborates on) the standard, rather than creating a truly unique – incomparable – object. What might be gained here, for instance, is a better understanding of the mechanisms involved in the complex dialogue between tradition and creativity, and the role of imitations and copies (of exotic objects) in Bronze Age societies (*e.g.* Flohr Sørensen 2012).

Conclusions

The recognition of skill as expertise and what would be considered skilfully made is contingent on cultural context, exclusiveness, experience, and purpose. Understanding these aspects is already a considerable task for archaeologists and currently, more often than not, achieved through intuitive presumptions about the difficulty of specific crafts. I have argued that instead any claims on these aspects should be founded in a thorough examination of the objects itself, and the inequality presented throughout the corpus of similar objects. This includes an interpretation of the purpose of an object and an explicit comparison with what we take to be the standard to which a reference is made. Referral or inter-object citation, as explained above, is a crucial aspect of human-object interactions and one that is used, but left unexplored in a comparative typological approach (Sørensen 2015, 90). On top of this, it needs to be argued for why a certain (level of) skill would be recognised as an expertise by prehistoric people rather than taken for granted. It is only then, that we can proceed to question the meaning and social value of this expertise, both in terms of the object and its maker.

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Abstract

What is ‘excellent workmanship’ and how do we arrive at such a ruling? I propose that this can be done via an analytical separation between 1) technical skills 2) the recognition of skill as (a) quality, and 3) the social value given to this quality. I argue that interpretations with regard to the latter can be made only *after* the other two have been established. This article will focus on the second point, the recognition of skill.

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