Sheridan, J A (2011) *Old friends, new friends, a long-lost friend and false friends: tales from Project JADE.*

http://repository.nms.ac.uk/679

Deposited on: 14 July 2015
Our understanding of the production, distribution and use of Neolithic axeheads, adzeheads and chisels made of jadeitite and other rare Alpine rocks has been transformed by a major international French-led research project, Projet JADE. This has systematically recorded and mapped all such objects longer than 135 mm across Europe – extending its coverage to all artefacts of Alpine rock in Britain, Ireland and the Channel Islands, irrespective of length – and collating information about contexts, dating and depositional practices at a pan-European scale.

The research has involved a remarkable amount of work ‘behind the scenes’ in museums and private collections across the continent. This has led to new discoveries and to the challenging of old provenances and associations. Focusing on the results for Britain and Ireland, this paper highlights the new information that has been obtained on well-known examples and shows what else has been learnt from the project: the additional specimens, the remarkable stories of individual objects, and the need to be able to recognise ‘false friends’ – ethnographic objects and Neolithic specimens from elsewhere in Europe, collected by antiquaries.
Introduction

Since 2006, our understanding of the production, distribution and use of Neolithic axeheads, adzeheads and chisels made of jadeitite and other rare Alpine rocks has been transformed by a major international French-led research project, Projet JADE. Directed by Dr Pierre Pétrequin (of the CNRS and the Université de Franche-Comté at Besançon until 2009), and funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche, Projet JADE has systematically recorded and mapped all such objects longer than 135 mm across Europe – extending its coverage to all artefacts of Alpine rock in Britain, Ireland and the Channel Islands, irrespective of length – and collating information about contexts, dating and depositional practices at this pan-European scale. This has allowed it to compile a ‘materio-typo-chronology’, showing which types of axehead were manufactured of what material, and when each circulated between the late 6th millennium and the mid-3rd millennium BC in different parts of Europe. The resolution provided by Projet JADE makes it possible to track patterns of production and individual artefact biographies and itineraries as axeheads were roughed out, finished, and (in many cases) subsequently re-shaped and re-polished (see Pétrequin et al. this volume).

The Project has also successfully located the source areas, which are almost all to be found high in the Mont Viso and Mont Beigua massifs in the Italian Alps, not far from Turin and Genoa respectively (Pétrequin et al. 2007; 2008), and has applied the non-destructive analytical technique of spectroradiometry, adopted from the field of remote sensing, to establish a geological provenance for individual artefacts and to check whether they really are of Alpine rock (Errera et al. 2008). The exceptional nature of the source areas cannot be over-emphasised: we are dealing with mountains that may well have been deemed to belong to the realm of the supernatural and divine (see Pétrequin et al. this volume). Furthermore, the Project has clarified the chaîne opératoire and spatial organisation of axehead manufacture and, through experimental work, has demonstrated that it would take well over a thousand hours’ work to create a jadeitite axehead with a glassy polish as seen, for example, in Figs. 1 and 3–5. An extensive bibliography relating to the Project, along with abstracts of presentations from the international Project conference held in Besançon, September 2009, can be found at http://mshe.univ-fcomte.fr/documents/jade/jade_congress_abstracts.pdf; publications relating to its work on British and Irish axeheads include Pétrequin et al. 2008; Sheridan et al. 2007; and Sheridan et al. 2010.

The final results of the Project are due to be published as two large volumes, and it is anticipated that the results for British, Irish and Channel Islands objects will also be more fully published in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society. In the meantime, this brief contribution is intended to highlight some of the many fascinating discoveries that have been made, and insights gained, from investigating British and Irish objects that have been claimed to be, or confirmed as being, of Alpine origin.

