

ANNELOU VAN GIJN, *Flint in Focus. Lithic Biographies in the Neolithic and Bronze Age*, Sidestone Press, Leiden, 2010, 289 pagini

One of the most important voices in use wear analysis is Annelou van Gijn, professor of Material Culture and Artefact Studies at the Universities of Leiden and Groningen. She is the architect and head of the

*Laboratory for Artefact Studies* from the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University. In her 25 years of scientific activity, A. van Gijn had the opportunity to analyze most of the prehistoric flint tools discovered in

Netherlands, and most of her work is included in the book. But, if one thinks that this book is just an abstract of her work until now, then one is terribly wrong. The analyses are not just exposed, but they are interpreted and integrated in the context of prehistoric Netherlands.

Presented by Mark Edmonds (University of York) as *The book we have been waiting for* (on the back cover) A. van Gijn's work is one of the books that must be read by prehistorians, interested or not, in stone tools. As the title suggests, the focus of the book is on flint tools. Flint tools are discussed as part of human activities, as part of social identity, as part of the economic life of the community, as part of trade between communities, as part of beliefs and rituals, in other words as part of all that is related to man as living cell of the society. The term of *lithic biography* refers to writing about the *life* of tools (concept borrowed from anthropology). The book covers more than 5000 years of prehistoric Netherlands, starting from Mesolithic and ending with Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, following the life of stone tools as they are just the meanings of getting through day to day life, as they gain special symbolism and as they decay in importance (both mundane and symbolic) because they are replaced by a new and stronger material: metal.

The book is divided in nine chapters with high quality images, and has an appendix containing the catalogue of the discoveries.

In the first chapter (pp. 1–9), A. van Gijn explains to us the twofold purpose of her research: to explore the *roles* of flint in past societies, sometimes bravely using a hermeneutical approach, and to study the decline of flint. In this book the emphasis will lay on the results of the use wear and residue analysis, as such data provide information about the *life* of the flint tools.

The methodology is presented in the second chapter of the book *The biography of flint tools: methods of study* (pp. 11–34). In this chapter the author has a general regard (with examples from Netherlands' prehistory) on what the concept of *life* of a tool comprises and what are the methods for investigating all the moments of a tool's life. The *conception* of the tool actually means the acquisition of raw material (local materials or through trade), the *birth* is the moment associated with the knapping of the tool, the *life* is related with the way in which the tool was used and its function in human society and *death* means the last phase of the object's biography: its loss, deposition or discard. As biographers are mainly concerned with the life of their subjects, A. van Gijn is interested in the use of the tools, use that can be interpreted through the traceological method and residue analysis.

The next chapter *Introducing the databases: selection, chronology and source criticism* (pp. 35–50) is essential for any archaeologist, more or less interested in use wear analysis, because it has good advices on how tools must be cleaned, deposited, selected for this kind of analysis. Also the author emphasizes the consequences of post depositional modifications, the importance of knowing the taphonomical factors and makes a sincere criticism of the methods involved in use wear analysis.

The subject of the next two chapters is the role that flint tools had in supplying and processing food and in

craft activities. A. van Gijn states that the distinction between craft and subsistence activities is an academic one, probably not experienced as such by prehistoric people.

The fourth chapter of the book is about *Flint and food* (pp. 51–74), being an incursion in the role that flint tools played in subsistence activities. The author remarks the fact that flint tools are not present in all food related activities and even if they are, not all activities leave interpretable use wear on tools. Some confusion may arise because most of the plants that are consumed are also used in crafts; also sickle inserts are not always easy to distinguish from *tribulum* inserts. She agrees that only through a holistic approach, encompassing palaeobotanical and archaeozoological material, environment and tools one can address complicated issues, as the importance of hunting or fishing.

*Flint and craft* (pp. 75–108) is the next chapter of the book, a chapter in which the focus is on the prehistoric crafts, often 'forgotten' and overlooked because in most sites craft products are rarely preserved. Hide processing, plant based craft, wood working, bone and antler tool manufacturing, ornament making are all discussed in this chapter. Well-defined, but mysterious activities like those responsible for 'polish 23' or 'polish 10' are also in the author's attention. The circumstances from prehistoric Netherlands are discussed, with very interesting examples.

