"Tulang Mawas" Re-examined
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"Tulang Mawas" Re-examined

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Notwithstanding the papers of I. H. N. Evans (1), V. B. C. Baker (2), H. D. Collings (3), R. Braddell (4), W. Linehan (5) and others the riddle of the *tulang mawas* is still far from being solved.

The question of the haft is closely connected with the problem of the use to which these strangely-shaped implements were put. Thus Baker wrote in 1937: "The old miners in Pahang used carefully shaped timbers, properly 'joggled' or joined. One of their implements for shaping the timber was probably the iron socketed tool, now known as 'tulang mawas'. This was probably held by means of a loop of thick rotan passed through the ferrule or socket of the tool and under the armpit—hence the curious alignment of the ferrule or socket, quite unsuitable for a wooden haft—and hence the legend of the 'iron forearm'. It was worked from the elbow joint, not the wrist." (6).

Baker's view is fully accepted both by R. Braddell and W. Linehan. The latter explains: "The socket, which is tubular and runs transversely to the haft, is in many cases so small and so situated in relation to the remaining part of the implement, and the weight of the tool or weapon vis-à-vis that of the socket is so distributed that it must be concluded that the socket cannot have been used to accommodate a handle wherewith to operate the implement. The most likely explanation appears to be that the socket originally designed perhaps to perpetuate the style of the tubular sockets of some bronze implements, such as daggers, were in fact used to accommodate the cord (no doubt, mostly rattan) whereby the implement was suspended from the body of the user, or hung up when not in use." Linehan refers to a bronze dagger from Dong-son (reproduced by Goloubew "L'Age du Bronze....", p. 18., fig. 7) the tubular socket of which accommodates a ring, and says: "The socket resembles those of our tulang mawas". (7)

This interpretation rests on an error of observation.

The authority responsible for this misconception is undoubtedly Collings, who was the first to publish drawings of *tulang mawas* (Fig. 1.), showing the 'tubular' socket of these implements (which must remain invisible on photographs). Collings claims that his drawings are 'fairly accurate' (8), but unfortunately enough this turns out to be an overstatement, as he actually

