



## Book Reviews

### **MINING AND MATERIALITY: NEOLITHIC CHALK ARTEFACTS AND THEIR DEPOSITIONAL CONTEXTS IN SOUTHERN BRITAIN BY A M TEATHER**

*Archaeopress Archaeology, Oxford, 2016. 114pp, 57 figs. ISBN 978-1-78491-265-9, pb. £26.00*

We are fortunate that a fair number of deep flint mines on the Sussex chalk have seen excavation in the past allowing us a reasonable grasp of the practices involved in the extraction process. It is, perhaps, less fortunate that finds from the excavations have not received the modern analysis afforded to those from the Later Neolithic site at Grimes Graves in Norfolk. So this contribution is most welcome. While some aspects have been attended to, the full publication of John Pull's excavation material housed at Worthing Museum, including a remarkable remnant of a wooden bowl, remains outstanding; similarly, other artefacts from the 19th-century excavations languish unstudied in Brighton, the Pitt Rivers in Oxford and several other museums. Much of it has been widely scattered and scarcely a museum in the country does not have a sample of flakes from Cissbury, while discussion of animal bone, antler, chalk artefacts published in 19th-century journals is now invariably overlooked. Even re-examination of the flint, whereby the *raison d'être* of the mines was formerly deemed to be production of the Neolithic flint axe-head, could be useful, as cores abound on the surface and are present among museum collections. Similarly, and unlike those from Grimes Graves, or from causewayed enclosures, the chalk artefacts have not seen recent consideration in any great detail. This volume seeks to remedy this by taking a theoretical approach to their study, comparing them with examples known from Varndell's (1991) work at Grimes Graves and with others found across the chalklands of Wessex. It separates chalk artefacts into portable – cups, phalli, plaques, discs etc – and non-portable, which for the most part means large blocks of chalk along with *in situ* art work.

The latter category includes the reasonably well-known linear, parallel-line and latticed arrangements found scratched at gallery entrances, as well as a number of circular and semi-circular designs, perforations, cup marks and animal carvings recorded during excavation. The author may be right in assuming that they are all genuine, though given former debates as to whether some may have been animal (badger) claw marks, perhaps something more detailed on this would have been useful. The fake art at Grimes Graves is acknowledged, but the bison, deer and fish engravings found at Cissbury by Pull are apparently accepted since there is a lack of evidence of fakery. Russell (2001) considered them genuine, although others were cautious, particularly in view of the fact that an ivory fish, a recent fisherman's talisman, with a head similar to that of the fish carving, was uncovered during excavations and initially thought to be a Neolithic artefact. Some effort was made by this reviewer to ascertain more about the carvings (Field 2005), at least one example being found by one of the boy scouts on site following return of the excavation team from lunch. Some images from among the rock art at Alta, Norway, however, are not dissimilar and a critical study would be useful before we finally accept or dismiss them. Full size reproduction of the rubbings and drawings in the Pull archive at Worthing would have been useful here.

For those with a penchant for theory, Teather clearly revels in discussion of personhood, phenomenology and functionality and undoubtedly this is the book's strength. As the title suggests, the study was carried out through the lens of materiality and consideration of the manner in which artefacts might have been expected to shape human behaviour and experience. The outcome, though, is not always clear. How the scratch marks formerly conjectured to be tallies of some kind, affected social relations beyond those already considered by the protagonists is indistinct.

Nevertheless, several very useful illustrations depict the location of pieces of artwork around the base of shafts or within galleries and the suggestion is made that the art provides a separation of space. In a practical sense, of course, the galleries do this too and the art may simply represent supplementary processes involved by those engaged on flint extraction. In these locations, by its very nature, the art is applied post groundwork, that is, after space has been constructed and delineated. Whether casual or symbol laden it may be that Topping's (1997) term graffito better describes the relationship of art and its emplacement.

Undoubtedly, a phenomenological appreciation of the nature of shaft floors and galleries as space was obtained by the earlier excavators who had the experience of excavating lying on their stomach in a cramped space, but Teather usefully reminds us of the complexities of the architecture of the Cave shaft at Cissbury, where little consideration has been given to the architecture that included a blocked-up room (the cave) and galleries that appeared to double back beneath earlier ones. The nature of all this is difficult to fathom from the 19th-century accounts but, in all likelihood, the architecture represents successive events and given the descriptions, one is even led to consider hypogeum-like possibilities.

