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# Enxó Use and Sharpening Tips 59U20.01

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by Simon Watts

The Enxó (pronounced en-Shaw), or hand adze, is still a widely used tool in Portugal. Carpenters, boat builders, millwrights – anyone working with wood is sure to have one in his toolbox. No one knows how old the enxó is but some form of adze goes back to the stone age – they’ve been found with flint cutting edges. In present-day Portugal, miniature stone enxós occasionally show up along with other grave goods in burying grounds.

Old blades vary in size but the newer ones I came across were 4½” wide and about 5” long. The front of the blade is slightly curved and ground to a 25° bevel. The handles are made of Eucalyptus or Orange wood and the sideways extension is intended to keep splinters out of the knuckles.

I’ve used an enxó for quite a few years and have found it a handy, versatile tool much easier to learn to use than its long-handled cousins – the lipped or the railroad adze. If you measure the radius of curvature of the blade you’ll find it close to the length of your own arm from hand to elbow. This is why you can become adept with it after only a few hours practice. Another advantage is that the tool is made to be used one-handed so the other hand is free to hold the work.

The enxó is not primarily a finishing tool but one used for roughing stock down close to its finished size. It can remove quantities of wood, but also, in skilled hands, shavings that require only a few passes with a plane to finish. Unlike a plane an enxó can cut inside curves – a chair seat, for example, and is especially useful for overhead work and getting into tight places.

The enxó works best on softwoods and green or partially dry hardwoods. I use one frequently in Nova Scotia where I have an island home with no electric power. I find it handy for building and repairing docks, making cribs, and all manner of rough carpentry – including shingling. An enxó is also useful when it’s not feasible to take the work to a bandsaw, either because it is too heavy or it is already built into a larger structure – bevelling the frames of a boat, for example. The men that repair and build boats in Portugal seldom have portable power equipment available. So a tool that rapidly dimensions lumber on the job is especially useful.

Other uses are stripping bark off trees; shaping masts and flag poles; putting up temporary staging and concrete shuttering. I’ve seen enxós put to cleaning the cement off used formwork. As one Portuguese carpenter said: “It’s not a toy. It’s for real business – you can even cut nails with it.”

In Portugal, choosing an enxó is easy. There is only one manufacturer, 'Jaguar', a firm known for quality tools. A Portuguese, when buying one new, would detach the blade and 'ring' it. "Choose the one that makes the best music." A dull chink might indicate a crack or faulty weld.

With older enxós you can touch up the edge with a file. The steel in the new ones is so hard that you can barely scratch it, so you must use a grinder. With a new blade, I first remove the handle and then set the tool rest of a dry grinder to conform to the factory-ground angle – about 25°. Grind the bevel, maintaining the same curve on the front edge.

After you feel a burr on the upper surface use a small oilstone (a soft Arkansas works well), to gently hone both edges. As the edge dulls with use hone it again with an oilstone. If you hit a nail or otherwise damage the edge you'll have to go back to the grinder and repeat the process.

Electric grinders are not as common in Portugal as they are here so workers mostly use a whetstone with water – the same kind farmers used for sharpening scythes and sickles. These carborundum stones are cheap and portable but leave a rough edge. As someone explained to me: "For delicate work an enxó must be sharp. For rough work it can be quite dull."

After sharpening the tool make a guard – wood or leather – before doing anything else. Otherwise your other tools will jostle the exotic newcomer and damage the edge – or vice-versa.

When learning to use an enxó first practice on the edge of some one-inch thick stock. Draw a line and try hewing as close to it as you can get. Watch for the slope of the grain and reverse the direction of cut if the wood seems to be tearing up. Next, draw a line with a gentle concavity and try hewing to that. Pivot the tool from the wrist – as you would swing a short-handled hammer.

When you've mastered edge trimming take a more solid chunk of wood – a log – and try flattening one side. You'll find it often works best to cut at an angle so you are slicing through the grain fibers obliquely.

Treat the enxó with respect. Keep a guard on the edge and don't leave it where children and animals might get hurt – nor on benches where it might fall. Once you get started I know you'll enjoy using this ancient tool and appreciate its versatility.

*(NOTE: This tool is just as it came from the factory in Portugal. While you have the blade off for grinding I suggest that you go over the handle with 120 grit sandpaper until it feels smooth and comfortable to the hand.)*