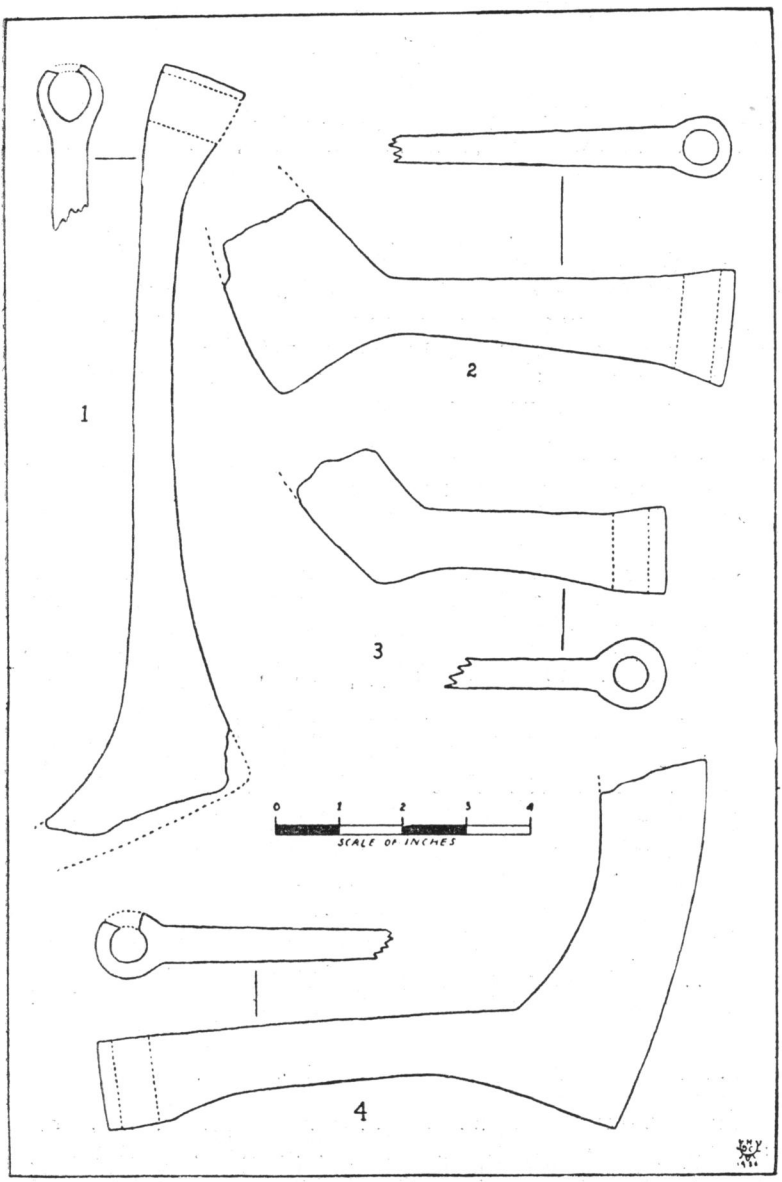

Fig. 1. Reproduction of Fig. 4. of H. D. Collings's "Recent finds of Iron-Age Sites in Southern Perak. . . .," *BRM, Ser, B.*, Vol. I, No. 2, December 1937.

missed the most important point. Twelve years later, in 1949, Collings dealt once more with the subject (9), but his drawings are as inaccurate as his previous ones (Fig. 2). Quite obviously he had not taken the trouble to examine the originals properly; otherwise he would have noticed that the socket of these implements is not tubular at all, but conical (Fig. 3.). As will be realized immediately, this is a most important point, because it proves beyond any doubt:

a) That the *tulang mawas* was fitted with a solid handle (most likely of wood).

b) That the handle (entering the tapered socket at its larger opening) was inserted so that it projected in the opposite direction to the free end of the working edge.

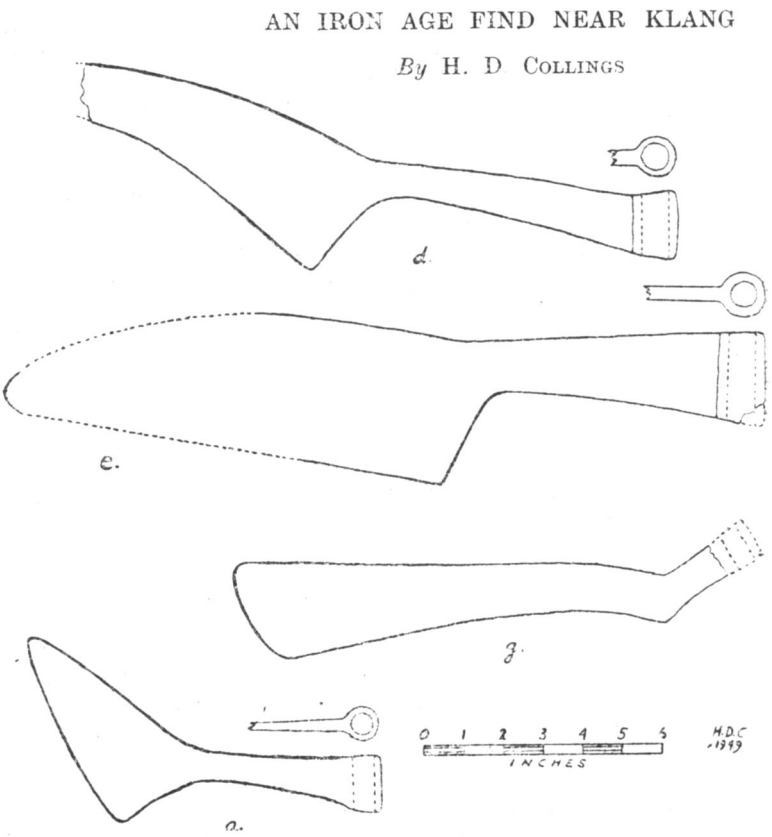

Fig. 2. Reproduction of Fig. 1 of H. D. Collings's second article in *BRM, Ser. B.*, No. 4, 1949. a. and d. are the specimens reproduced in Fig. 3. of this paper (top right and bottom left.)