Old friends

Axeheads (and other objects) made from Alpine rock have long exerted a fascination over antiquaries, archaeologists and mineralogists in Britain and Ireland. Fine engravings are to be found in numerous nineteenth century publications (e.g. Evans 1872: fig. 1), and attempts to map and list British and Irish examples have been made since Lily Chitty prepared a distribution map for Sir Cyril Fox’s Presidential address to the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia, published in 1933 (p 154). By 1949, when Stuart Piggott and Terence Powell offered their updated map and list in discussing a fragment of an axehead which they had found at Cairnholy chamber tomb in south-west Scotland (Piggott & Powell 1949: 121, fig. 9.1, 137–9 and Appendix A), the total had risen to 50 examples. In 2010, that figure has more than doubled, to around 118 (Fig. 2). Analysis of
specimens in order to identify the raw material has been undertaken since the late 1930s, when thin sections of several axeheads were made by the Sub-Committee on the Petrological Identification of Stone Axes of the South-Western Group of Museums (Keiller et al. 1941). Walter Campbell Smith, of the then-named British Museum (Natural History), undertook further thin-sectioning and other types of analysis, reporting his results not only in Piggott and Powell’s article but also in a set of three influential reports in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society (Smith 1963; 1965; 1972), in which he revisited and corrected some previous identifications. Others were to continue with the listing and/or analytical work (Bishop et al. 1977;
Jones et al. 1977; Woolley et al. 1979), and individual finds of axeheads believed to be from the Alps have continued to be published (e.g. Cotton & Green 2004; Edmonds 2005; Field & Woolley 1983).

A major task of Projet JADE, as regards the British and Irish material, was to revisit the work of previous researchers who had been listing and mapping Alpine artefacts and to collect as many of these artefacts as possible for spectroradiometric analysis. This has been achieved for over 90% of the objects, with most of the remainder being unavailable for analysis or unlocatable, in private hands.

The Project has confirmed that most of the axeheads and other artefacts that had previously been claimed to have an Alpine origin are indeed of Alpine jadeitite, omphacitite or eclogite. In particular, the thin, flat, triangular axeheads of so-called ‘Altenstadt’ and related ‘Greenlaw’ type, which are the commonest type to be found in Britain and Ireland (Fig. 3), all seem to be made from the finest, and rarest, type of jadeitite and many, if not most of these had originated in a restricted area high in the Mont Viso massif. Furthermore, by comparing each individual spectrum obtained from the spectroradiometric analysis with every other of the thousands of spectra obtained by the Project (from axeheads, raw material samples and working debris), it has been possible in some cases to trace the origin back to an individual free-standing block of jadeitite. Thus, in the case of a fragment of a Greenlaw type axehead from Dunfermline, Fife, it has been possible to demonstrate that it had most come from the same block on Mont Viso as three similar axeheads that have been found in northern Germany (Fig. 4).

Other insights provided by the Project include confirmation that some axeheads, like the Dunfermline example, must have been deliberately broken since jadeitite tends otherwise to shatter in an irregular pattern when it breaks naturally (incidentally, the fragment from High Peak in Devon [Fig. 5.3] has traces of an abortive attempt to perforate its butt, to make it resemble more closely the Morbihan axeheads of perforated Tumiac type). Some had been deliberately burnt as well as broken, as in the case of the examples shown in Fig. 5.3–6. This breakage and burning may well have been part of the rituals of deposition deemed necessary to return these precious, otherworldly objects to the world of the ancestors and gods.

That the process of deposition was a deliberate act, undertaken with regard to beliefs about the special status of Alpine axeheads, is suggested by the fact that at least 20 axeheads (c 17%) have been found in wetland contexts, including in rivers. Others have been found in topographically-distinctive locations, such as near the top of Ebbor Gorge in Somerset (Fig. 5.6). The best-known of these ‘special’ locations remains the Sweet Track, also in Somerset, beside which a Glastonbury-type axehead of quartzo-feldspathic jadeitite (whose origin is thought to be the Mont Viso massif) had been deposited, alongside an axehead of mined flint (probably from a south coast mine) in pristine condition, plus several carinated bowls (Coles et al. 1974). The construction of the trackway has been dated by dendrochronology to 3807/3806 BC and it seems to have been used for a short period, perhaps a dozen years (Hillam et al. 1990: 218).

