

LETTERS AND NOTES

TWENTY-THREE PROPOSITIONS FOR STONE ARTEFACT STUDIES

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FUNDAMENTALS

1. While we often consider a stone artefact as belonging to the sphere of technology, ultimately its beginning and end exists within that of geology and sedimentary process.
2. Between these end points we can attempt to understand the material's interaction with, and modification by, a biological agent.

THE ARTEFACT

3. The artefact can be thought of as a behavioural node: the meeting point of intention, culture and material. One must consequently understand the complexity of each artefact in isolation before attempting to relate artefacts to each other.
4. For this reason the artefact cannot be the fundamental unit of stone artefact analysis. Rather it is each gesture of procurement, manufacture, use and discard which, as an irreducible and observable elements, we attempt to bring under ultimate examination.
5. Stone technology is not therefore the ultimate goal of our analysis. It provides an avenue to a much wider understanding: that of individual, group and population behaviours across different scales of time and space.
6. We can also go further and attempt to theorise the intentions which lie behind these individual and collective gestures through a detailed understanding of artefacts in isolation, as assemblages and as wider collective datasets.

CONTEXT

7. Every artefact is on an arrested or interrupted trajectory towards destruction, usually though sedimentary processes.
8. Therefore, understanding the circumstances of preservation and how these might create a distortion of the past should always be the first stage of stone artefact analysis.
9. 'In situ' is an idealistic state, it does not exist in nature, every preservational environment involves modification, however small the degree. Determining the scale of transformation is the priority, the absence of transformation is a virtual impossibility.
10. The distinction between different sedimentary contexts (e.g. plateau, head or fluvial deposits) are useful as classifications, but must be considered to form parts of a single, phased and unified sedimentary system.
11. Understanding the past and ultimate future trajectory of each artefact within these systems allows a full appreciation of a stone artefact's value as a data point.
12. Distribution maps of artefacts and sites within regions are therefore not records of past landscape use, but a snapshot of the sedimentary processes and collection histories distorting the original patterns.
13. A single artefact, occurring in isolation as a surface find, has the potential to unlock an understanding of those

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processes when read correctly first as a sedimentary particle.

BEHAVIOUR

14. While stone artefacts have life histories, which are useful to reconstruct, these should always be subordinate to, or a means of access to, the aim of addressing the life histories of their makers.
15. An artefact exists on a trajectory incorporating at least three locations and behavioural phases: the origin of the raw material, the history of the artefact at the site of its last traceable use and the possible onward movement of products from the artefact or the modified artefact itself.
16. Understanding these trajectories provides a framework for understanding the movement patterns and the curation/discard decisions of the maker.
17. Artefacts are encountered in the archaeological record only after they have been discarded, after their last phase of interaction with human agents.
18. All assemblages are 'death' assemblages and may present profound asymmetries with their use and form in life.
19. Useful tools are less likely to be discarded and so are less likely to be recovered from the archaeological record.
20. Low-density scatters of small flakes from tool maintenance are the signature of the presence of useful, valuable objects.

ARTEFACTS AS TRIGGERS

21. Once discarded artefacts have potential to be re-encountered by their makers and those who come after them.
22. We should be aware of, and sensitive to, the potential of past human populations to recognise and interact with archaeological material within their own landscapes.
23. Our encounters with artefacts in landscape leads to changes in understanding and behaviour. We should consider this a possibility for people in the past too.