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## Review: New Approaches to Old Stones: Recent Studies of Ground Stone Artifacts

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Space precludes detailed discussion of the remaining papers, which summarize current ideas about monuments (Cummings), ceramics (Woodward) and foodways (Schulting, Mulville), although Mulville's paper on later prehistory suggests that despite an abundance of palaeoenvironmental evidence there remains a lack of understanding of many aspects of economic practice. Perhaps we need to think more about the questions being framed in these areas of archaeological science and how to integrate them with the types of narrative exemplified by many of the other papers.

The book provides important insights into the major interpretative themes in current academic discussions of British prehistory. Inevitably there are gaps, including some of the issues raised by Pollard in the introduction, such as conflict and violence (p. 13). Another is the contemporary practice of archaeology. Pollard sees a *rapprochement* between the 'two cultures' of academic and field archaeology (pp. 12–13), but this seems a little optimistic at a time when working locally has low academic prestige in the UK and commercial archaeology continues to generate quantities of undigested data in the form of 'grey literature'. Other pressures on the prehistoric resource, such as arable cultivation or the desiccation of wetland sites, are not mentioned. While such topics may not be thought appropriate for volumes like this, present material conditions are not irrelevant to academic discussion. As Giles states in an apt conclusion to the volume, we should be able 'to explore how *we* are constituted in part through this engagement with the past' (p. 345). She also provides a partial answer to the question I posed at the start: while landscapes formed arenas for the negotiation of identities we nevertheless have to be wary of approaches founded in 'geographic essentialism' (pp. 344–5). Britain's insular character may be relevant at some narrative scales but such generalizations will only get us so far, as shown by the rich diversity of prehistoric inhabitation, identities and practices revealed in these essays.

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Anthony P. Graesch

*New Approaches to Old Stones* is an important edition to Equinox's 'Approaches to Anthropological Archaeology' series. Editors Yorke Rowan and Jennie Ebeling have compiled a corpus of case studies and methodological papers addressing one of the most neglected data sets generated with archaeological investigations — ground-stone artefacts. An outgrowth of symposia hosted by the Annual Meetings of the American Schools of Oriental Research, this volume organizes the ground-stone-related research of 31 scholars into 22 short but insightful chapters, including an introductory chapter by the editors and a closing discussion by Jane Peterson.

Often relegated to the appendices of site reports and dissertations, ground-stone artefacts are seldom the focus of theoretically substantive archaeological research. As the editors elaborate in the introduction, a tradition of analytic neglect is perpetuated by several commonly assumed characteristics of ground-stone assemblages, including low artefact abundance, low typological variability and a functional association with simple domestic food-processing tasks. There is also the issue of the otherwise functionally ambiguous yet all-encompassing label 'ground stone', which may refer to how an object was made or how it was used. Generalized as such, the descriptor 'ground stone' may refer to objects used for activities as varied as woodworking, polishing stone, storing libations, slicing fish, or grinding maize. Indeed, given how the term has been used in the broader archaeological literature, a pan-regional assemblage of ground-stone artefacts might include nephrite chisels from the Columbian Plateau, ground slate knives from the central Pacific Northwest Coast, white stone vases from the Yucatán, alabastra from Anatolia, andesite grinding slabs from Çatalhöyük and manos (or handstones) from the northern Mojave Desert.

Contributors to this volume do not advocate censorship of classificatory practices pertaining to ground-stone artefacts, but rather collectively challenge and debase an implicit assumption that ground-stone assemblages are less useful than their chipped stone and pottery counterparts for pursuing anthropologically significant questions. This challenge comes in the form of no fewer than 20 papers, each of which presents an innovative analysis of regionally specific data sets. Combined, the chapters of this volume feature some of the most recent advances in ground-stone research from around the world, including studies addressing the Aegean, western Anatolia, the southern Levant,

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Mesopotamia, Egypt, southeastern Australia, the American Southwest, the northern Mojave Desert, the Great Basin and Mesoamerica. Equally impressive is the broad diachronic framework in which ground-stone studies are situated; contributing authors examine the behavioural implications of ground-stone artefacts in the late Pleistocene, the Neolithic, the Early Bronze Age, the Formative and Classic periods in Mesoamerica and the Pueblo III and IV periods in the American Southwest, among others.

The editors have divided the volume into three broadly thematic sections: 'Production and Exchange', 'Interpreting Function, Primary vs Secondary Use', and 'Symbols of Luxury and Ritual Equipment'. While the title of each section accurately captures key elements of the papers contained within, book shoppers should be aware that most individual chapters explore substantive issues relevant to at least two and sometimes all three themes as well as a myriad of other interesting subjects. Below, I highlight only some of these topics.