For sure, the nature of chalk as a material is little considered within an archaeological context, a little fine brushing with a toothbrush reveals minute foraminifera which even today can be difficult to comprehend, while anyone who crawls through a chalk mine knows just how quickly one is covered in white powder. Equally, the symbolism of colour and the malleability of the chalk, its subject to weathering, is not lost on a landscape archaeologist. Martin Green once suggested that chalk might have been quarried for use as paint. Here chalk blocks are seen as artefacts that, like the art, separate space, with an implication that those around the burial in shaft VI at Cissbury contained special properties beyond the merely functional. Investigation of the extent to which chalk blocks might have been carried beyond the downland and used in monuments or burials on other geologies might have provided some confirmation of this. Certainly sarsen appears to have had some significance as a material and was broken up and moved for considerable distances beyond its immediate surroundings. The discussion here though, turns to polissoirs and particularly those incorporated in the West Kennet long barrow chambers, which it is suggested, enhanced the meaning of the tomb by incorporating stones that exhibit evidence of grinding of axe-heads, a practice which may have been integral to the burial rite. There is, however, no indication that such practices occurred in the Cissbury burials, for the axe placed with the burial in Shaft VI was left unground.

The book aims to provide a typology, chronology and classification system for chalk artefacts. In providing a type list it is successful. Included are chalk axe-heads along with examples from non-flint mine contexts such as chalk beads and Folkton style drums, of which a non-decorated example was found in a pit at Lavant, north of Chichester. Not included though, is the striking 'shocked hair' carving used as a cover illustration and which was found in one of the ditches at the Whitehawk causewayed enclosure (cf. similar images on rock art at Alta and in some Carnac tombs), here interpreted as a carving of an ammonite.

Tying down chronology, however, is difficult given the longevity of some artefact types, nevertheless, here the study would have benefitted from comparison with the third millennium phased chalk objects from Stonehenge (Cleal *et al.* 1995, 399–407), while the whole suite of radiocarbon dates from Grimes Graves now available, improves chronology for artefacts from that site (Healy *et al.* 2014).

The new typology conflates some of Varndell's useful categories established at Grimes Graves. Whereas Varndell presents a typology or sub-division of cups, balls and work surfaces, the various categories are here simply listed. Of those from flint mines, none of these types rest on particularly large numbers, in the case of axe-heads just two and it may have been better to use artefacts from other sites on which to base typologies. Thus of cups, Varndell's useful four-fold division is reduced to one. Undoubtedly, cup marks on chalk blocks and cups that can potentially be used for

drinking need to be differentiated, as do the decorated examples from Windmill Hill. Analysis to detect whether they held oil or some other liquid would have been useful, although there is no mention of scorching or presence of soot to indicate that any were used as lamps.

Similarly of chalk balls; only 13 examples come from the mines and Varndell's two-fold division is reduced to one. It may have been better to preference the 29 from Windmill Hill (Smith 1965, 130–5) in determining whether there is subdivision. Several useful tables comparing the numbers of chalk artefacts from flint mines to other selected sites are present. Whether workers in the field opt for the new categorisation remains to be seen and it may have been better to add new groups, axes, beads, charms, cylinders and plaques, as distinct types to Varndell's system rather than dispense with it.

Traditional, science based analysis incorporating measurement and detailed treatment of, say, chalk cups may have informed us how the chalk was shaped, which tools were used, whether the chalk was potentially from the mine site or brought in from elsewhere, whether the artisan was left or right handed and more, and in doing so brought us closer to the individuals who made them. Somehow, the lens of materiality, while an interesting and thought provoking exercise, also provides a screen that appears to have masked sight of such objectives.

This is the author's doctoral thesis, presented with little change or amendment and consequently the volume follows the format often encountered in such reports that are prepared for a viva panel; numbered sections, repeated passages, etc., along with a chapter on theory. In this respect it is curious that the Foreword states that the author no longer agrees with the version of the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition presented!! A spell and grammar check, along with a tighter edit to eradicate repetition and to rectify afterthought, would have benefitted the volume and presented the reader with an altogether more embracing tome. Consequently, I suspect that unless you're a theory enthusiast, most readers will wish to cut to the chase and go directly to the assessment of the chalk artefacts themselves.

The primary stated aim is to critique prevailing interpretations of flint mines as a functional economic resource, although it should be noted that for almost two decades Peter Topping, in particular, but also this reviewer, have incorporated widespread ethnographic evidence and applied it to artefacts and deposits left in the flint mines (eg, Field 1997: Topping 1997: Topping & Lynott 2005). The question was posed at that time as to why it was necessary to mine for flint when it was so easily accessed from surface exposures, thus setting the ground for the non-economic explanations that followed. Consequently, alternative interpretations are now widely accepted across Europe and the US. While, the work here certainly serves to support their case, it also provides further insight into the manner in which the process of extracting chalk and flint was carried out.

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