

REVIEW OF / RECENSIÓN DE: Peter Topping. *Neolithic stone extraction in Britain and Europe. An ethnoarchaeological perspective*. Prehistoric Society Research Paper 12. Oxbow Books. Oxford, 2021, 178 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78925-705-2; 978-1-78925-706-9 (epub).

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This volume makes a significant and important contribution to the way we think about prehistoric flint and stone extraction sites. Most of Peter Topping's career was devoted to the study and recording of landscapes and upstanding monuments. His part in one such project, surveying English Neolithic flint mines and synthesising the evidence from them (Barber *et al.* 1999), prompted a strong interest in the ethnography of mining and quarrying and in its relevance to the understanding of prehistoric flint and stone extraction. This book is the culmination of years of research by one who, starting out as an autodidact in ethnography and archaeological theory, achieved considerable mastery of both.

His approach has been to identify recurrent patterns of behaviour, often spiritually- or symbolically-charged, among peoples who worked in recent or surviving traditional mines and quarries, to relate them to their material signatures, and to attempt to identify comparable material signatures in the archaeological record, from which beliefs and practices analogous to the ethnographically documented ones might be inferred.

The sample of 168 ethnographic studies is necessarily restricted to areas where traditional mining and quarrying survived recently enough to be recorded. Most are from North America, New Guinea, and Australia. The results distilled from them are related in detail to the archaeological record of eleven flint mines and nine stone axehead quarries in Britain and Ireland and more generally to that of extraction sites and their products across the rest of Europe.

The main characteristics noted from each ethnographic record were the following: the nature of the raw material, whether the stories or myths attached to the site, whether there was ownership or restricted access; whether exploitation was seasonal, the demographic composition of the miners, whether ritual was bound up with extraction and implement production,

the typology and functionality (or lack of it) of the products, whether craft specialists were involved, the distance over which products were distributed, the role of ceremony at the site, whether the sites were marked by graffiti or carvings, and whether people were buried there.

Some characteristics occurred frequently across the sample, regardless of location or cultural context. Most notable among these were ceremonial use of the sites, the participation of craft specialists, storied or mythological associations, ritualised extraction and/or tool production, seasonal use, distribution of products over distances of more than 200 km, ownership or other control over access, and male-only extraction teams. This alone indicates that comparable behaviours might be imputed to those who worked in Prehistoric mines and quarries. Even more significant is the extent to which these characteristics occurred together, with, for example, a strong correlation between storied or mythologised locations, all-male extraction teams, products that can have ritual uses as well as functional ones, the involvement of craft specialists, and supra-regional distributions.

Using this exercise to interpret the remains of prehistoric mining and quarrying necessitates defining archaeological correlates for the ethnographic characteristics. These range from the straightforward, as with the distances over which products were distributed, to the invisible, as with ownership or other restricted access. Some equations are more convincing than others. Among the strongest is the case for seeing mythic or storied locations in sites on locally prominent landforms, sometimes difficult to access and sometimes with raw material no better, or worse, than that which can be obtained more easily elsewhere.

Equally persuasive are the cases for seeing ritual and ceremony in non-functional placed deposits (including mining tools) and structures, burials, and carvings (whether portable or parietal), and for seeing the

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work of craft specialists in skilled mining techniques and in the quality of some products. Peter Topping takes the significant further step of inferring less visible behaviours from the more visible ones, on the basis of their correlations with those in the ethnographic sample. This provides, for example, a case for both ownership or restricted access and all-male extraction teams at storied or mythologised sites where craft specialists participate and from which products are widely distributed.

All the features pointing to significance beyond the functional come together in the case of Alpine jadeitites, of fine, distinctive raw material, obtained from remote and dangerous locations, worked with high craftsmanship far beyond functional necessity, distributed across Europe, and sometimes deposited in tombs or in other significant placements (Pétrequin *et al.* 2012). At first sight, one might argue that jadeitite is an exceptional case. But the same features can be identified, less conspicuously, for many other sources across the continent. Topping's work emphasises the long-apparent significance of axeheads as powerful, multi-valent symbols in the early Neolithic of Europe, as well as instruments of land clearance. Most importantly, it goes beyond this to provide insights into the way in which prehistoric mining teams and the communities to which they belonged thought and functioned. We are all in his debt.

I have some reservations: Topping's case for Mesolithic quarrying in Britain is supported by continental analogy and enthusiasm rather than solid evidence. His estimate of annual production at some British stone quarries is based only on those products that have been identified petrologically (many have not been) and on very few radiocarbon dates. From a wider viewpoint, it would have been good to view mines and quarries, however briefly, as part of the full, wide spectrum of stone and flint procurement and in the context of the settlement record. A sustained emphasis on the symbolic, extra-functional aspects of mining and quarrying creates, probably inadvertently, a dichotomy between these and the practical, economic aspects of the process, the products, and the needs they filled. I would be willing to bet good money that these would have been indivisible for the prehistoric peoples concerned, as they seem to have been for the recent traditional societies on whom the work is based.

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