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## Book Review

PIERRE PÉTREQUIN, SERGE CASSEN, MICHEL ERRERA, LUTZ KLASSEN, ALISON SHERIDAN & ANNE-MARIE PÉTREQUIN (ed.). *JADE. Grandes haches alpines du Néolithique européen. Ve et IVe millénaires av. J.-C.* 1520 pages, 944 colour and 177 b&w illustrations. 2012. Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté; Gray: Centre de Recherche Archéologique de la Vallée de l'Ain; 978-2-84867-412-4 hardback 2 volumes, €120.

### Review by Gabriel Cooney

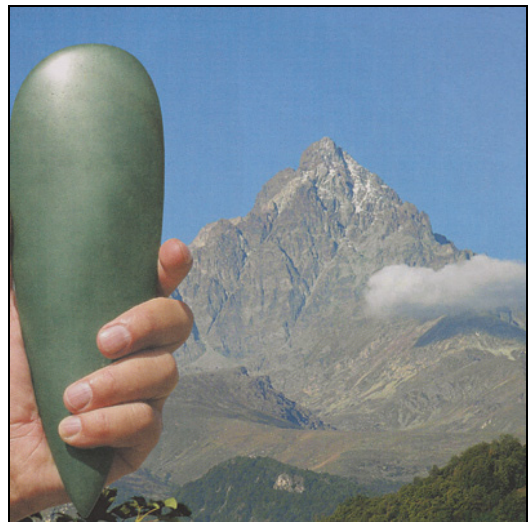
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An archaeologist mentioning to a colleague that one of their research interests is stone axeheads is likely to be met with a bemused, patient look, even from those who are interested in the societies that produced such objects! The fact that axeheads occur in very large numbers and are often regarded as without archaeological context, unless found on a site or during an excavation, has strengthened the perceived difficulties of getting a handle on stone axeheads. This book demonstrates conclusively the enormous potential of stone axe studies when applied in the innovative and comprehensive manner that Pierre Pétrequin and his international team of colleagues have taken. It helps of course that they are dealing with jade (jadeite, omphacite and eclogite) axeheads of Alpine origin. It is the enduring attraction of this rock and its qualities when transformed into axeheads—its luminosity, translucence and ability to take a spectacular polish—that are at the heart of this seminal book and the new perspective it provides on Neolithic Europe in the fifth and fourth millennia BC.

The authors provide a very succinct view of their achievement (p. 1431). By taking a pan-European approach they have demonstrated that in this period jade axeheads over 13.5cm in length were moved over distances up to 2000km from their quarry sites. The source areas were the Alpine massifs of Mont Viso and Mont Beigua in north-west Italy. From here the Neolithic networks of movement and contact, as seen in the material evidence of these long axeheads and their reworking and interplay with other objects, stretched from the Atlantic in the west to the Black Sea in the east. But that summary does not really capture the extraordinary research commitment and achievement of *Projet JADE* (2007–2009), and the work that led up to it over a period of 15 years, in transforming our understanding of the social role and significance of Alpine jade axeheads.

It is, however, clearly reflected in the 1500 pages of this very well-illustrated and presented text. The book is divided into 5 parts and 29 chapters. These are mostly in French with an extended English abstract. The first part deals with the exciting identification of different sources of Alpine jade, particularly in the Mont Viso massif where five important primary sources have been identified by the authors at heights of between 1500 and 2400m. Test excavation here indicates that quarrying began around 5500 cal BC and interpretation of axe production was aided by experimental work. Petrographic thin-sectioning, X-ray diffraction and spectroradiometry were key tools in identifying and characterising the raw materials and in reinforcing the particularly important role of Mont Viso. The second part discusses how the application of these techniques allied to the description, morphological and contextual analysis of over 1700 axeheads (and the description of a further 2500) were used as the basis for a typo-chronology of the large Alpine axeheads in western Europe during the fifth millennium BC. This distinguished 15 different types, some of which, including the highly polished jadeite 'Carnac type' axeheads from around the Gulf of Morbihan, Brittany, had been transformed and repolished to serve regional stylistic requirements. The discussion is developed in the third part by looking at the impact of the Alpine axeheads through their further circulation and the imitation of their form in different lithologies. Included in the fourth part is another key discovery: the eastward movement of jadeite, omphacite and eclogite axeheads as far as Bulgaria in the middle of the fifth millennium BC. This adds an important new element to a theme running through the book, that is, at this time (4600–3700 BC) two Europes can be recognised—a jade Europe in the west and a copper (and gold) Europe to the east. It is



argued that contacts between these largely geographically separate zones can be seen not only in the eastern distribution of Alpine axeheads but also in two-way flow of influence in form between copper and jade axeheads. The final part of the book provides a general *résumé* and data on the associations of Alpine axeheads in western Europe.

The authors argue that these axeheads would have been viewed as 'object-signs': powerful, sacred things held and used by men to demonstrate both their social status and their ability to communicate with the supernatural. The jade axeheads were moved long distances by inter-elite direct exchange, alongside more localised exploitation and movement of a wide range of lithologies. Their power resided in the very familiarity of the axehead as an everyday tool and in being made from an unusual, rare rock, procured close to the highest point of the southern Alps whose manufacture and movement required very considerable human investment. The deliberate deposition of roughouts at the quarries, the placement of axeheads in hoards, in special locations and in graves can be seen as indicating their symbolic charge and sacred character.

One can concur with the authors that there is something remarkable about the distribution and context of these objects across Europe. I wonder, however, whether their 'grand narrative' view, based to some extent on the evidence from southern Brittany, sufficiently explains the reception, social roles and deposition of large Alpine axeheads over a millennium and in a wide range of cultural contexts. Here it is worth returning to the ethnoarchaeological perspective that informs the book. This is based on Pierre and Anne-Marie Pétrequin's 21 years of fieldwork in New Guinea. This perspective provided the model for approaching the identification of the sources of the Alpine axeheads. But it also documented the rich tapestry of the active social lives of axeheads in New Guinea, interpreted in terms of local beliefs and rituals. There is an underlying assumption that jade axeheads were deliberately imitated in different lithologies in Neolithic Europe. But some of the axeheads from New Guinea illustrated in the book show a strong similarity to the typo-chronological forms of the Neolithic jade axeheads. This suggests that we should be cautious in seeing deliberate imitation of jade axeheads as the only reason that similar forms occur in other lithologies at the same time in Neolithic Europe.

But at this point I can see that bemused look starting to appear in the reader's eye! These are really points that should be considered in the spirit of the further work and research that this truly important book will inspire. What would be immediately useful is a follow-up text that distils and makes more widely available the results of this remarkable project.

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