AXE-HEADS AND IDENTITY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ROLES OF IMPORTED AXE-HEADS IN IDENTITY FORMATION IN NEOLITHIC BRITAIN BY KATHARINE WALKER

Archaeopress, Oxford. 2018. 355pp; 142 colour and black & white figs, pb, ISBN 9781784917449, £40.00

This very timely volume is derived from Katharine Walker’s PhD research into stone and flint axe-heads imported into the British Isles from continental Europe during the Neolithic period. The book is much more than a catalogue, and is full of ideas which include consideration of the roles that axes played in ‘identity’ formation from the onset, and throughout, the Neolithic period. It also highlights the importance of context for imported axes in terms of establishing when they arrived and the difficulties which have arisen from uncertainty over their origins, sometimes as a result of deceit.

The book is divided into eight chapters which are followed by a series of appendices. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 establish the background and provide the wider context for the author’s research. The opening chapter usefully sets out the background to stone axe studies, research questions and methodology used for the project, as well as explaining terminology and acronyms used by stone axe specialists. In outlining the development of stone axe studies the author makes the valid point that too many previous studies have separated flint from stone axe-heads, thereby creating a false division.

The second chapter reviews the changing approaches to the study of objects and identity since the culture historical model of the 1930s to the more recent considerations of ‘object biography’, summarizing the results from ProjetJADE to highlight its importance for Walker’s theoretical and material starting point.

Chapter 3 considers the ‘afterlives’ of axe-heads in the time since the Neolithic period, from re-working into other forms such as arrowheads in the Early Bronze Age through to the much more serious problem with establishing the provenance of many antiquarian and museum pieces which have been exchanged and relabelled over the years; usually as a consequence of innocent mistakes, but sometimes as a result of deliberate forgery.

Chapters 4 to 7 form the core of the authors’ analysis, which includes the study of axes from two continental sources, polished marbled flint axes, and rectangular sectioned axes. Chapter 4 commences with a discussion of the earliest Neolithic Alpine axe-heads which are found across
Western Europe and which have been studied in great detail and published by Pierre Pétrequin and the project team (Pétrequin et al. 2012). The study in this volume is significant because in Britain Alpine axes have been the focus for discussions of the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition period. The chapter examines context for each of the British examples, using GIS and HER data to consider their locations and relationships between artefact scatters and sites of Mesolithic and Neolithic date. This approach is a useful way of contextualising find-spots, although some caution may be needed, as from personal experience, Mesolithic artefacts can be underrepresented in HER data. The author concludes by supporting the association of Alpine axes with the arrival of people at the start of the Neolithic. Chapter 5 reviews the evidence for the Group X dolerite axes which are sourced to central Brittany. Only a small number of these Breton dolerite axe-heads (as well as those of fibrolite) are recorded in Britain although the author makes it clear that there has never been a systematic search for them, and more may therefore await identification.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the very visually distinctive all over ground, marbled looking flint axe-heads, which are often highly polished. However, no corpus for these axes has been compiled before and the flint source from which they are made has not been identified. Indeed, in the past it has been debated whether they were imported from Scandinavia. The author coins the term ‘Crudwell-Smerrick to cover, what until now, has not been considered as a unitary group. Walker forwards the possibility that they may have been made from a source off the coast of Lincolnshire and suggests that their distribution around Britain reflects their circulation by boat, especially along the North Sea coastline. Despite having indigenous origins, the author does argue that their thinness and distinctive appearance is likely to mean that they were socially prestigious items which may well have been contemporary with the marbled Danish axes dating to the centuries in the middle fourth millennium cal BC.

Chapter 7 reviews the finds of rectangular sectioned flint axe-heads, which resemble those from Denmark, the Netherlands and northern Germany. Many of the examples in museum collections appear to be much later historic imports and do not have a Neolithic context. Indeed, the author undertakes an interesting piece of detective work on the axe-head from Julliberrie’s grave long barrow in Kent, which indicates that it may well have been planted during the excavations when the site director was away. Walker argues that few of the earlier Neolithic thin butted axes can be regarded as true Scandinavian prehistoric imports, although she suggests that the later thick butted axes were brought to Britain during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age period as part of a suite of exotic items.

Chapter 8, the final concluding section reviews the evidence from the preceding chapters, puts forward an outline sequence for the importation (and influence) of continental axe-heads and considers their wider context, suggesting shifting concepts of how social ‘identity’ associated with axes changed over the course of the Neolithic. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of
imported axe-heads (119) are of Alpine rock and date to the Early Neolithic, when axes are likely to have been central to social ‘identity’. Comparatively few imported axes are made from other sources of stone and although some British axe-heads appear to have been influenced by Scandinavian forms, there are few certain imports of Middle Neolithic date. Significantly, no imports are of Late Neolithic date, when ‘identities’ may have become much more insular. It is only in the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age that a larger range of exotic materials and artefacts appear again in the British archaeological record.

Approximately half of the volume is taken up by the seven appendices which provide the data which sits behind the core chapters of the book. These are valuable, for example showing the location of all known published Alpine axe-heads in Britain and tables of Group X and ‘Crudwell-Smerrick’ type axes.

The volume is exceptionally well illustrated with artefact drawings, maps, diagrams, and photographs. The overwhelming majority work well, although a few lack sharpness and in a couple of cases, for example Figure 4.13, are blurred. They do not, however, detract from the look of the book, which overall is very good.

Despite ProjetJADE and Cooney and Mandel’s (1998) Irish stone axe project, stone axe-head research, in Britain at least, has with a few exceptions (for example, Davis and Edmonds 2011) been neglected since the publication of *Stone Axe Studies II* (Clough and Cummins 1988) in the 1980s and Bradley and Edmonds (1993) ground breaking work at Great Langdale in the 1990s. There has also been a lack of consideration of both flint and polished stone axe-heads together, or a reconsideration of the identification of pieces held in museum collections. This book therefore makes a significant contribution by helping to redress these imbalances by providing an in-depth review of the evidence for the importation of axes and the changing social contexts of their use, and importantly by addressing the problems with the identification of many axes. If in places, the structure of the volume is a bit thesis like, it more than makes up for this by providing a much needed lively consideration and review of these imported axe-heads in the context of both the British Neolithic and their continental background.

In conclusion, I enjoyed reading this volume and would very much recommend it to anyone with an interest in stone axe-heads and the social context of artefacts in the Neolithic.

References


*Andy M Jones*

*Cornwall Archaeological Unit, Truro*

Review submitted: August 2019

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*