The Sweet Track axehead (which, like the Breamore example, may well have been reshaped, its original shape being a Chelles-type axehead) is of key importance in discussions of when and how Alpine axeheads reached Britain and Ireland. Like the aforementioned fragment of an Altenstadt/Greenlaw-type axehead found in the simple chamber tomb at Cairnholy, Dumfries & Galloway (Fig. 5 and Piggott & Powell 1949), it suggests that at least some of these axeheads had been brought from the Continent during the early
centuries of the fourth millennium, as part of the process of Neolithisation of Britain and Ireland. As argued elsewhere (Sheridan 2007; 2010; Sheridan et al. 2010), most are likely to relate to the 'Carinated Bowl Neolithic', a strand that involved movement from the far north of France to large parts of Britain and Ireland during the first centuries of the 4th millennium, while some – including the Breamore axehead and possibly also the Sweet Track example – may have arrived as part of the 'trans-Manche Ouest' strand, from north-west France to southern and south-west England, around the same time (cf. Sheridan et al. 2008). We can say, from our knowledge of the chronology of axehead production (Pétrequin et al. this volume), that most may well have been at least two centuries old when they arrived, some considerably older; it seems likely that these had been the treasured possessions of incoming groups of farmers, handed down and carefully curated over many generations.

It would appear that most Alpine axeheads arrived within a narrow time frame during the early centuries of the 4th millennium. However, that some may well have arrived at a significantly later date is suggested by the two axehead pendants from Preston and Wootton Fitzpaine, Dorset (Fig. 6.1–2) and possibly also by two small double-ended chisels (Fig. 6.3–4), one found in an Early Bronze Age barrow at Brownstone Farm, Kingswear, Devon (Rogers 1947; Evens et al. 1972; Jones et al. 1977), and the other from an unknown location but possibly from Devon. The latter, which closely resembles the Brownstone Farm example, had been found by Canon Greenwell and is now in Torquay Museum, which suggests that it may have been found in the area; it is assumed to be contemporary with the Brownstone Farm chisel. The axehead pendants resemble those found in Late Neolithic contexts (according to French periodisation) in France and in the Channel Islands, and are likely to have been made during the late 4th or early 3rd millennium BC. This raises the intriguing possibility that there may have been cross-Channel contact between northern France and the south coast of England in the centuries around 3000 BC, as well as during the first quarter of the fourth millennium (see above and Sheridan et al. 2008) and in the centuries around 3600 BC (Peacock et al. 2010; Sheridan et al. 2010: 31). The chisels are harder to explain in terms of cross-Channel contact, however, since artefacts of Alpine rock had long ceased to circulate over long distances on the Continent by the time these were in use. The Brownstone Farm example, of jadeite, has...
Fig. 5.
Alpine axeheads that have been broken in prehistory; nos. 4–6 have also been burnt.
1: Llangua, Wales;
2: Aberdeenshire;
3: High Peak, Devon (an abortive bore-hole was observed on the other side of the axehead fragment);
4: Cairnholy, Dumfries & Galloway (note: the straight parts of the fracture edges are petrological saw marks);
5: Railway Stores, Inverness, Highland;
6: St. Cuthbert Out (top of Ebbor Gorge), Somerset.

been radiocarbon-dated – from associated cremated bone – to 3420±30 BP (SUERC-21367, 1870–1630 cal BC at 2σ, calibrated using OxCal v.4.1). By that late stage, jadeitite had long fallen out of fashion, the last examples of its use dating to around 2700 BC in the distant lake settlement site of Clairvaux-les-Lacs in the French Jura. The Brownstone Farm evidence raises the question of how the Alpine stone had been obtained: are we dealing with the local, Early Bronze Age re-shaping of an ancient axehead that had been discovered locally? The object shows no obvious signs of this. As for the second chisel, found by Greenwell, not only is its findspot uncertain, but also its identification as being of Alpine rock is not definite, with the initial provisional identification as eclogite currently being checked against the Projet JADE database of spectra. If it is indeed of Alpine eclogite, then in order to explain it one would have to postulate that a second ancient axehead had been found and reworked – an interpretation that the authors find unconvincing. All that one can conclude for the moment is that more remains to be found out about both these objects.

