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MARTIAL ARTS

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# MASTERS

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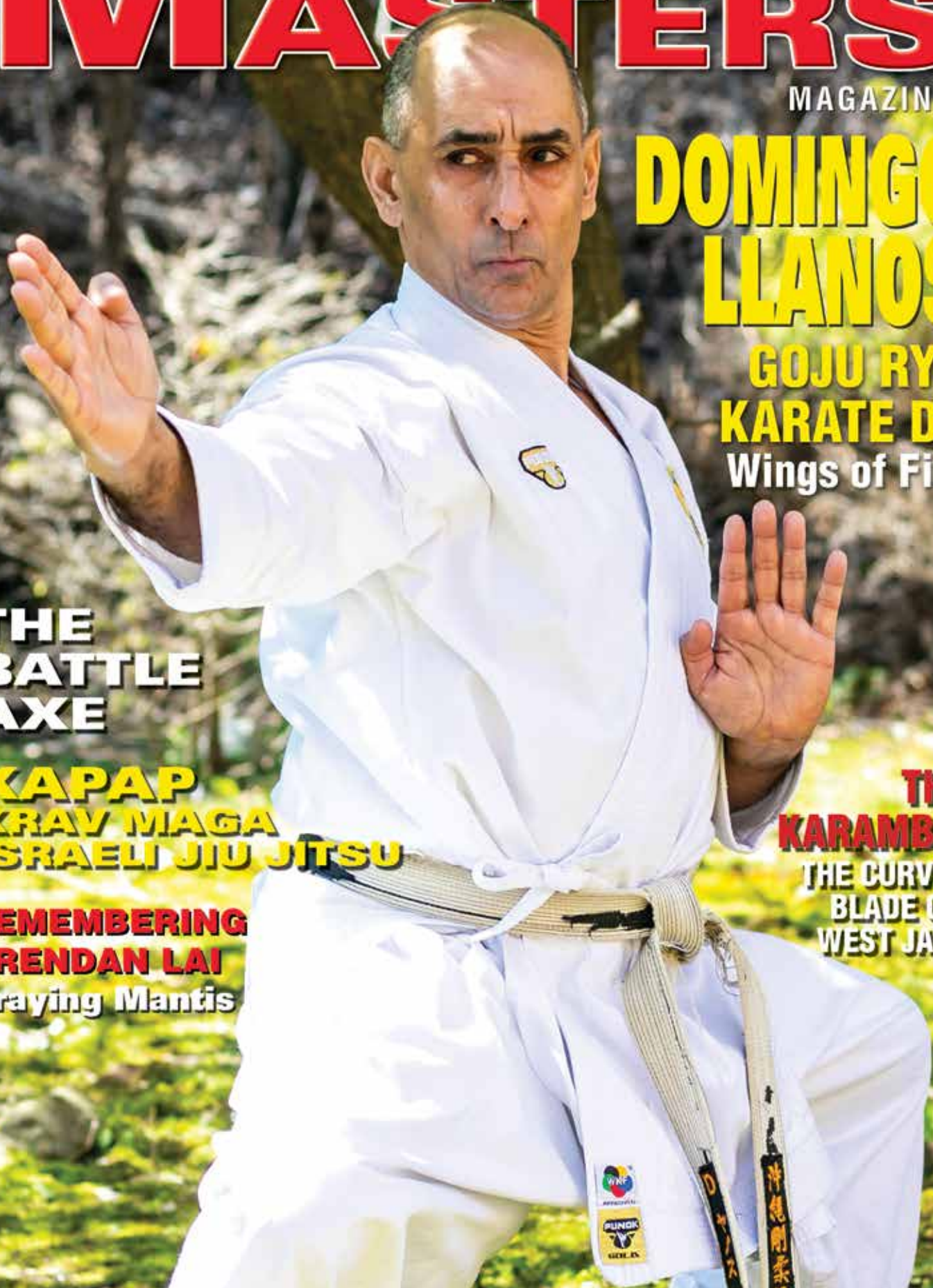
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# THE BATTLE AXE

By DAVID "SENSEI" STAINKO, *prof. | mag. of kinesiology*



**T**he axe is a manual tool or melee weapon in a shape of a flat peg with a wide blade. It is used for cutting, chopping etc. It is usually made out of steel and set on a wooden holder and, according to its usage, it is made in different shapes and sizes. Today, it is mostly used as an auxiliary tool among lumberjacks, butchers, firemen as well as with traditional trades such as carpenters, coopers, wheelwrights etc. At first, axes were made of stone, then in bronze and iron.

