Book Reviews

edited by Francis Wenban-Smith


When confronted with my first lithic assemblage to record and measure I recall looking through the available literature to find the best method for the task. I soon discovered that different people record assemblages in different ways, or else completely fail to explain the methods that they have used. Had Professor Andrefsky’s book been on hand then it would have saved me much confusion and time, for in it he explains in detail the many different ways that can be used to record, study and interpret lithic assemblages.

The book can be divided roughly into three sections. It commences with an introduction to the history of lithic studies and then defines the basic terminology used in lithic analysis. Sections on stone fracture mechanics and raw materials summarise how various rocks are formed, how to identify them and which can best be used for knapping. The second part of the book deals with the basic techniques that can be used to analyse an assemblage. Here typologies are explained and statistical methods for creating them explored. Andrefsky explains his own simple typology based on morphology, this could be used as a starting point for sorting out any assemblage. Following chapters deal with flakedebitage and tools, explaining the many different techniques that can be used to study an assemblage ranging from understanding the core reduction processes to measuringdebitage, quantifying retouch and looking for evidence for hafting. The final part of the book explains how the information gleaned from the study of an assemblage can be used to determine a site’s function. The last chapter examines case studies where links between Prehistoric sedentism and artefact variability have been claimed.

Andrefsky makes it clear that this book is not a "cook book" of how to analyse a lithic assemblage. He emphasises that the many different methods explained can all be deployed to analyse an assemblage, however, which methods are used must be determined by the nature of the site and the specific questions needing answering. The final chapter provides the reader with a cautionary warning about the need to look broadly at assemblages before making statements about the nature of a site. The causes of artefact variability are complex and linked to the changing dynamics of both manufacturing technologies and tool use, and variability in the availability, quality and characteristics of the different raw materials used, as well as being affected by modern interpretations defining single or multiple function tools.

This book certainly fills an important gap in our libraries. In one volume it explains many methods for the study and use of macroscopic stone tool analysis to interpret excavated sites and some surface assemblages. It is an excellent reference book. The book continually draws upon and credits the work of many lithic analysts, particularly those in North America as well those working in related fields such as geochemistry and microwear. The difficulty, however, with the book, for those of us working outside North America is the use of terminology that has different meanings elsewhere. Despite care being taken to define terms in the text, it would have been good to see some of the same definitions used in the book’s glossary. For instance, the term microlith is applied in its literal sense to small blades or tools in North America, whereas in Europe it is used to define a specific tool type. Another problem with the book is the lack of explanation of the statistical methods deployed in the later chapters. Here interpretations of analysed assemblages frequently quote results of comparisons between different measurements as formulae without actually explaining how the calculations are obtained. I felt that this contradicts Andrefsky’s warnings about ensuring that when an analytical method is used that it is always clearly explained to enable comparisons to be drawn with other assemblages that have been recorded in the same way.

Notwithstanding my few minor quibbles Andrefsky’s book satisfies the requirements of any good manual by outlining the processes clearly and summarising potential applications and drawbacks to methods impartially, without stating that one method is better than another. This is an extremely useful reference book and must join the others in the Cambridge Manuals in Archaeology series on all University reading lists. It is also essential reading for professional lithic analysts.

Elizabeth A. Walker, Department of Archaeology & Numismatics, National Museums & Galleries of Wales, Cardiff