Attention should also be drawn to three Alpine axeheads with particularly interesting histories. The first (Fig. 7) was found in 1780, as workmen were preparing the foundations for the new St. Enoch’s Church in Glasgow, beside the River Clyde (Smith 1963: 167, no.54). Early accounts suggest that it had been found in a logboat, and there is no way of checking the validity of this claim, although it could be genuine. The axehead was reportedly acquired ‘by a maternal relative of C. Wilson Browne’s [the owner during the mid-1800s] “who chanced to be passing at the time of the discovery”’ (ibid.) and is now the property of Glasgow Museums, on display at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art. This exquisite black axehead of Durrington type, made of eclogite from the Bule Valley, Mont Viso, has a unique pattern of glassy polish, with an unpolished band...
around its mid-point. This, and the shape of the boundary between unpolished and polished zones, indicates that the axehead must have been given its brilliant polish when set in a wooden haft. This feature is unique among the c 1800 axeheads studied by the Projet JADE team across Europe. Elsewhere, where a varied surface texture exists (in the hoard of Bégude-type axeheads from its eponymous findspot: Pétrequin et al. 1998: fig. 4), this is due to the deliberate roughening of the surface, in order to prevent the heads from slipping out of the haft. The presence of a glassy polish is a characteristic feature on some Alpine axeheads, and it is known to have been applied at some considerable distance from the source area of the rock. British and Irish axeheads are unusual in having a particularly high incidence of this surface finish, and this has led to debate within the Projet JADE team as to where, when and why this had been applied. While it seems likely that the axeheads that had passed through the Morbihan during their long itinerary had probably received this special polish there, with other axeheads it seems most likely – at least in the opinion of the first-named author – that the polish was applied in northern France, shortly before the perilous sea journey was undertaken to an uncertain new life in the north (i.e. in Britain and Ireland). If one accepts that these non-utilitarian axeheads had been attributed special powers (e.g. to protect), then their polishing to a glassy sheen would be a logical practice, probably intended to enhance their apotropaic quality. Quite why the St. Enoch’s Church axehead had not been removed from its haft while this was done, we shall never know; perhaps it was stuck.

The second axehead of particular note (Fig. 8) is one that may have been found in Scotland;
we know of it through a reference in G F Kunz’ 1913 book, The Curious Lore of Precious Stones, where it is stated (in a figure caption facing p. 264) that it had been worn by a Scottish gentleman during the 1860s, tied over his loins, as a ‘cure’ for kidney disease (cf. Smith 1963: 169, no. 66, where it also states that the man had been an officer). It is of Altenstadt type, of jadeitite from Mont Beigua, and clearly its 19th century owner had arranged for two holes to be drilled near its ends, and for it to be embellished with a silver mount, so that it could be worn rather like a sporran. This belief in the power of this precious green stone to heal kidney problems is widespread and long-lived: as Kunz pointed out, ‘The name jade is derived from the Spanish designation, piedra de ijada, meaning literally “stone of the flank”, which is said to have been bestowed upon the stone because the Indians [of south America] used it for all diseases of the kidneys. The name nephrite owes its name to the same idea.’ (Kunz 1913: 383). Such ideas were widespread, and can be compared with the traditional popular belief, prevalent until the 19th century, that flint arrowheads were ‘elf bolts’, to be used as charms (Cheape 2008: 114–5).

The third axehead featured here (Fig. 9.1; Smith 1963: 65) might also have been the subject of beliefs, in the last few centuries, as to its curative or protective properties. On display in Traquair House in the Scottish Borders, this magnificent Altenstadt type axehead of jadeitite may well have been found on the extensive estates of the Maxwell Stuart family in south-east Scotland. A fine decorated leather carrying case had been made for it, and as a result of investigations by Robert Stevenson (Keeper of the then-named National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) in 1954 with a colleague from the National Library of Scotland (NLS), it was then believed that the case may have been made in France during the early 18th century, raising the suspicion that the axehead may have been acquired there. The Maxwell Stuart family had spent some time in France during the 18th century. However, in 2007 the principal author of this contribution undertook renewed investigations, consulting rare book curators in the NLS (Dr Brian Hillyard and Eoin Shalloo) and colleagues in the Scotland and Europe Department of National Museums Scotland (NMS, George Dalgleish and Godfrey Evans). From this it was concluded that the box is more likely to have been made in Scotland, and to date to around 1700; the punched designs on the box are indeed of French inspiration, but executed less expertly than is the case with genuine French bookbindings. It is likely that an Edinburgh-based bookbinder who had learned his craft in France made the box; indeed, in the NMS collections there are two other roughly contemporary objects with very similar punched designs (Fig. 9.2–3): one is a carrying case for a jewel, made for the Carruthers family of Holmains, not far from Traquair House, and the

Fig. 9. 1: Altenstadt-type axehead of jadeitite, probably from Traquair Estates, Scottish Borders, and its case; 2: The case alongside other contemporary and similarly-decorated cases from Scotland.

