

AN EARLY MILLSTONE FROM SANDFORD, WINSCOMBE, IN NORTH SOMERSET

In March 2009 Mandy Brading,¹ while out walking her dog, found a large piece of stone in a field south of Sandford in Winscombe parish in north Somerset (NGR c. ST 41705935). The stone was on the surface of a field which was being prepared for a new orchard for Thatcher's Cider in Sandford. The field still had arable strips at the time of the tithe map in 1840 and it is clear from the names then in use that the furlong here had been called Bin- (or more likely Bean-) furlong. This was part of the common field system of Sandford but there was never, apparently, a typical two or three-field system operating here in the Middle Ages.

The nearest known mill sites to the find are at Max Mill and Woodborough where there were medieval water mills, and there was a windmill on the Lynch, between Winscombe and Woodborough, from the 14th to the 16th century (see p. 72). There were certainly medieval mills in the neighbouring manor of Banwell to the west and there may have been a water mill on the Towerhead brook, near the find spot of the stone, between Sandford and Towerhead, a hamlet in Banwell (NGR c. ST 41505917). There

is stonework and a sluice gate in the stream at that point but no sign of a wheel pit or by-pass leat which would clearly indicate a water mill site.

Subsequently, in September 2009, Martin Watts² examined the stone and the following notes are based on discussion with him (Fig. 1). The millstone is made from the local Dolomitic conglomerate which is widespread in the Mendip region and occurs all over Winscombe parish, so the stone was probably quarried and worked into shape locally. It is not an ideal stone for millstones as it contains large pebbles and lumps of rock which must have cracked and ended up in the meal. But at least the stone has the advantages of cheapness and local availability and has been found to be used elsewhere in the region. It is just possible that the stone came from an alternative source such as the Old Red Sandstone of the Wye valley.

The dressing on the grinding face of the stone could date it to the 16th or 17th century, although there is little available published material to compare it with. The dating is based on the fact that it is too small to be part of an 'industrial' stone of the 18th

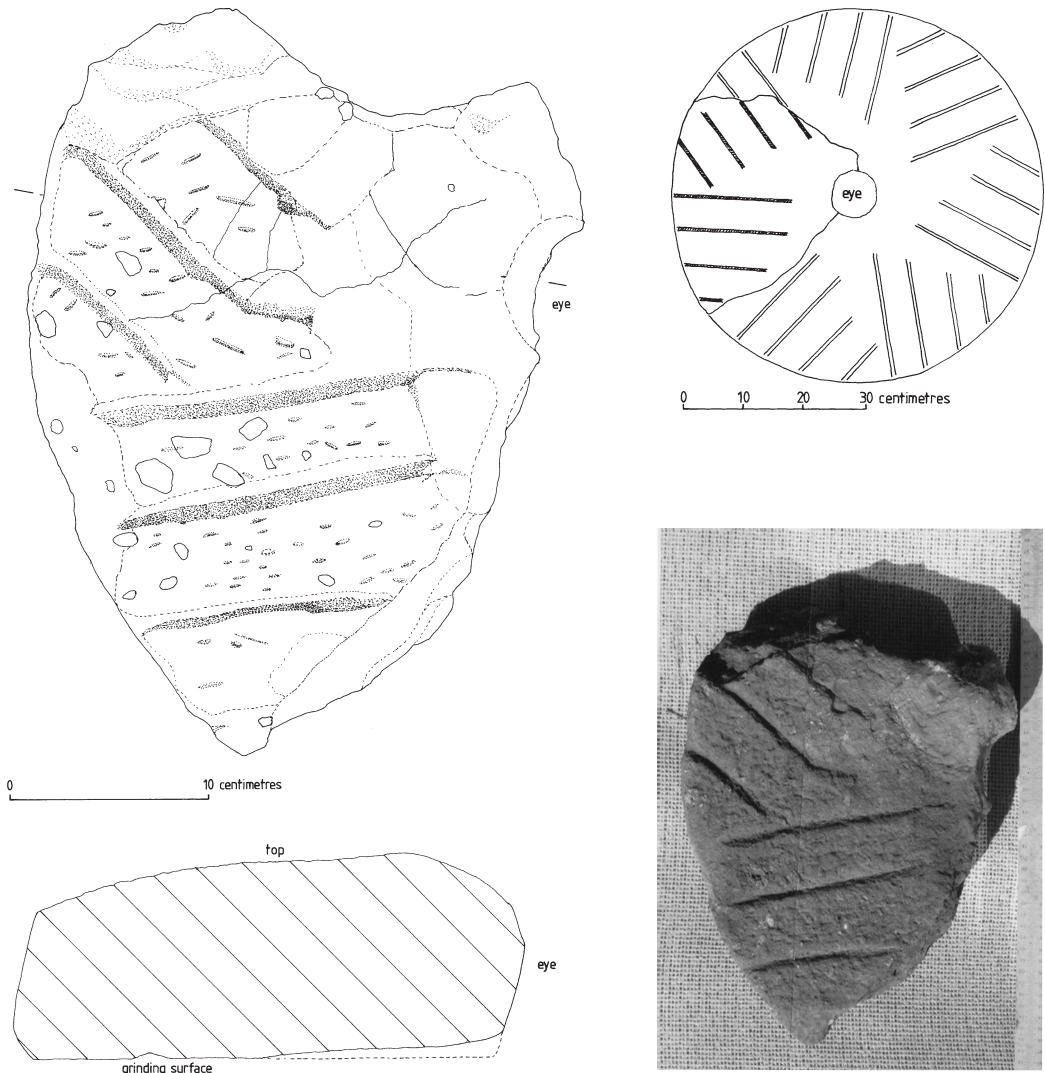


Fig. 1 Fragment of early millstone from Sandford: A plan and cross section, B restoration drawing of complete millstone, C photograph

or 19th century and yet it does not appear to be from a hand quern. The harp-shaped layout of the furrows, the grooves of which provide the cutting edges for breaking open the material being ground, was used during the later medieval period, and the furrows themselves have been cut with a sharp-pointed pick, giving a 'V' shape in section, rather than one almost vertical and one angled face, which became common during the 18th century. The relatively primitive

layout of the furrows and the picking on the lands, the flat areas between them, are suggestive of a pre-1700 date.

It is still a puzzle what sort of mill the stone could have come from. Its relatively small diameter rather suggests it might have been from a hand-gear mill. Also with the lack of any chases or recesses near the remains of the eye, it was probably the bedstone rather than the runner. The pattern of the dressing

(the layout of the harps) indicates that the stone was dressed for clockwise rotation.

The stone when complete, would have been 570 to 580mm in diameter, 100mm thick at the central hole – the ‘eye’, which is 70mm in diameter – and 80 to 90mm at the circumference; roughly a quarter of the stone survives.

Thanks are due to Mandy Brading for reporting the find and donating the stone to the Somerset County Museum, and to Teresa Hall for the drawing.

Endnotes

- ¹ Mandy Brading also found the hand axe in Winscombe reported in Harding, P., and Aston, M., 2009 ‘The context and significance of a Palaeolithic hand axe from Winscombe’, *SANH* 152, 217–20.
- ² See Watts, M., 2002. *The Archaeology of Mills and Milling*, Stroud.

MICK ASTON AND MARTIN WATTS