This latter point is supported by yet another factor. The implements are all badly worn at the pointed end of the working edge, or, in most cases this pointed end of the blade is broken off, which seems to indicate that the implements were pushed along in the manner a plane is operated. The question of the use must of course remain problematical until new evidence becomes available but the fact that *tulang mawas* were found in relatively large numbers near river-beds suggests that these implements were carpenters' tools, used in the manufacture of boats, which was certainly the most vital occupation of the iron-age wood-worker in Malaya. If *tulang mawas* had been miners' tools, as Baker suggested (and before him Evans) (10), their occurence would be restricted mainly to mining districts. This is not, however, the case. On the contrary they are distributed over a fairly large area, extending in the West from the Kinta district of Perak down to Klang, Selangor; in East Malaya *tulang mawas* have been found round Kuala Lipis, especially in the region of the Tembeling, and in the Raub district, particularly at Tersang, Pahang, (11).

Collings remarks: "there can be no doubt" that most of the *tulang mawas* were "for warlike or ceremonial use" (12). He also suggested 'currency' (13). While the possibility that these implements served as weapons cannot of course be excluded, there is not the slightest evidence to support Collings's claim that they were ceremonial objects or currency.

W. Koppers says:

> Der Praehistoriker hat kein Recht, aus der Einfachheit ergologischer Artefakte auf Primitivitaet und Roheit der Soziologie, de Sprache und Religion ihrer Traeger zu schliessen. Zumal fuer die aelteren Perioden fehlen der Praehistorie durchgehend die Voraussetzungen, in bezug auf die soziologisch-geistige Seite der Kultur Konkretes auszusagen * (4).

This cuts both ways and the archaeologist is certainly not entitled either, to deduce from a few potsherds and implements that a prehistoric people (of whom not a single bone, nor even a tooth has ever been found) had already reached a stage in civilization where ceremonial objects and currency played a part. As a matter of fact we know very little about the material culture of the Iron-Age Folk of Malaya and absolutely nothing about its social customs and religious conceptions.

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* "The prehistorian has no right to infer from the simplicity of artifacts that a people was in a state of primitiveness and that its sociology, language and religion was barbaric. Especially for the earlier periods the prehistorian is not in a position to make concrete statements regarding the sociological-spiritual aspects of a particular culture."