Photos: NMS.
other is a case for calling cards. This discovery lends support to the idea that the axehead had been found in south-east Scotland, where several other similar jadeitite axeheads have been recovered. George Dalgleish has added (pers comm) that the practice of housing individual jewels and precious objects in specially-made boxes during the 17th and 18th centuries was not simply to protect them, but may have indicated that they were particularly revered, and perhaps believed to have special powers: a parallel may be cited in the housing of some religious relics in similar containers in the Vatican. Irrespective of whether the Maxwell Stuart family accorded special powers to the axehead three centuries ago, the fact that the Traquair House axehead has been treated with such care offers an early example of fascination with these beautiful objects.

New friends

During the course of Projet JADE, the list of Alpine axeheads in Britain and Ireland has been augmented in two main ways: firstly, through the systematic inspection (by one of us, YP) of several museum collections, followed by spectroradiometric analysis of candidate specimens; and secondly, through the reporting by members of the public of new discoveries, or of examples held in private collections, thanks to the publicity generated by the Project.

The systematic inspection of several museum collections has unearthed several ‘new’ examples which, because of their small size or the fact that they are not of the commonest (and distinctive) flat triangular shape, means that they had previously evaded notice. These include a teardrop-shaped ‘Durrington’ type axehead of jadeitite in the collections of Marischal Museum in Aberdeen (ABDUA: 35465). This is shown in Fig. 10, beside two axeheads of strikingly similar shape and size, but of non-Alpine rocks (ABDUA: 19825 and 19988). While the exact provenance of these axeheads is unknown, all could have come from north-east Scotland: the Alpine example is recorded as having been found in ‘Aberdeenshire’, while ABDUA: 19825 is from ‘Scotland’ and ABDUA:19988, from Inverurie, Aberdeen-shire. It also seems likely that the two non-Alpine examples represent deliberate copies of the Alpine axehead type – a phenomenon known from elsewhere on the Continent (e.g. in the ‘Cangas’ type axeheads of north-west Spain, made to resemble perforated examples of ‘Tumiac’ type from the Morbihan area of Brittany). The discovery of the previously-unrecognised Alpine axehead in the Marischal Museum collection was followed by a subsequent discovery, by curator Dr Neil Curtis, of a fragment of a large and previously-unrecorded Altenstadt axehead of jadeitite in the same collection (ABDUA:64546). This serves to illustrate that, despite all the previous studies of stone axeheads (e.g. by the Implement Petrology Group/Committee: Clough & Cummins 1979; 1988), hidden treasures may yet lurk in museum collections, and that thorough re-examination, in the light of our current understanding of the range of Alpine axehead materials, shapes and colours, can pay dividends.

As regards Irish Alpine axeheads, the work of Projet JADE was significantly facilitated by the systematic research on all Irish stone axeheads that had previously been undertaken by the Irish Stone Axe Project (ISAP, Cooney & Mandal 1998). This had identified around 15 unusual axeheads with Irish findspots, suspected to be of jadeitite or nephrite, or previously identified as such by previous researchers (e.g. Smith 1963; 1965; 1972). Re-examination of most of these (by YP), followed by selective spectroradiometric analysis, confirmed that the best-known examples (namely the Altenstadt/Greenlaw specimens from Tristia, Co. Mayo; Kincraigy, Co. Donegal; and Paslickstown, Co. Westmeath) are indeed of Alpine jadeitite; that some – e.g. two, in the NMS collection, reportedly found ‘on the banks of the River Shannon’ – are in fact ethnographic specimens (see 10 Stone Axe Studies III Fig. 10. Durrington-type axehead of jadeitite (far left), plus copies in local rock, in Marischal Museum, Aberdeen. Photo: Neil Curtis.
below, ‘false friends’); and others are most unlikely to be of Alpine rock. One – a small example, provenanced only to ‘Ireland’ – has turned out to be of Alpine rock; and it seems likely, from the ISAP photograph of an axehead from Movaghaher, Co. Derry, from the Keiller-Knowles collection, that this, too, is of Alpine rock (the item in question could not be located).

