It has long been the convention in reporting archaeological fieldwork to organize the descriptions of artefacts according to the kinds of material of which they were made. Thus lithic artefacts are presented separately from those of bone, and metalwork occupies a different part of the publication from finds of pottery. The result is a neutral description influenced by a system of classification quite similar to those employed in botany or natural history. Another approach is to group together items that may have played a role in similar activities: activities such as craft production, cooking, food consumption or hunting. Only rarely do these publications adopt a more radical procedure.

That seems odd at a time when more emphasis is being placed on the subject that has become known as ‘materiality’. New studies concern the special nature of stone as a building material, or as the surface on which prehistoric paintings or carvings were made. In the same way, it is widely acknowledged that in the ancient world metals were worked by techniques that possessed something of the qualities of magic. Despite these initiatives, specialists still describe the methods by which ancient people worked ‘raw material’, as if the materials themselves lacked any significance until they had assumed their finished forms as artefacts. Such a functional approach is at odds with a growing awareness of the social significance of prehistoric technologies.


Richard Bradley


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The book by Chantal Conneller examines the role of materials in prehistoric societies and offers a fresh perspective on how artefacts were made and used. It challenges the conventional approach of organizing archaeological descriptions by material type and instead focuses on the functional and social aspects of materials. The book underscores the importance of understanding the materials themselves, not just as raw materials but as integral parts of the societies that produced them. It is an excellent resource for teaching and for courses in environmental archaeology, demonstrating the complementarity of geological, botanical, and zoological data sets. It is an obvious fit for courses in Environmental Archaeology, nicely illustrating the utility and complementarity of these different disciplines.
An Archaeology of Materials tackles these problems head on through a detailed analysis of a series of objects which date from the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods in Europe. The subtitle is important, for it does not refer to artefact production or technology. Instead it highlights the importance of ‘substantial transformations’. In doing so it allies itself with recent research on the importance of animism among hunter-gatherers, past and present.

Conneller is the author of an influential paper on the interpretation of Star Carr, where she is now conducting fieldwork. Its title was both arresting and revealing: ‘Becoming deer’. It discussed the ways in which human identities could have merged with those of the animals they were hunting. The new book develops this important insight through a study of the artefacts associated with the last hunter-gatherers. It does not neglect the techniques by which these artefacts were formed, but it places a special emphasis on the substances of which they were made.

After a useful but complex discussion entitled ‘Making material matter’, Conneller returns to her earlier work on Star Carr and discusses the use of antler as a raw material. She considers the paradox that a material derived from an animal’s body was made into tools with which to hunt prey belonging to the same species. That contrasts with the use of ivory in the Upper Palaeolithic period. This material would have had one set of connotations in regions where mammoths were being hunted, but quite different ones where they were unfamiliar and few people had encountered them. Here other connections were more important than their association with hunting. Fossil ivory might be used to imitate the appearance of shells or teeth which would have suggested a different relationship between artefacts and the living world. This is an important point as it emphasizes the importance of specific local practices and the fragility of the general models of hunter-gatherer perceptions of the world which have been favoured in social anthropology.

Rather similar arguments apply to stone, a material which has lent itself to many studies based on experimental replication. While these approaches have proved their value, Conneller shows that there are dimensions to their analysis that are seldom considered. There is the importance attached to the shape of the nodule before it was flaked. There is the rarely discussed practice of drawing images on the cortex — images that were broken up and dispersed once the stone was worked — and there are the extinct creatures embedded in the material itself in the form of fossils that were exposed and even displayed.

These are simply examples taken from a rich body of case studies, but they come together in the final chapter in a more detailed analysis of the importance of animism in studies of the past. Conneller is especially alert to the less usual properties of ancient materials, of which their lustrous appearance is particularly important. This is too rarely discussed despite the fact that the distinctive properties of amber, gold and jet are frequently considered in studies of later periods of prehistory. By engaging with the specific details of Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic technology, Conneller provides an interesting alternative to more general models based on cognitive evolution. It is her attention to the detail of ancient objects — a concern which she obviously shares with the people who made them — that gives these studies their depth. They endow the study of portable artefacts with a richness that is often lacking from archaeological writing. The result is a fascinating book. Her presentation is concentrated but lucid, and the text is supplemented by appropriate figures and a useful bibliography that runs to twenty pages of small print. It is to be recommended not only to people who study the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods, but to those engaged in research on later phases.

An Archaeology of Materials is the first book in a new series, ‘Routledge Studies in Archaeology’. It was a good choice, but, if this volume is at all typical, there may be problems with the format. Conneller’s study is unusually short and absurdly expensive, and both these factors may deter potential readers and even libraries from acquiring it. It would be a pity. I am sure that it would have more impact had it been issued as a paperback at a fraction of the price — there are plenty of precedents. In this case, the book itself is a winner, but the publisher appears to have scored an own goal.

Richard Bradley
Department of Archaeology
University of Reading
Whiteknights
Reading
RG6 2AA
UK
Email: r.j.bradley@reading.ac.uk