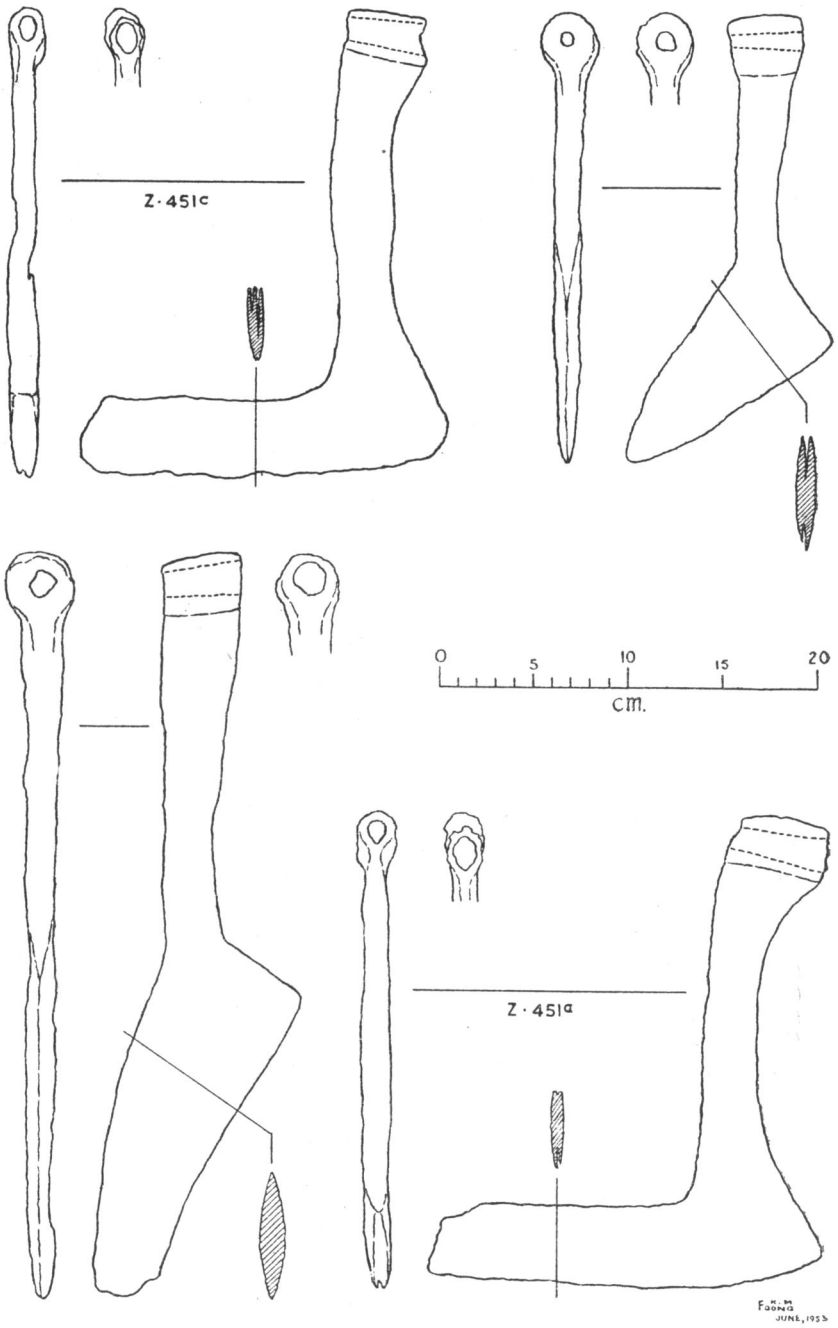

Fig. 3. Drawings of Tulang Mawas in the collection of the Raffles Museum, Singapore (one quarter natural size): the examples at top right and bottom left are (a) and (d) of Collings's drawing reproduced here as Fig. 2, p. 39 above.

With regard to prehistoric 'currencies' there are always definite indications which lead to the assumption that certain objects like rings, weapons or bars of metal may have served monetary purposes. If for instance large numbers of identical objects, used and unused, and conforming to a weight standard are found together, or if certain implements or weapons discovered in quantity, are of too small or too large a size for practical use (15), or if they occur in a half finished form (like the sword blades of Prehistoric Britain) (16), it may be supposed that they had served as currency. Now, it is true that small hoards of *tulang mawas* have come to light, but these implements were always found mixed with iron spear heads and even with potsherds, which makes it most unlikely that they were ever used as currency.

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(5) W. Linehan "Traces of a Bronze Age Culture associated with Iron Age implements in the regions of Klang and the Tembeling, Malaya" *JMBRAS*, Vol XXIV Pt. III., 1951, pp. 1-60.

(6) V. B. C. Baker. 1937. p. 30.
(7) W. Linehan, 1951, p.14
(8) H.D. Collings, 1937, p.85
(9) H.D. Collings, 1949.
(10) I.H.N. Evans, 1928, p.114
(11) W. Linehan, 1951, p.13
(12) H.D. Collings, 1949, p.115
(13) H.D. Collings, 1937, p.89.

(14) Wilhelm Koppers 'Der historische Gedanke in Ethnologie und Praehistorie' in *KULTUR u. SPRACHE*, Institut fuer Voelkerkunde der Universitaet Wien, Wien, 1952, p.63.

(15) Comp. A. Blanchet (Traité de Monnaies Gauloises,' Paris, 1905, Part I. (dealing with the Bronze Axe currency of ancient Gaul). To quote only one example: At Maure-de-Bretagne (Ille-et-Villeine) about 4000 miniature bronze axes of a peculiar shape, tied together by a wire were found. New and badly worn ones were mixed together. In other parts of Gaul great numbers of these axes (or 'celts') were discovered in earthenware jars, a popular hiding place for coins and valuables.

(16) R. C. Collingwood 'Roman Britain' in 'An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome', Vol. III., 1904-5, p.60.