The public response to articles, lectures and newspaper coverage of Projet JADE has turned up several hitherto unknown Alpine examples, along with other axeheads that have turned out not to be of Alpine rock. The former include a Puy-type axehead of jadeitite found around 1975 in Potterhanworth Fen, Lincolnshire (Fig. 11.1), whose closest compositional links are with raw material samples from Mont Beigua; and a burnt fragment of an axehead of probable Altenstadt/Greenlaw type, of jadeitite almost certainly from the Porco valley on Mont Viso, found in February 2010 during fieldwalking on Pentridge Down, Dorset (Fig. 11.2). The Potterhanworth Fen example is of the latest type of Alpine axehead to have circulated widely across Europe and had probably not been as old as the other Alpine axeheads when it was finally deposited in its wetland context; this kind of axehead was being produced in large numbers around and after 4000 BC, its faceted sides probably influenced by the shape of early copper axeheads (Pétrequin et al. this volume). The Pentridge Down axehead fragment joins the cluster of Alpine axeheads from Wessex (Sheridan et al. 2010: fig 6), which includes a further recent find, a small Chelles type axehead of eclogite from Handley Common, Dorset.

One Alpine axehead that came to the authors’ attention as a result of Projet JADE is a very fine Altenstadt axehead of jadeitite, probably from the Porco valley on Mont Viso, and found at Garvock, Aberdeenshire (formerly Kincardineshire: Fig. 12; Kaul 1998: 44; Jensen 2007: 132). This specimen is housed in the Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, where it had acquired an incorrect findspot name of ‘Garsack’ at some time in the past. It was included in Projet JADE thanks to research by team member Lutz Klassen, with the kind co-operation of Flemming Kaul at the Nationalmuseet. This particular specimen has had an interesting his-
tory over the past 150 years, as it was acquired by the famous Danish antiquary J. J. A. Worsaae during his visit to Scotland in October 1846, from whose collection it found its way into the Nationalmuseet. Worsaae acquired the axehead from Scottish antiquary Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe (c 1781–1851), who lived in Edinburgh, was a friend of Sir Walter Scott, and is reputed to have had one of the finest collections of antiquities ever to be accumulated by a private individual in Scotland. The inclusion of this axehead in Projet JADE has served not only to correct its misattribution to a non-existent findspot, but also to bring this long-forgotten Scottish axehead to the attention of British archaeologists. It joins the cluster of Alpine axeheads that have been found – or are alleged to have been found – in north-east Scotland (Fig. 2 and see below).

False friends

Just as Projet JADE has succeeded in identifying previously-unrecognised Alpine axeheads, so it has also been able to disprove an Alpine origin for some specimens that had previously been attributed to that source. This is particularly true as regards axe- and adzeheads made from nephrite, where every confirmed British and Irish example examined to date can be accounted for as being a recent ethnographic ‘manuport’, brought back from distant travels (e.g. by Victorian missionaries, engineers, et cetera), rather than as a Neolithic object made from nephrite from the Valais region of Switzerland (even though such objects are known to exist, mostly in that region). One such ethnographic specimen is the irregularly-shaped axehead found under a rose bush in a garden in Hendon, north-west London (Fig. 13.1), which was published in 1977 as being “probably of Alpine jadeite” (HADAS 1977; cf. Jones et al. 1977: 293, where the material is correctly identified as nephrite). This object finds no convincing match, either in its material or form, among the c 1800 large Alpine axeheads studied by Projet JADE. Instead, the distinctive, foliated green stone can be matched in New Zealand, where nephrite (pounamu) has traditionally been prized. Although axeheads of this material are relatively uncommon there, being outnumbered by adzeheads (Best 1974), it is possible to find parallels for the Hendon axehead in New Zealand. Finds from urban gardens tend to be suspect, as they can easily represent material that had been collected and then discarded, as seems to have been the case with this axehead (as with one found in Warkworth Terrace, Cambridge in 1908, which turned out to be from the West Indies: Smith 1963: 170, A).