They have developed from a simple stone chisel use in the Paleolithic period by prehistoric men. The typical flat shape of an axe, formed in the Neolithic period, hasn't changed much until today. Smaller axes were used as amulets that protect from curses or as votive gifts. Because of its deadly power, it was often an object of blind devotion (fetish), a symbol of authority (fasces) or a cult symbol (labrys). Sometimes it was richly decorated (tomahawk) or made in a peculiar shape (halberd). Among old nations and peoples, it was used as a weapon by the Scythians, Thracians, Gauls and Vikings in Europe up until the 16th century and in some Asian countries (Iraq, Iran, India) for even longer than that.

A battle axe is a name for every axe which is made as a weapon. It is considered to be one of the oldest types of weapon in history. Throughout human history, everyday objects were, out of necessity, used as weapons. Because of their manifold purpose, axes were not an exception. Apart from axes that were specially designed for combat, there were many types of battle axes which were used as a tool.



The very manufacturing process was a bit simpler and, consequently, cheaper than the production of swords. They can be distinguished by their material, size, i.e. whether they were intended to be held with one or two hands. Axes have been produced in Europe, the Middle East, India, China and America since the dawn of time. They have appeared the latest in Southeast Asia. Traditionally in South Europe, for

the production of the axe handle people mostly used the wood of the ash tree, hornbeam and beech.

As early as the Stone Age, men became very skilled in trimming and whetting stone. The stone axes of the time had a hole in which man would set in the handle and wrapped it with skins. Men used those kinds of axes to chop down trees, build first cabins, rafts etc. Although those axes were, in comparison to today's axes, very primitive, man used them very well in peace times (as a tool) and in war conditions (as a weapon). Brazilian rainforest explorers have seen Brazilian Natives who chopped down trees with stone axes. If necessary, they would also use them in combat. Although they needed up to 2 months worth of chopping to bring down a larger tree, they were very skilled when using them during war as well. For example, a stone axe from Polynesia was used as a weapon.

The stone axe was a very primitive weapon, however, from a spectre of different axes across the world, the stone axe is still the most popular one as a weapon. North American Native Americans are responsible for its level of popularity as they were very skilled in its usage. Tomahawk is a well-known Native American axe which, along the bow, arrow and spear, represented the favourite Native American weapons. Almost all Indian tribes used the tomahawk and many of them learnt how to use them even after the arrival of some more developed weapons, such as the firearm. The



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stone axe was very heavy and its handle was almost 1 meter long. The handle was always specially manufactured and decorated with various feathers (usually eagle feathers), bird claws and enemy scalps. A large and heavy stone was used as a blade after it was patiently sharpened (whetted) and shaped. The stone was tied to the handle with buffalo skins.

The tomahawk is a Native American battle axe, originally of the Algonquins, from which the other tribes took it over. The Algonquin tribe lived in the territory of today's state of Virginia. The word "tomahawk" perhaps came from Powhatan word "tamahaac" or "tamaham" meaning "he cuts". The word is similar in some other Algonquin languages which proves its Algonquin origin. The Native Americans called it "tamoihacan". The earliest tomahawks had a stone head fixed with leather strings or tethers to a wooden handle. Later on, it was replaced with a metal blade and, in different versions, it can have an added head pipe, i.e. the so-called "Tomahawk-pipe" which the Native Americans used for smoking. Their version of the tomahawk axe was actually an iron axe with two blades (each side had one blade) with a wooden handle and was much smaller than the earlier original Native American stone axes.

The Native Americans became famous because of their warrior technique and their skill in using an axe, mainly the Apache, the Iroquois, the Sioux, the Mohegan, the Comanche and the Navajo tribes. In the second half of the 17th century, metal blades came about, i.e. the Native Americans bought their first axes or stole them from the English (the American army gave axes to their soldiers until 1812 and axes with two blades started to be produced in America at the beginning of 1860). In the 19th century, they learnt how to work with iron themselves. The legend of the so-called "battle axe" is well-known today, i.e. the axe that would be buried during the period of peace. Once it was dug up, it would symbolize a proclamation of war. It is interesting that the Native Americans used the axe as a kind of peace pipe. For them, smoking a "kinnikinnick" in a peace pipe was a symbol of truce and they would then ritually bury the tomahawk in the ground. The wolf Indians, i.e. the Pawnee people, still use the tomahawk as a symbol on their tribal flag.

The oldest found axes of that type with two blades made out of bronze (called "labrys") date as early as 2000 years B.C. when the new independent culture on Crete was founded. It is thought that the very word "labyrinth" comes



from the Greek words "labrys" - double axe and "inthos" - place. The double axe is one of the basic symbols of Crete culture, as well as the labyrinth itself. The two are very closely connected. However, except for images found on Crete coins, there weren't any relics of the labyrinth found in archaeological remains up to this date. The two-blade axe is present in images carved in stone, painted in ceramic and frescoes as well as made in bronze, silver and gold, ranging from a couple of centimeters to several meters. These were found even in caves which were used for religious ceremonies (the saint bull cult) during the Minoan era, which speaks of their ceremonial importance. The double axe is a symbol of the internal man's weapon which was also shown as a pair of horns turned upwards and downwards (each horn to its side). This way they have together made an axe with two blades. In a psychological sense, the labrys is, just like a sword, a symbol of strength of man's will which he uses to place himself in harmony by ruling over his lower nature in his very own psychological labyrinth. Contemporary thinkers such as C. G. Jung, Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade have pondered over this problem and have found the meaning of man's internal life. Which do we conquer when travelling to our core- the labyrinth or ourselves?

