

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

Edited by Yorke M. Rowan and Jennie R. Ebeling (Approaches to Anthropological Archaeology). Pp. xvi + 379, figs. 149, tables 33. Equinox, London 2008. \$140. ISBN 976-1-84553-044-0 (cloth).

Assyrian Stone Vessels and Related Material in the British Museum

By Ann Searight, Julian Reade, and Irving Finkel. Pp. viii + 68, b&w figs. 68. Oxbow, Oxford 2008. \$130. ISBN 978-1-84217-312-1 (cloth).

As the contributors to both of these volumes emphasize, the study of stone vessels (a class of material culture within which we can usefully group, for certain analytical purposes, a variety of closed-stone containers, open shapes, and grinding slabs) has tended to be a poor relation to the study of what are typically more abundant and more chronologically diagnostic pottery or knapped-stone data sets. This is ironic because, if anything, stone vessels are one of the longest-lived and most globally relevant cultural traditions, and they are clearly implicated in some of the most fundamental documented shifts in human society. For example, they are key features in more intensive processing of gathered foods and early farmed crops, as well as being unusually well-preserved tracers for developments in cosmetics, metallurgy, and multimedia crafting among more complex societies.

In a sense, the "poor relation" problem is one that has faced ground-stone studies more generally, with attention typically only paid to such objects (e.g., vessels, tools, beads) either when they are made with exotic materials, include elaborate carved elements, or are, as happens only rarely, the dominant class of material culture at a site. It is therefore reassuring

to see the editors, contributors, and publishers of these two volumes commit such effort and so many resources to foregrounding this class of material. The results of this work are also of high quality and represent both ends of a spectrum of necessary work, from detailed cataloguing and illustration (Searight et al.) to less full documentation but more expansive discussion (Rowan and Ebeling).

Assyrian Stone Vessels and Related Material in the British Museum provides a welcome treatment of a poorly known corpus of material, with a core focus on some 400 Late Assyrian stone vessels, as well as some regionally or chronologically related material. The links between the former (coherent) corpus and the latter odds and ends is sometimes a little forced, with the feeling that some vessels were included only in the knowledge that they were unlikely to receive treatment elsewhere. Ultimately, however, this mopping-up strategy is perfectly acceptable for an institution-sponsored volume of this kind. The book begins with a brief introduction, offering an overview of the collection and its past history, as well as a brief three-page discussion of the regional history of stone vessel use in Mesopotamia. The editors clearly state the scope of what they intend,

noting that the volume does not offer extended discussion about subvarieties of stone, manufacturing techniques, spatial distribution and vessel types, trace and residue analysis, textual references to stone vessels and their uses, or the wider implications of some of the inscriptions. However, a few pages on some of these and/or more bibliographic jumping-off points would have made this an even stronger publication. In particular, it is a pity that more was not made of the manufacturing marks on the vessels, as the corpus spans almost the entire gamut of possible production methods, from broad-spectrum grinding out of the interior (probably with loose abrasive and a cobble) to device-aided drilling (with a weighted drill, loose abrasive, and some combination of copper tubes and/or shaped-stone bits) to percussive chiseling and knife carving to manufacture on a horizontal lathe.

The bulk of the book is the vessel catalogue, which includes accompanying drawings and photographs. Before each morphological subgroup of vessels, a useful short discussion is offered, but the emphasis is mainly on vessel-by-vessel descriptions of general shape, material, date, provenance, and stylistic parallels. One obvious attraction of the corpus published here is, as the editors suggest, the large number of examples with cuneiform inscriptions (ca. 100 examples). It is good to see these treated alongside the physical character of the objects themselves for once, rather than divorced from each other in separate epigraphic and typological treatments. The catalogue is also careful on a notorious point of detail with regard to vessels made of travertine (predominantly CaCO_3) vs. alabastrine gypsum (predominantly hydrated CaSO_4). This corpus includes vessels made of both materials, and the distinction between them is important, as it relates firmly to differences in provenance, manufacturing method, and past valuation. The terms used in the catalogue are perhaps not ideal—"calcite" (technically just the name of the main mineral constituent) and "alabaster" (a semantically messy term with equally strong associations with travertines, hence the use of terms such as "Egyptian alabaster" and "calcite-alabaster" in other publications)—but they are sufficient for the reader to note key differences. It is a pity, however, that the introduction awkwardly lumps them together when it would have been helpful to have had at least some reflection on their varied implications. Even so, such calls for further reflection are a

sign of the whetted interest that such a clearly published catalogue can generate. The volume as a whole will certainly be an important point of future reference for many specialists.

