

Ancestral stones: Workshop rationale

Stone is one of the most durable and oldest materials present in human history and as such provides us with the extraordinary opportunity to potentially discern human perceptions of their place in the world from the time of our earliest beginnings to the present. We propose to assemble a workshop of scholars from the Americas, Levant, Australia, Europe and Africa to exchange ideas and bring new insights to the histories of relationships between humans and stone. Common knowledge suggests that any changes in stone artifacts are in direct response to human activity and directed through human intention. We will explore other ways of knowing and understanding stone-human interactions based in real world experiences and perceptions of archaeological, historical, and present-day societies for whom stone is significant in their daily lives. We submit that by including a wide range of intellectual contributions to understanding our pasts, we open new possibilities and engage in practicing good science. Rather than limiting ourselves to Western theories, we advocate a paradigm shift that forwards profound respect and appreciation for stone and other earthly materials. We propose that such worldviews may express long histories of accumulated and changing ecological knowledge that reassure and provide future solutions for the co-existence of humans and the elements of the world we are depended upon.

It is our contention that the time is right for scholars focused on our deep pasts to reimagine the possible ontological and cosmological conceptions held by our ancestors concerning stone. Over the last decade, a growing number of archaeologists have begun to consider that there are other ways of knowing the world that influence how people in the past perceived their relationships with nonhuman entities. Yet most scholars focused on stone technologies shun inclusion of multiple perceptions of the world and insist only “objective” science can rebuild narratives about societies in deep time. Academics largely taut theories of relational and human intention human interaction with stone in the world. Commonly narratives offer that our ancestors scavenged the surface and penetrated the earth for passive stones, then struck, snapped, and split stones producing various forms of architecture and tools. The variations in shapes of stone are viewed as reflecting differences in qualities associated with the parent material, use, stage of use, the materials processed by the stone-tools, and the identity of the maker/owner and/or their group identity. Stone is generally thought to be an inert earthly matter that experienced change only when humans intervened.

Stone is perhaps the most durable and ancient of materials manifested and our earliest interactions and nurturing of stone often serves as a key to defining our humanity. We believe that creating a space for alternative ontologies is practicing a science that is open to new and diverse sets of knowledge and practicing inclusiveness surrounding our common heritage. Only a small cadre of scholars privilege historic and descendant communities knowledge as integral to writing pasts that resonate with diverse audiences and foreground human-stone relationships. We advocate a paradigm shift that includes widening our perspectives to include an epistemology that forwards profound respect, care, responsibility, and appreciation for the past and present agency of stones and other materials. Mountains, caves, and boulders may have actively drawn us into a particular landscape invigorating our senses and connecting us with other earthly beings. Humans might have integrated their touch with stone in the landscape to co-create structures, paths, sculptures, paintings, etchings, etc. Perhaps pebbles and cobbles attracted our attention and required particular conditions and selected specific humans to form them into figurines and implements. Gratitude and reverence for stone may express long histories of a healthy relationship with the landscape.

The aim of the proposed workshop is to convene international scholars to critically examine other ways of knowing, perceiving, and appreciating stone from the Paleolithic to the Present. Scholars

who have agreed to participate in the workshop are from Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, UK and USA. The workshop will open dialogues to produce a significant collection of coherent original essays with associated visual arts. Significantly, we aspire to contribute to anthropology by providing deep-time narratives about how entangled human-stone perceptions, practices, and relationships have changed through time; narratives we can leverage to mitigate the significant human impact on the earth today and in the future.

Our workshop will present the anthropological and archaeological community with the first coherent set of papers dealing with comprehensive studies of stone ontologies. Our list of participants demonstrate that it is time to bring together these scholars, who are separately engaged with ontological and cosmological worldviews concerning stone and the ways these perceptions shaped and were shaped by the different elements of the world entangled with humans. Participants represent a wide-array of individuals concerning career-stage, gender, as well as Indigenous representatives and artists bring a diverse set of perspectives and skills to the workshop. All participants concentrate on issues relevant to the theme of the workshop, some focus on Indigenous ontologies, some on human-stone interactions in the past, and some combine both. We will place emphasis on elucidating particular ways in which ontologies can be discerned through material culture and landscapes. An attempt will be made to also correlate insights gained from human-stone interactions with relevant human relationships with other elements of the world such as animals, plants, rock-art, landscape features and more. Our deliberations will encompass the following topics:

- **Ontologies as Theories:** What are the ethnographic and ethnohistoric ontologies through which people have perceived their relationships with stone? How do we convey diverse ontological interpretations to broader audiences? How can we create space for more inclusive interpretations of the past without invoking ahistorical interpretations? How do we integrate the particulars of ontologies into archaeological interpretations in a way that respect present and past cultural diversities?
- **Ontologies and Human Behavior:** How does ontology impact a person's interactions and place in the world? How might ontologies have impacted the ways our ancestors interacted with stone? How would it alter interactions between stone, humans, and other beings such as plants, animals, water, etc.? Is/was the relationship mutual, asymmetric, competitive, predatory, parasitic, or amensalistic? What would be the implications for reassessing academic categories of stone procurement, alterations, use, and discard?
- **Ontologies and Identity:** How would considering a variety of ontologies redefine our image of the "toolmaker" and who interacts with stone, their age, gender, status, etc.? How might ontologies influence criteria for teaching, learning, and skill interacting with stone?
- **Ontologies and Methodology:** Are there material manifestations of ontologies that might be visible and if so what are they? In what ways would a change in our ontological perspective alter our discipline's methodology, techniques for data recovery, analysis and descriptions of the forms and locations, as well as our curation of heritage materials, including stone? How might it impact our discipline's language and concept of site, artifact, feature, etc.? Can there be a universal methodology that reflects diverse ontologies?
- **Ontologies and Archaeology:** What are the archaeological evidences for human-stone interactions from the Paleolithic to the present? What kind of evidence can be related with such interactions? Could ontologies explain changes in human-stone interaction during the human past?

In what ways the incorporation of stone ontologies might be helpful in reconstructing transformations in human behavior from the Paleolithic to the present?