The Ancient Chinese have as early as the Shang dynasty in 1500 B.C. made bronze axes which they frequently used



in war and were very skilled in it. The Chinese used several forms of battle axes. The most famous ones are the types of heavier and wider axes called *ge* (鉞) and *yue* (鉞). The Ancient Chinese used axes in both secular and religious ceremonies (mostly wider ritual axes of a *yue* form) as well as on the battlefield. A large *yue*-formed axe was a symbol of strength during the Shang dynasty. Chinese battle axes called *fu* (斧) were somewhat smaller and lighter and weren't as wide as the *ge* any *yue* form of axes. This is why they were more practical to use in the battlefield. Their role-model was a well-known Chinese battle axe which was formed as a spear- sabre according to which the Japanese made their own version of an axe- spear (*naginata*).

In Ancient Rome, gladiators were armed with swords although they used special axes that were used mostly for exercise or fighting against wild animals. The description of the axe as a weapon was first mentioned by Homer in his epic poem *Odyssey*. In the beginning, the axe as a battle weapon was thought of as a weapon that mainly peasants and low-rate or low-born warriors used. Such an opinion was popular during the 11th and 12th century. Later on, in mid- 13th century, such an opinion gradually changed. The famous battle on lake Peipus in 1242 in which the Russians defeated the Germans greatly affected this change. After

the battle, the commander Duke Alexander Nevsky and the Russian army which used mostly battle axes (called *sovnya*, Russian "С О В Н Я") became famous for their achievement.

Among the older nations, the most famous ones who used the axe in battle were certainly the Scythians, the Franks (there was even an axe called "franciska" which was used since the 6th century), the Vikings (which used battle axes since the 10th century, famous under the names Dane axe or Danish axe), the Cimmerians and especially the English who used axes with two blades (English long battle axes). The Vikings used axes a lot, primarily because they used them outside of battle and robberies for their crops. As ship-owners, the axe was useful to them in repairs and in manipulating ships. It is very important to note that the Vikings never fought in formation. They were a wild barbaric people that was famous for their "hit and run" tactics, not for their military discipline and order.

Battle axes had constant use on the battlefield in many civilizations throughout history. We can name a few such as the tomahawk, halberdove, polearmove as well as Viking axes. In a certain period in the Middle Ages across today's Europe, large axes on poles were the primary weapon and have suppressed swords to a secondary weapon. However,

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the axes were mostly used by peasants who found use in it in everyday life. During Ancient Greece and Rome, the axe wasn't practical because warriors fought in tight formation and, in order to handle an axe, you need more space than when using a sword (gladius). On the other hand, the axe is much cheaper than the sword when it comes to manufacture and blacksmiths could forge axes with much less resources and time. Furthermore, the axe head was very useful in smashing metal shields. Also, peasants were often forbidden to possess weapons and the axe was registered as a tool for home usage.

During the Middle Ages, various knight tournaments had fights between knights on a horse, using a shield, helmet with a lowered visor and a spear in one's hand. Organized battles without horses were more rare and much more difficult. In those instances, the fighters used a sword and a heavy battle axe in combat. Among the more famous warriors who use the axe proficiently, we should give special mention to pirates to whom this was one of their favourite weapons during the 17th and 18th century. The pirates used different hooks and sabres in their ship battles and were often armed with axes which had a spike on one end and a blade on the other. However, apart from axes, weapons that were very appreciated in Medieval Europe were various forms of battle hammerheads which were round, jaggy or spiked as well as different maces ("burzgodan" in Turkish and "dabbus" in Arabic). Most often, six-pointed maces were used.

During the Ottoman period, a battle axe called "tabar" was used and sometimes also the "tabarzin" (saddle-axe, an axe in a shape of a saddle). This type of an axe later appeared in Persia, Armenia, some parts of India, Iran and in smaller instances in some neighbouring countries. In Ancient India, smaller-sized battle axes were made. They were

called "parashu" (on certain Faras dialects). This very same type of battle axe was used in Ancient Iran under the name "sagaris".