The most ample chapter from the book is the one regarding *Flint and Identity* (pp. 109–160), a very challenging theme. The author begins her analysis from the idea that the material representations of a specific group of people are believed to reflect a common identity that bonds a group of individuals and differentiates them from neighbouring groups. She assumes that stylistic markers must be related to a need to mark the larger social group people commonly associate with. She discusses the concept of personhood, and the way material culture can be a marker of the personhood. She finds markers for lithic technology and use in most of the prehistoric cultures from Netherlands. Some flint tools can be associated with personhood, both in settlement and funeral context, and the given examples back up the conclusions of the author. The author also discusses the trade of flint tools as marker of *locus* and flint tools as a gender marker.

Although flint is generally associated with the mundane, some highly crafted flint implements have often been referred to as ritual objects, especially if they were found in what we interpret as special depositional contexts or if they appeared basically unusable. This *Ritualisation of flint* is the main theme of the seventh chapter (pp. 161–197), in which A. van Gijn illustrates 'the role of flint in the expression of the cosmology or world view of past people'. In this chapter she analyzes flint as part of specific rituals in which some of the most spectacular objects were involved: the large ceremonial axes or the Scandinavian daggers. Also the discussion on flint objects leads the author to consider them as 'pieces of places' or 'vehicles for remembrance'.

Chapter 8 deals with *Flint in the age of metal*, considered the *Cinderella of lithic research*. Although flint was frequently used in the Bronze Age not much use wear analysis has been done on Bronze Age flint but

results obtained so far indicate that curation was part of the domestic Bronze Age flint technology. Most flint tools were no longer invested with stylistic information and had lost their role in the constitution of social identity (for example the importance of flint objects as burial gifts greatly diminished in the Bronze Age). A. van Gijn observed that the introduction of metal initially resulted in the rise of highly skilled craftsmen who produced some of the finest flint items, as 'look-alikes of the 'real bronze thing'.

The last chapter, *The meaning of flint* (pp. 219–233), comprises the conclusions of the author on lithic tools and their evolution in prehistoric Netherlands. A. van Gijn distinguished for the Neolithic two traditions of flint tool use: an upland tradition (characterized by a predominance of hide working and the activities that are causing the distinctive wear traces referred to as 'polish 23' and 'polish 10' and agricultural activities) and a wetland tradition (which distinguishes itself by a range of tools used for different plant processing activities, probably related to a preoccupation with basketry, netting, bone and antler tool manufacturing). Evidence for interaction between the uplands and the wetlands is present throughout the Early Neolithic but mostly in the classic Swifterbant period. Van Gijn thinks that the tools have been imported as finished and, most importantly, used implements, considering the presence of typical 'upland' types of use-wear traces on in the classic Swifterbant. Scandinavian flint seems to be the focus of the long-term interaction networks. The author discusses once again the relation between burial goods and the identity of the deceased, possibly gender, age or status related. During the Early

and Middle Neolithic the objects include implements associated with agriculture, whereas in the later Neolithic weapons figure more prominently, while during the Bronze Age flint gradually disappears from the burial scene.

At the end of the book the author is confident that future lithic study will be a more biographical approach. The biographical approach which refers to *conception, birth, life and death* of the tools (comprising, in this way, all the data that can be provided by tools) might be the future of material study in archaeology.

In our opinion, *Flint in focus* is one of those books that is a *must read* for anyone interested in the study of lithic assemblage. The fundamentals of the book lay in use wear analysis. The rigor with which Annelou van Gijn did the use wear analysis can be seen in the whole book: all the facts are well documented (through a large experimental collection); the conclusions are integrating, connected and logical. Written by a researcher with a great capacity for synthesis and interpretation, *Flint in Focus* shows where the analysis of large assemblages may lead. In general, through comparison of the data from different sites and their extrapolation, the conclusions may lead to a diachronically view of the roles flint played in the prehistory of mankind. In particular, corroborating use wear analysis (on lithic, bone and other tools) with all the environmental data from sites (as the author mentions in chapter four) one can have a holistic view on the real economy of a settlement, on social life and beliefs of a community.

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