The search for the source of Group I

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Ever since the second report of the implement petrology committee the source of the material used to manufacture Group I Neolithic axes has been identified as Mounts Bay in Cornwall. Greenstone outcrops are known to be morphologically and mineralogically different, even within the same outcrop, and geochemical methods readily available to counteract these differences require the partial or total destruction of the implement. Development of X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) techniques and equipment, however, now mean that geochemical analysis can be undertaken without damaging the artefact in any way whatsoever. The project aims to use non-destructive XRF analysis along with measurements of magnetic susceptibility (also by non-destructive means) and a review of existing petrological thin sections, to create a database of artefacts which can then be matched with a similar database from outcrops of greenstone found in southwest England.

A review of petrological thin sections of both axes and outcrops (Penzance, Pauloe, Trenow and Cudden Point on the south coast and Gurnards Head and Zennor on the north) has been undertaken. A simple graphical plot, based on the presence/absence of Pyroxene and Plagioclase feldspar showed a distinct trend for the axes with the degree of alteration for both minerals being related. However, thin sections from the outcrops were not distributed within the axe results, suggesting the material collected from the outcrops was not a match.

The KT-9 portable magnetic susceptibility meter was demonstrated on three Group I axes held by the National Museum of Wales. Results from other Group I axes held at The Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, suggest a reading of between 0.5 to 1.2 on the KT-9 could be expected. Of the three Group I axes tested, Denbighshire 8 (52.177) gave readings of 2.9 to 3.5; Glamorgan 85 (66.215) gave readings of 0.06, and Glamorgan 11 (28.458/89) gave readings of 0.7 to 0.8. These readings suggest that the three Group I axes are distinct.

The project does not aim to recategorise Group I implements but aims to provide data to substantiate the origin of the greenstone used in the manufacture of Group I axes. It hopes to settle the debate as to whether the Group originated from Mounts Bay or not.

BOOK REVIEWS

Raiders of the lost part


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Fairweather Eden is a dramatised account of what is now over 15 years of research directed by Mark Roberts at the Lower Palaeolithic site of Boxgrove. The book tracks the Boxgrove project from its origins as an undergraduate dissertation in 1982-3 to its final glorious fling in the summers of 1995 and 1996, when almost half a million pounds was spent by English Heritage (Tim Tatton-Brown please note) carrying out a major research excavation in the part of the site where Roger Pedersen had found a massive hominid find in autumn 1993. According to the book jacket "It is a tale of vision, determination and ultimate triumph of a fight against the odds to rescue a unique palaeoanthropological site and to overturn established academic opinions". The book continues throughout in an unashamedly populist tone, Mills & Book meets Indiana Jones; "it was a huge big bone", test-pits are "banged in", academic ripostes are "banged out", Greg Bell walked around "crunching his heavy black boots", Lucy Gibbons "runs her hand through her short dark hair", the sun "fired a thin horizontal sliver of crumpled gold foil", to name a few instances. To be fair, the book is squarely aimed at a popular market, rather than the academic one thirsting for more detailed publication of the work at Boxgrove. However the academics won't have to wait much longer for reports on the early Boxgrove years, with a paper in the forthcoming volume of PPS (Roberts et al. 1997) and an English Heritage monograph in the pipeline. As for the more spectacular discoveries of recent years, such as the horse-kills and butchery site, the hominid remains and the other percussors, the academic world will have to wait a little longer, the publication and post-extraction programme currently still being under consideration.

The book is divided into six parts, which between them contain 36 chapters many of which are only two or three pages long, plus a prologue and an epilogue. There is also a brief glossary for specialist terminology and a complete faunal list, which makes fascinating reading in its own right; how many sites can boast either bluefin tuna or European musk, let alone both? Each chapter is also headed by a miniature drawing of one of the faunal species found at the site - maybe this is the reason for so many chapters, but another 30 would still have been needed to represent each species. Disappointingly, no chapter has an image of Boxgrove Man, properly known as Homo cf. helodlbergensis, although the cover of the book shows several shadowy figures clutching spears and engaging in group chino butchery in front of a photogenic herd of elephants, paradoxically one of the least well-represented species in the faunal collection (minimum number of individuals -1). Admittedly a plain of water vole...