Some ethnographic manuports have turned up in the most unexpected places and one can only assume that these, too, represent material that had been collected and then discarded. A classic Maori adzehead (Fig. 13.2) of nephrite was found on an islet in the River Thames, during the construction of a railway bridge, at Strand-on-the-Green, Chiswick (Adkins & Jackson 1977: 43; see Best 1974: plate XVIII.37, for a New Zealand comparandum). Elsewhere along the Thames, at Datchet, an amphibolite axehead (Fig. 13.3) that was reportedly found with other stone axeheads in dredgings was found to be from Woodlark Island, and of a type used in the kula exchange system (inter alia) in the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea. Similarly, deep in the countryside, another amphibolite kula axehead from Woodlark Island turned up on a farm at Droxford, Hampshire (and was published as being of ‘jadeite’: Schofield 1987). Even though the publication stated that it had been found during construction work, a few centimetres below ground level in a previously undisturbed area, further enquiries of its owners in 2008 revealed that this account was not accurate, and that the object had actually been found in a barn. Once again, this seems to be an ethnographic object which had been discarded by previous occupants. More puzzling is the nephrite or serpentinite axehead (Fig. 13.4) that was found on Dartmoor, at Lower Down near Bovey Tracey in 1930, when a new path was being cut ‘through a mound of unknown character, and a few feet from an ancient trackway…’ (Anon 1932; Smith 1963: 158). Of strikingly similar material to the Hendon axehead, its most likely origin is New Zealand or New Caledonia. Could it be that this had been the possession of a sailor?

Ethnographic manuports evidently also lurk, mis-attributed, in some museum collections, including those of National Museums Scotland. Here, two small axeheads that are catalogued as having come ‘from the banks of the [River] Shannon’ (as if from dredging) and acquired, with four others from the same reported Irish provenance, in 1903, were found to be of nephrite, probably from New Zealand or New Caledonia. (Fig. 14.1; NMS X.AG 411, 415). Unfortunately, the NMS records offer no further information about their discovery, nor do the pages of the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and we may never know
whether this is a case of mis-labelling of a mixed collection of material or whether, as with the Thames axeheads, we are dealing with ethnographic objects that had been thrown away in the Shannon.

The accidental mis-labelling of material is a perennial museum problem, especially where the material in question has passed through several hands or where old collections are concerned. Thus, for example, the small amphibolite axehead in the Wiltshire Heritage Museum, Devizes, ‘Believed to be No. 11 of [Sir Richard Colt Hoare’s] Stourhead Collection dug up at the entrance to Scratchbury Camp [Norton Bavant, Wiltshire] by Mr Cunnington’ (Smith 1963: 171, F), is of a type and material that is unmistakably Australian (DZWS:STHEAD.11). Indeed, Campbell Smith remarked that the Stourhead Collection was not confined to British antiquities (ibid.), and he listed that axehead in his Appendix of examples that had previously, and wrongly, been reported as being of Alpine material. However, elsewhere in the same report (p. 164, no. 40), Smith includes as genuine another small axehead allegedly from Broad Town, Wiltshire, housed in the (then-named) British Museum (Natural History). Identified as ‘black amphibole’ by Evens et al. (1962: no. 845) and as unusually-black nephrite by Smith. The Projet JADE team were able to identify this axehead as a New Caledonia specimen, of amphibolite, close to nephrite. In this case the mis-labelling may have occurred because the object had been donated to the museum after the death of its collector, by his widow.

While ethnographic objects can be relatively easy to spot if one is well acquainted with other material of known provenance, it can be harder to recognise Continental archaeological objects of Alpine stone which had been acquired, usually from Swiss lake settlements, by collectors and museums during the late 19th and early 20th century and subsequently mis-labelled as having been found in Britain or Ireland. This appears to have been the case with one small axehead in the Yorkshire Museum which, through no fault of the current staff, seems to have suffered ‘provenance drift’. Labelled simply as ‘Ireland’ (YORYM 2001.1077), the small axehead in question (Fig. 14.2) matches exactly the small axeheads found in Alpine and peri-Alpine lake settlements. Furthermore, recent research by Mark Edmonds has revealed that the Yorkshire Museum, like many others in Britain and Ireland, acquired a sizeable number of Swiss lake village artefacts, in this case as part of the ‘Boynton Collection’, amassed in the latter part of the 19th century. Given the rarity of Alpine axeheads in Yorkshire, it seems likely
that the axehead in question had been acquired as part of this material (Edmonds pers comm).