### Political economy

In several areas of this volume readers are encouraged to reexamine the uncritical yet common association of ground-stone technology with only domestic food-processing tasks. Indeed, some of the volume's contributors (e.g. Tristan Carter, Ch. 4; R. Thomas Schaub, Ch. 17; C.H. Roosevelt, Ch. 18; Christina Luke, Ch. 19) explore the social and ritual significance of objects that, although used to store food or libations, were likely regarded as prized possessions and conferred some measure of prestige to their owners. The conspicuous display of finely manufactured objects – sometimes acquired through long-distance exchange and often the focus of specialized craft production – is a strategy shared by elites in intermediate and state-level societies alike. In this regard, these chapters explore how patterns inherent in the production, exchange, consumption and ritual deposition of ground-stone objects can provide as important insights into social hierarchies and political economy as those gleaned from studies of ceramics and chipped stone.

### Foodways

In other chapters, we are reminded that ground-stone objects sometimes are associated with past foodways and as such offer important analytic windows onto the organization of food selection, preparation and consumption. Martin Biskowski (Ch. 9) compellingly demonstrates how metate attributes can be linked to tool production and transport costs and in turn used to track the emergence of specialized maize preparation at Teotihuacan. In Chapter 13, Mark Basgall explores how the abundance and distribution of metates and handstones can be used to examine resource utilization and intensification strategies among foragers in the northern Mojave Desert. In Chapter 16, Renee Kolvet uses seed grinding equipment to consider the organization of late Pleistocene women's spaces and foraging decisions in the Great Basin.

### *Chaîne opératoire* and methods

Many of the contributed chapters also consider how ground-stone objects reflect on the social context of craft and tool production and (as a whole) this collection of recent research makes apparent that scholars are increasingly concerned with the *chaîne opératoire* of specific technologies. Several contributors, for example, address the significance of ground-stone quarries and quarrying techniques to the analysis of exchange networks, labour organization, mobility and intensity of production (e.g. Joan Schneider & Philip LaPorta, Ch. 2; James Harrell & V. Max Brown, Ch. 3; Yael Abadi-Reiss & Steven Rosen, Ch. 6; Ianir Milevski, Ch. 7; David Amit, Jon Seligman & Irina Zilberbod, Ch. 20). Others consider the importance of production decisions as they relate to raw material colour (Carter, Ch. 4; Luke, Ch. 19) and texture (Schneider & LaPorta, Ch. 2; Harrell & Brown, Ch. 3), and still others examine the use, reuse and intentional discard of specific classes of ground-stone objects (e.g. Jenny Adams, Ch. 14). Ethnography features prominently in many of these studies.

Other important methodological contributions can be found throughout the volume. These include archaeological and ethnographic studies of wear patterns on grinding and craft-production equipment (Martha Valado, Ch. 11; Harold Liebowitz, Ch. 12) as well as ground-stone residue analyses (Richard Fullagar, Judith Field & Lisa Kealhofer, Ch. 10). In a well-written and data-packed paper, Seiji Kadowaki (Chapter 15) articulates the analysis of ground-stone assemblages with the study of built domestic environments, activity areas and site-formation processes. Kadowaki's study is particularly noteworthy in that it maximizes explanatory power by drawing from a range of archaeological assemblages (e.g. shells, charcoal, architectural features, etc.) and not relying solely on a narrow subset of technological data.

### Final comments

In sum, *New Approaches to Old Stones* is a 'must read' for archaeologists who regularly make ground-stone objects the focus of their research, but also for archaeologists who have yet to grapple with analyses of these informative assemblages. There is a long-standing archaeological tradition of privileging other categories of material culture over ground stone, and readers are reminded of this analytic bias in several areas of the volume. As such, the onus of demonstrating the relevance of ground-stone studies to theoretically substantive research falls firmly on the shoulders of the volume's contributors. However, not all come through in this regard and despite methodological contributions many readers may find themselves less engaged with some descriptive chapters that falter in connecting regionally specific datasets to questions of broader anthropological concern. Nevertheless, the chapters that make these connections far outnumber those that do not, and readers will be hard-pressed to find as wide a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of ground stone in a single volume. Further, nearly all of the chapters include numerous photographs and illustrations of ground-stone artefacts, scores of data-rich tables and graphs and copious

maps — all of which is remarkable in light of recent ‘minimize and synthesize’ trends by publishers of archaeology edited volumes.

