

## *JADE*

### *Aspects of social inequality in Neolithic Europe : the circulation of large axeheads made from Alpine jades*

Pierre Pétrequin, Serge Cassen, Michel Errera, Lutz Klassen, Alison Sheridan et Isabelle Mouret

MSHE C.N. Ledoux

32, rue Mégevand

F 25030 Besançon Cedex

<http://mshe.univ-fcomte.fr> - [mshe@mshe.univ-fcomte.fr](mailto:mshe@mshe.univ-fcomte.fr)

Theme:

The end of 2009 will see the conclusion of JADE, a project funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (2006–2008). This project built upon a dozen years of research, by Pierre and Anne-Marie Pétrequin and their collaborators, into Neolithic axeheads made from Alpine rocks, and in particular their origin and their circulation across Europe.

This research, originally informed by the ethno-archaeological approach to contemporary stone axehead production, circulation and use in New Guinea, led to the discovery – first in 2003, and then in 2008 – of very important quarry sites of eclogites, omphacites and jadeitites in the Italian Alps. Of particular importance are the exploitation sites in the Mont Viso massif, at Oncino and at Bobbio Pellice (Piedmont), between 1800 and 2400 metres above sea level. We now know that the diffusion of axeheads made from these Alpine rocks extended over the whole of western Europe over the course of the 5th and 4th millennia, from Malta to Denmark and from Slovenia to Brittany, with a few isolated objects having circulated equally far to the east, to Slovakia and to Bulgaria. These incredible networks of diffusion extend over 3000 kilometres from west to east as the crow flies, and constitute an extremely rare phenomenon for the Neolithic period.

The international conference at Besançon, organised by the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme et de l'Environnement which manages *Projet JADE*, will present the major results of the project and will offer a new way of 'reading' the European Neolithic. The project has involved an effective international collaboration between researchers from various disciplines. It has studied high-altitude quarries and their conditions of exploitation; it has produced a detailed inventory of all the large (>140 mm long) axeheads of Alpine stone that have been found in Europe, covering 14 countries, and has mapped the distribution using GIS; it has analysed, through mineralogy and spectroradiometry, several thousand axeheads; and it has examined findspot contexts and representations of these axeheads on monumental stelae and other megalithic monuments. All this work has aimed to enhance our understanding of the

significance of a type of artefact whose social function certainly touched on the domain of ritual, of beliefs, and of social inequality to a far greater extent than was the case with other axeheads, whose principal function was for clearing the forest and for working timber.

The conference is open to presentations which highlight collaborative approaches between different disciplines. It seeks to avoid the methodological stumbling block created by those archaeometric approaches that were (and continue to be) undertaken in isolation, conceived without considering the chronology of the axeheads in question, their social function, their typology and the nature of their raw materials. Among the various themes covered in the conference, we shall focus on questions relating to the conditions under which long-distance transfer of these long axeheads of Alpine stone took place; on the cultural and social context of these movements; on identifying the different ways in which these artefacts functioned in different regions; on the significance of their representation on stelae and other megalithic monuments; on the re-working and re-polishing of Alpine axeheads within Brittany, and their re-circulation – and the relationship between this and the movements of Iberian variscite and of Iberian fibrolite axeheads. The conference will also examine the question of the imitation of Alpine axeheads in local materials. Furthermore, it will investigate whether the opening of flint mines – and of extraction sites of other rock types, including quartz pelites, cinerites and quartzites in France, and of Lake District tuffs and of other rock types in Britain and Ireland – was a consequence of the circulation of axeheads made of precious Alpine rock types.

Therefore, even though the conference is based on empirical evidence obtained through very precise observations of material culture, its main concern is with developing a *social* interpretation of an extraordinary phenomenon, whose geographical scope is larger than previously suspected. The use of sacred objects in the inegalitarian societies of Varna in the east and in the Gulf of Morbihan in the west offers us two poles of the social dynamics that drove the circulation of artefacts of especial value' artefacts and which animated Europe during the 5th and 4th millennia.

Length of presentations: 15–30 minutes, plus 10–15 minutes for discussion, according to the importance of the presentations.

This means about 30 presentations over the course of the conference.

The proceedings will be published and, as part of this, discussions will be recorded, so that key elements of the discussion can be included in the publication.

There will be two official languages, for both the conference and the publication: English and French.