Over history, all manual weapons had their advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of axes are that they were usually practical, as mentioned, they were cheaper and easier to manufacture- you needed only a metal head and a wooden pole in comparison to a sword which needed a much more complicated, precise and timely effort, a more demanding form of blade, sharp edges, a certain ratio between firmness and elasticity during the quenching period, balance etc.

The greatest disadvantage of the axe is that it was difficult to pair to it the opponent's weapon. So, a shield was more than mandatory. Also, axes that were used as a tool had a thicker blade which wasn't very efficient when penetrating flesh, as with the sword. Injuries were made solely thanks to the weight of the head and the strength of the blow, rather than the sharpness, similar to the mace. Life during the Middle Ages was difficult and people had to know how to use even battle axes as a weapon. In Medieval Europe, it was mostly used by the Franks (franciska) and the Vikings. However, we need to point out that, although legends usually mention Vikings to be using axes, they were actually a more modest weapon. They were mostly used by those warriors who couldn't afford a sword.

Also, classic battle or peasant axes didn't have the ability to attack in a stabbing manner. You could only attack by swinging from any available direction. Again, this is all in comparison to the sword with which you could combine the stabbing attack. A distinction between battle axes and polearms needs to be made. Polearms are longer and, apart from having an axe, they also had a very dangerous spike. Polearms were specialized in suppressing the opponent, keeping a distance, battling against a cavalry and an opponent with shields. They started to be used in Austria during the 14th century under the name bardiche (berdiche or berdish). Later on during the 16th century, their usage gradually transferred to Scandinavia and Russia (it was the weapon of Russian guards).

Halberds were related to axes. They consisted of a long pole (1,80 – 2,40 m) and at the top there was a spear, small axe or beak (only since the 16th century). They were used by the infantry against the shielded cavalry. It was used for the first time by the Swiss soldiers-infantry against a shielded cavalry in the battle at Morgarten in 1315. This



weapon was multifunctional because you could make a blow or stab someone with the spear, the axe was used to cause cuts and the beak was used to throw the horseman out of his saddle. Each country in which it was used had its own shape so we can differentiate German, Swiss, Italian and Czech halberds. At the beginning of the 15th century, the halberd was pulled into the core of the military formation and in the century after that, it was entirely squeezed out by the spear. Today, only the Papal guard in Vatican still uses it.

In the age of Samurai, the Japanese used the battle axe which was formed somewhere between the axe, sabre and spear, the so-called, naginata. Hence, the skill of using the axe was called naginata jutsu. Naginata was a spear – axe which had a large crooked and sharpened blade and was a weapon which top was very similar to the Japanese sabre. This is how the naginata became the Japanese halberd under the Chinese influence with certain changes. The samurai used the naginata with a heavy blade so it sometimes used to weigh more than 5 kg. Although the belief is that the samurai didn't use a classic battle axe, it is not entirely true. Many pictures of the famous Japanese painter Katsukawa Shuntei (1770 – 1820) where he portrayed the samurai (it is thought that the samurai is Awate Saemon) who is holding a huge axe. Today, a collection of a couple

of his paintings of samurai with an axe can be viewed at the Brooklyn Museum. The old Japanese name for this type of a larger battle axe is ono (斧), and sometimes the historic name wono (をの). In some Southern parts of Japan, it is also called masakari.

Among the more famous battle axes we should definitely mention the Filipino axe called panabas which was used on the battlefield at the beginning of the 19th century. The axes were of different sizes and could be used with one or two hands. Unlike them, in ancient Sri Lanka, they used a battle axe that would be handled with only one hand, called keteriya. Similar battle axes were used in Vietnam. According to the period they originated from, they are part of the Dong Son culture and are called the Dong Son axe.

Battle axes were used by mostly all soldiers around the world and their purpose was multifold. However, it is an essential part of the military equipment even today. For example, during the Vietnam war, American soldiers used a type of battle axe similar to the tomahawk which they would procure on their own (a certain Peter Lagad manufactured it) and used it because of its efficiency.

One of the best classic axes in the world is made on the North of Sweden, in private forges, where the blade is made entirely according to an old system (carbon steel with a coat which protects it from rust) and the wood from an American walnut tree for the pole because it is resistant to vibrations. However, one of the best and the most resistant axes today is used by firefighters. The poles of their axes are made of fiberglass because it can take up twice the amount of cargo until breakage (up to even 270 kg) in comparison to the regular axe with a wooden pole.

The battle axe, usually of a smaller size, could be thrown at the opponent. This was oftentimes done by the old Franks (franciska), the Vikings (Danish axe) and the Native Americans (tomahawk). Such smaller axes were thrown with one hand, whereas larger axes would be thrown with two hands above the head. If it was properly thrown towards the goal, the axe should make a rotation around its axis. In today's world, there exists a number of experts that deal with the history of battle axes. As the leading experts we should mention the English historians Steve Friehty and Nigel Amos. 🐾