New Approaches to Old Stones started life as a conference session, but the range of contributors has been significantly expanded and the finished volume has clearly benefited from conscientious editorial work. The chronological, geographical, and methodological scope of this collection is impressive—it is likely to promote the kinds of heightened awareness that such data sets have needed for some time. The volume will be of interest to those seeking a rapid overview of techniques and agendas in current ground-stone and stone vessel studies, as well as a route into further literature on specialist topics (particularly for the eastern Mediterranean). In a sense, the reference to "ground stone artifacts" in the title is awkward because the main focus of the volume is on stone vessels of various kinds, including some that are ground, but others that are percussively carved or lathe-turned, with further attention to related grinders and pounders and little to other ground-stone artifacts (e.g., beads). Even so, the appellation is probably justified as a useful umbrella term.

Despite the wide geographical scope of the volume, there remain notable clusters of emphasis: some reflect real differences in the global, panchronological intensity of ground-stone and/or stone-only vessel activity—for example, repeated emphasis on eastern Mediterranean stone vessel assemblages since pre-Neolithic times, to which could be added numerous other recent discussions (A. Bevan, *Stone Vessels and Values in the Bronze Age Mediterranean* [Cambridge 2007]; R.T. Sparks, *Stone Vessels in the Levant* [Leeds 2007]). Other concentrations of emphasis reflect clusters of current research and expertise. For example, the Levant is the dominant focus of the collection as a whole, with 10 out of 20 papers addressing this region, and of these, six or seven concentrating on Neolithic to Early Bronze (EB) I basalt industries in the southern Levant. A secondary regional emphasis concerns the southwestern United States and Central America (six out of 20 papers). Such priorities bring interpretative rewards in terms of the repeated visitation of particular problems from different perspectives, but it is a pity that neither the introduction nor any other section in the book seeks to reflect on these academic convergences more directly.

There is insufficient space here to address each paper in turn, but it is worth noting that there are many strong contributions in this collection and few really weak ones. Schaub's comments on the vessels from the EB IA communal tombs at Bab edh-Dhra makes simple but effective correlations between vessel frequencies, positions in the tomb chamber, and other artifacts. The role of these specialized early basalt-bowl industries in producing artifacts that might knit together far-flung semisedentary groups is often floated in other publications, but the way this might work in practice is made far clearer here. Wright's paper is one of the few to address a much wider suite of ground-stone artifacts and several case study sites in turn, with the resulting analytical advantage that the reader gets a much clearer sense of these objects as part of broader contexts of use and discard. A concluding remark that microstratigraphic sampling has much to offer as a complement to traditional object-based approaches to ground stone is likely to be particularly prescient of future emphasis, at least for well-resourced excavations. Carter's paper is one of the first to grapple directly with the implications of a series of slotted amphibolite cobbles that are our most common indicator of vessel manufacturing processes on second-millennium B.C.E. Cretan sites, even if we still struggle to pin down the exact mechanics of how they were used (there is useful scope for future experimental work here). He also rightly emphasizes that these toolkits are specialized, highly recognizable products.

Luke's paper is particularly interesting for the way it is able to link stone vessel styles with larger-scale architectural expression at major

sites among the Maya and their immediate neighbors, as well as with equivalent artistic production in polychrome ceramic. Roosevelt's emphasis on the manufacture of travertine alabastra in Anatolia is a useful antidote to the common impression that these were typically of Egyptian provenance (and it is an important object-based complement to recent research into western Anatolian travertine sources). It also makes useful complementary reading to many of the vessels listed in the British Museum catalogue. Harrell and Brown offer an excellent assessment of a series of quarry sites for Islamic steatite cooking pots. There is real scope here for building upon such work to address the phenomenon of steatite cooking vessel production and use cross-culturally—for example, in terms of quarry procedures, manufacturing methods, distribution, culinary benefits, and social implications—in major known traditions in prehistoric and historic North America, Brazil, northwestern Europe, and the Middle East.

There are plenty of insights to be gleaned from elsewhere in this volume as well. At any rate, what both this collection and the British Museum catalogue clearly demonstrate is the great potential of these kinds of artifacts to set new and highly productive research agendas.

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