A final example of a ‘false friend’ relates to the wristguard from Sonning, Berkshire (Fig. 14.3), which had been petrologically identified as being of nephrite (through thin-section petrography) by J E Morey during the 1960s (Evens et al. 1972: 244) – with the implication being that it could have come from the Alps. Thanks to research undertaken by a team of archaeologists, petrographers and geochemists for a current project on Early Bronze Age grave goods (Woodward et al. 2006), 24 wristguards of the same distinctive, pale material – some with a bluish tinge – have now been recognised. All of these were examined macroscopically and most analysed using portable X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometry by Woodward’s team. At first it was thought that the unusual material employed was spotted slate or hornfels, but comparing the results of X-ray diffraction and XRF analysis with spotted slate samples proved this not to be the case, and the materials are identified as amphibole-bearing metasediments (amphibolites). The sources for such rock are currently unknown, but field research continues. Following examination of three of these wristguards (including Sonning) in thin section, their material was confirmed as being of a very fine-grained amphibolite comprising fibrous amphibole, quartz and sphene, which is certainly not an Alpine nephrite. The same conclusion was drawn from the spectroradiometric analysis of six of the wristguards (again, including Sonning).

Conclusions

It is hoped that this brief review of some of the results of Projet JADE has demonstrated the rich dividends that have been reaped from this remarkable exercise in international collaboration. It is only by studying the phenomenon of Alpine artefact production, circulation and use at a pan-European scale that it can begin to be understood. Studying large numbers of axeheads also allows anomalies (such as recent ethnographic manuports) to be identified more easily.

As far as the British and Irish specimens are concerned, it can be claimed that our understanding has been transformed by the new information produced by Projet JADE. The very fact that we can now pinpoint the ultimate source of the rock used for many individual axeheads, and recognise far-flung products from individual jadeite boulders in the Italian Alps,
represents the achievement of a long-held aspiration. Because of this, our axeheads can now be understood within a broader geographical and chronological context. Furthermore, the collaborative work involved in tracking down, researching, borrowing and analysing the British and Irish (and Channel Island) material has yielded new information regarding the finds spot location, and the circumstances of discovery and of acquisition, of several axeheads, as well as unearthing previously-unrecognised specimens. It has also reminded us of some of the pitfalls and problems involved in such a study, especially where poorly-provenanced material is concerned. We need to familiarise ourselves with ethnographic axeheads, with archaeological material imported from the Continent through antiquarian and other collecting activity, and with the history of museums’ collecting; and we do need to check the reliability of finds spot and contextual information, wherever possible.

Loose ends remain to be tied up: the search for hard-to-find privately-held axeheads will continue, for example, and the task of matching each individual spectroradiometric result with all the others has not yet been completed. In the case of axeheads that Projet JADE has shown not to have had an Alpine origin, there remains the question of where the source of the stone is to be found. It would be particularly useful to ‘bottom out’ the question of whether stone from south-west England had been used to manufacture the axehead from a Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Raddon, Devon, for example (Gent & Quinnell 1999: 53).

Projet JADE has had a remarkable impact on the discipline, but it offers broader lessons too. Without doubt, part of the success of this work has been because it has had a high public profile in the media. This has stimulated interest and has also encouraged new discoveries. The work reported here has also demonstrated how useful and powerful the non-destructive technique of spectroradiometry is. With this, and other new characterisation techniques that are now coming on-line, we will be able to return to our collections of other materials with new and more detailed questions.

Acknowledgements

The kind co-operation of a huge number of individuals, from museum curators and field archaeologists to private owners of axeheads, is warmly acknowledged; the number of people involved is too large for each person to be named individually. Special thanks are extended, however, to Gill Varndell and her colleagues in the British Museum for kindly hosting Projet JADE’s 2008 session of analysis; and to Ann Woodward and Rob Ixer for providing up-to-date information on their research on wristguards, along with the photograph of the example from Sonning. Finally, the Editors are thanked for their forbearance.

Bibliography