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*Nukak: Ethnoarchaeology of an Amazonian People*,  
by Gustavo Politis, 2007, translated by Benjamin Alberto.  
Walnut Creek (CA): Left Coast Press; ISBN 978-1-59874-  
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paperback £24 & US\$32; 411 pp., 108 figs., 24 tables

### Michael Heckenberger

This volume is the first detailed ethnoarchaeological study of a small foraging Amazonian people. It is based on in-depth fieldwork conducted over seven episodes (1990–96) among the Nukak of the Northwest Amazon (Columbia). The book is based on his Spanish publication (*Nukak*, Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones Científicas, 1996), but substantially revised and expanded with fresh data and interpretations. It explores diverse ethnographic aspects of the local culture, sociality and history, but from the unique vantage point of an archaeologist focused on basic settlement, subsistence and techno-economic patterns of this small and highly mobile society.

The indigenous histories of Amazonian peoples are among the least known of any major world area and studies of the region’s past are still overshadowed by highly generalized characterizations and stereotypes. This is slowly changing, as in-depth archaeological studies are conducted across the region. Likewise, recent studies in ethnoarchaeology have made important strides forward in recent decades, but are still far less developed than other world areas, despite the cultural persistence of many traditional Amerindian peoples. This work is an important step in filling this lacuna.

Chapter One provides a thorough summary of the history and ecology of the culturally diverse Northwest Amazon region. The region is well known in Amazonian studies and is a unique case of ethnic and linguistic pluralism, including cultural interactions between the foraging Maku peoples, such as the Nukak, and more populous agriculturalists of river settings, speaking Arawak and Tukanoan languages.

In Chapter Two, ‘Theory and Methods: Ethics and Techniques’, the author provides a balanced view of previous work in ethnoarchaeology and indigenous history in Amazonia. Importantly, he provides a thoughtful discussion of ethics, including responding to critiques regarding the

competence and motives of archaeologists describing living cultures. He notes, for instance, a quip by a colleague: why should archaeologists ‘go and trouble the living Indians in order to understand what happened to the dead ones’ (p. 72)? In fact, many indigenous groups are especially interested in studies that document their heritage and lifeways, notably participatory mapping of their lands and settlement histories, which have very real implications for cultural property rights.

Hunter-gatherers, the author notes, are neither ‘absurd and obsolete derivations of evolutionary theory’ nor purely artefacts of colonial domination. There are no ‘pristine’ foragers, he agrees, but it is possible to identify groups whose economy and sociopolitical organization are located within the broad category of hunter-gatherers. Locally, there is good reason to believe that many of the patterns witnessed by the author are indeed traditional. Nonetheless, characterization of the Nukak as ‘the last undiscovered people of the Amazon,’ on the back cover, does play into shopworn stereotypes.

Throughout the book, Politis clearly represents new trends in ethnoarchaeology, which transcend traditional paradigms of processual *vs* post-processual and general *vs* historical analogy. In Chapter Three, for instance, he bridges traditional interests in formation processes research with the common interests of direct historical studies, including sociality, ritual and cosmology. In this vein, his treatment of sociopolitical and cosmological factors and how they relate to settlement and subsistence patterns, such as food taboos, inter-group relations, and special habitation structures (e.g. the ‘house of the tapir,’ an ancestor spirit), provides a particularly nuanced view of the diverse relations between human groups and nature in the Amazon. As he notes: ‘living space is linked both to ecological and material factors and to cosmology and the tapestry of social life’ (p. 129) even in this small-scale, highly mobile and technologically simple society.

Ethnographic studies have long neglected material culture, as the author notes, citing Malinowski’s criticism of the techno-economic focus of Boasian and German ethnological camps (p. 188). But, while some may think that the mundane details of technology and discard are things that only an archaeologist could love, early material culture studies stand as singular testimony of traditional material culture, which is slipping away before our eyes. Much recent attention has been directed toward the documentation of endangered languages, but what about human bodies, their culturally specific movements and operations in structured space, and their unique products? There is no similar ‘call to arms’ to rally archaeologists to rush out and document these things that are disappearing even more rapidly in many cases than the spoken word.

In this regard, *Nukak* is in a class of its own in the broad northwest Amazon. If it were not for studies such as his, the rich ethnographic record of these mundane aspects of life would pass into history without any ethnographic description. Further, what are ritual and everyday dispositions if not forms of communication, providing means that structure and reproduce human experience? Objects, such as gifts and token of welcome, the communicative value of