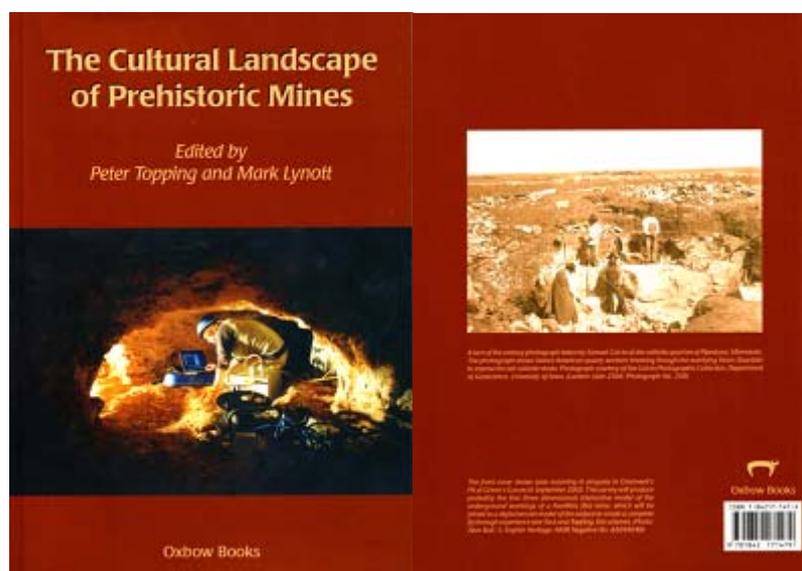


**Topping, P. & M. Lynott. Eds. 2005. The cultural landscape of Prehistoric mines.  
- Oxford, Oxbow Books.**

Book review by L. Meurkens



Social approaches have permeated into almost every field of archaeology. Until recently the only notable exception to this trend were technology and material culture, the main issues addressed in these fields usually being of technical or typological nature. In contrast, anthropologists addressing similar issues had long realised that technologies and material culture cannot be fully understood when they are studied in isolation, away from the context in which they were developed and used. The archaeological focus on technical and typological aspects of material culture is a direct consequence of the nature of the archaeological record and the difficulties in interpreting it. Assessing the social context in which material culture was used and produced is an aspect of prehistoric life that has always been considered more or less impossible to test archaeologically. Things are changing however. Archaeologists are increasingly addressing questions concerning the role of material culture in prehistoric societies and this book is one of the latest additions to this trend.

The book contains the papers that were presented at a symposium at the 2001 meeting of the Society of American Archaeology, which focused on the social, instead of technical, dimensions of prehistoric mining and quarrying. Issues addressed during this symposium concerned the organisation of production, the status of the miners, the value of the raw material and the ritual/symbolic aspects of prehistoric mining. Another specific aim of the session was to see in what ways prehistoric raw material extraction differed in the Old and New Worlds. The latter aim is clearly evident in the selection of case-studies, which, although the title may suggest otherwise, mainly derive from Britain and North America. Moreover, the main type of extraction discussed in the book is the mining and quarrying of stone with only one contribution specifically dealing with the prehistoric mining of metals.

The first part of the book (chapters 1-6) concentrates on Neolithic mining in the British Isles. A presentation of new evidence is given in the papers by Saville and by Barber and Dyer. The first discusses recent excavations at a flint extraction site in northeast Scotland, while the latter reviews the possibilities of aerial photography in assessing the extent of a long known flint mine in southern England. The remaining papers in this section concentrate on questions related to the social context of mining: Why was there a need for mining at all, when adequate raw material could apparently be obtained in other manners? How can we interpret structured deposits of pottery, flint tools, mining equipment and animal and human remains: are these the material remains of rituals related to the extraction process? What was the meaning of the mines to later communities? Cooney tries to answer some of these questions by discussing the rich evidence for axe production and structured deposition on a recently excavated extraction site on Lambay Island, Ireland. The other two authors (Topping and Barber) are not in such a luxurious position, since they deal with sites in southern England that were excavated, hardly up to modern standards, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless evidence for structured deposition and ritual at the mines is almost overwhelming. Topping effectively argues that ritual was an important aspect of/integral to the process of flint extraction at some of the Sussex mines. Barber succeeds in trying to make some sense of the apparent presence of 'barrows' and scattered human remains among the mines at Blackpatch and Church Hill. He argues that most of these can probably be dated to the Early Bronze Age. The

mines were probably no longer in full use at this time (although this is still being debated), but had acquired a different meaning as an appropriate place of burial for the dead. An interesting fact touched upon by Barber is that flint nodules, either mined or collected from the surface, were widely used in the construction of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments on the chalk lands of southern England. This might suggest that apart from being a source for axes and other tools, flint also had a wider symbolic significance which made it an appropriate raw material for constructing burial monuments.

The second part of the book mainly deals with case studies from North America. In the contributions by Clark & Martin (chapter 7) and by Scott & Thiessen (chapter 9) an interesting extra dimension to many of the archaeological cases of quarrying is provided. Clark & Martin focus on the extraction and use of copper on the shores of Lake Superior in the northeastern United States. Scott & Thiessen discuss the extraction of Catlinite, a soft kind of stone used by native Americans for making pipes. These two studies are particularly interesting since quarrying continued here into historical times, thus providing an excellent opportunity for studying the social context in which production took place. Particularly impressive is the rich body of folklore associated with the extraction of copper on the shores of Lake Superior and the diversity and complexity of rituals carried out before, during and after the extraction of Catlinite.

Concluding, this book is a welcome addition to an increasing number of studies focussing on the social context of production in prehistoric and pre-industrial societies. The contributions address issues that are current in the debate, and therefore it will surely stimulate those working on prehistoric mines and quarries in the Old and New Worlds. On a less specialised level it will be interesting reading to all those concerned with prehistoric mining and the social context of prehistoric material production in general.

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