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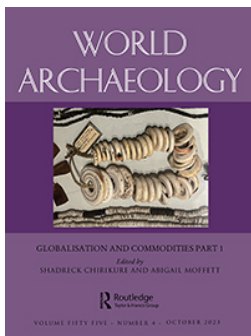
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Sentient beings? Rethinking the meaning of stone in mesolithic burials and beyond

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ABSTRACT

Considerable attention has been given to the skeletal remains and personal ornaments from Mesolithic funerary contexts. Relatively less analytical attention, however, has been given to *lithic objects* frequently found in the same graves. As a result, understandings of grave goods and the broader ontological frameworks surrounding Mesolithic mortuary practices can be argued to be incomplete. A partial picture is perhaps why we have struggled to move beyond monolithic accounts of grave goods as status items. In this paper, I draw on empirical evidence for lithics playing diverse roles in funerary rites and rituals. Connections between stone objects and human bodies are drawn from funerary and other contexts to argue that, rather than being simply inanimate and utilitarian, some stone tools were perceived as living entities. Taking this new ontological perspective enables a radical rethink of the meaning of lithic artefacts in Mesolithic burials and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Mesolithic; lithics; funerary; agency; sentience

Introduction

To a large degree, the European Mesolithic is defined by its lithics. Without the rich cave art of the Palaeolithic and the monuments of the Neolithic, attention has historically focussed on stone tools, and on the development of robust typologies (Bailey and Spikins 2008; Perdaen, Crombé, and Sergeant 2008). This has been important, however, our emphasis on description and dating has consequently played down the social roles that these tools played in the lives *and deaths* of Mesolithic hunting and gathering societies. This lacuna in knowledge is arguably most evident within Mesolithic funerary archaeology, where studies of human skeletal remains (osteology, bioarchaeology) and personal ornaments (beads and pendants, mostly of animal teeth) predominate (Petrović et al. 2024; Rigaud and Little 2025).

Historically, divisions like that made by Schulting (1996), who categorized grave goods from the Late Mesolithic cemeteries of Tévéc and Hoëdic (France), have helped reinforce the notion that flaked and ground lithic artefacts are, by virtue of their practical potential, essentially utilitarian. This sits in stark contrast to other grave goods such as personal ornaments that are often considered material representations of personal identity, linked to concepts of social status and complexity (Mannermaa et al. 2021; Newell et al. 1990; Rigaud and Little 2025).

Building on previous research (Little et al. 2017), this paper seeks to better understand why seemingly 'utilitarian' stone tools were placed with the Mesolithic dead. Using evidence drawn from

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the archaeological record of Mesolithic Europe, I argue that within European Mesolithic burials, lithics had diverse meanings. It is impossible to capture the full depth of variability within funerary contexts; lithics may have performed many roles. In this paper, I focus on just a few:

- As belongings, personal toolkits of the deceased (entangled biographies)
- As gifts from mourners (exchange relationships with the dead)
- As items/equipment involved in mortuary rites
- As equivalents for bodies or parts of bodies
- As sentient beings

Because of the higher frequency of well-preserved Mesolithic burials coming from Northern Europe, in particular northwest Europe, I draw more heavily on examples from this region.

Multi-species Mesolithic Europe

Grounded in broader ontological frameworks (Fausto 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Willerslev 2004), a picture has emerged over the past decade or so of Mesolithic societies' complex relationships with other living entities. Physical and ideological links between human and nonhuman animals have been made possible via an increase in social zooarchaeological approaches within Mesolithic studies, notably in funerary contexts (Pasarić 2023; Živaljević 2015). These approaches have highlighted contexts in which the personhood of animals was recognized – not just in relation to complete animals but also their component parts and the things made from their remains (Conneller 2004; Macãne 2022; Overton and Hamilakis 2013; Pasarić 2023; Živaljević 2015).

Mesolithic researchers have recently begun recognizing other forms of animacy beyond animals – shifting focus to the materiality and entanglement of other living entities, such as plants (e.g. Little et al. 2022; Overton and Taylor 2018; Taylor 2020; Warren 2003). However, greater focus has been on Mesolithic people's perceptions of animals and the diverse objects made from animals within graves, with arguments centring on the personness of the animal and how this survives and continues to have affect after death. Critically, however, these approaches have struggled to recognize the animacy of acellular things. I argue that by focussing on objects made from eukaryotic organisms (animals, plants) we may have privileged cellular life forms, preventing minerals the right of animacy. Thinking of stone as lifeless chronically impacts our ability to conceive of Mesolithic lithics as anything more than mundane utilitarian instruments: bound up in daily economic tasks, useful for identifying activities, site function, and chronologies (Figure 1). To help move beyond this monolithic mindset and rethink people's relationships with stone in Mesolithic Europe, requires a radical change in perspective. To start, we need to accept that, at least some stones, were perceived as *living*.

Ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts enable us to consider the diverse ways in which different societies perceive stone and the tools shaped from it. This is not to draw a direct link through millennia (see Elliott and Warren 2023 for a critique of the use of ethnography in Mesolithic studies), but rather, to explore different cultural perspectives on what stone means, and how this meaning can change depending on social context. Ethnography further highlights another important point – not *all* stones are alive (Breda 2022). Amongst diverse indigenous cultures, variation exists in the way stone (and other beings in the material world) is perceived (Hallowell 1960; Harris and Robb 2012). Stones - *asiniig* - are animate in Anishinaabe (Manitoba, Canada) grammar (Harvey 2017); when an elder was asked whether 'all the stones we see around us here [are] alive?' he replied



Figure 1. Reconstruction drawing of mesolithic domestic life, showing the central role lithics played in broad range of tasks. Illustration by Hege Vatnaland.

'no, but some are' (Hallowell 1960, 24). Within Inka society, not all stones possessed animacy – some are mundane, others are alive (Dean 2010). Sometimes the lives of stones are bound up with select members of society – as is the case for the Gamo lithic practitioners of southern Ethiopia. Here, the

enculturation of technological knowledge is restricted to people with appropriate lineages. Hide-scrapers are not passive objects with secondary agency, dependent on humans. For the Gamo, scrapers have primary agency and are respected as *living beings* (Weedman Arthur 2018).

Mesolithic studies have seen relatively little focus on the materiality of rock sources (Warren 2009). Yet Mesolithic communities often made specific choices about the stones they extracted or gathered, sometimes travelling great distances, and/or participating in exchange networks: seeking specific colours, textures, banding, lustre, luminosity and, perhaps, a material affinity with a particular landscape (e.g. Berg-Hansen et al. 2022; Little 2009; Wickham-Jones 2004). In some places the intangible qualities of stone, their transformability, may have made them charismatic and socially powerful (Nyland 2020). In other instances, life is captured in Mesolithic stone artefacts – ancient creatures fossilized in rock exposures, sometimes eroded on beaches, and as surprises, revealed once a nodule is knapped (Conneller 2011). Similarly, trace wear evidence for flints used as strike-a-lights, creating sparks and fire, essential to human life, conjures a sense of animacy, which is possibly why they are occasionally placed in hunter-gatherer and early farmer mortuary contexts (Friedrich 2007; Lübke, Lüth, and Terberger 2009). Experiences of fossils and fire, alongside its ability to transform and multiply, conceivably reinforced Mesolithic perceptions of stone as a remarkable, living thing.

This contribution aims to extend these insights into the funerary realm. It will focus on occasions when stone tools appear to be more-than-mundane, functional objects. Often these instances occur when stone is bound up in various ways with human bodies, either through entwined biographies or life histories, or when objects take on certain affects of their owners. At times, I argue, stone objects should be seen as animate bodies in their own right.

Why give lithics to the dead?

Flaked and ground lithic artefacts are frequently found in European Mesolithic burials (Grünberg, Gramsch, et al. 2016), often as single finds or in small numbers. Their presence has, however, been difficult to explain (Rigaud and Little 2025). In part, this is because their utility and perceived ‘mundaneness’ is at odds with the ritual context in which they are found. Nonetheless, several examples exist whereby analytical studies have revealed important insights into lithics given to the dead (e.g. Fontana et al. 2020; Grünberg, Graetsch, et al. 2016; Kannegaard 2016; Little et al. 2017; Petrović et al. 2024).

As I aim to demonstrate in the following sections, there exists considerable variation in the reasons why a lithic artefact may have come to rest where it did.

Bodily entanglements

In some cases, lithic grave assemblages appear more like a personal toolkit, containing specialist tools used for varied durations of time to work different contact materials. Two possible examples are the toolkits with wear traces from a male burial at Mondeval de Sora, Italy (Fontana et al. 2020) and the female burial at Bad Durrenberg, Germany (Grünberg, Graetsch, et al. 2016; see also Rigaud and Little 2025). Another possible personal toolkit is the assemblage of lithics from the Groß Fredenwelde standing burial, also from Germany (Terberger et al. 2015). In each of the above cases, individuals were given distinctive lithic assemblages and unusual mortuary treatments. Rather than seeing these simply as reflection of living identity, long-standing personal, specialized equipment, over time, became entangled with the life course of its user/owner (Hodder 2011). These

may even have been understood as extensions of particular people (Bateson 1972) or parts of persons (Fowler 2004). Such long-standing bodily associations may have required tools/toolkits to accompany the deceased into the ground.

More literal forms of physical entanglement between stone and human bodies are visible in the positioning of lithics within Mesolithic graves. Sometimes blades and flakes are found clasped in the hands of the dead (Péquart and Péquart 1929, 1934) as if the tool and the hand are one and the same. An emotive composition which serves as a reminder that ‘tools are made and used by the hands as much as hands are made and used by tools’ (Malafouris 2021, 38; see also Mauss 1979). Stone and human corporeal forms merging, hybridizing, becoming one, is not unlike the merging of human-animal bodies, ‘assemblages of effects’ seen in mortuary contexts from the Danube Gorges (Živaljević 2015). In this light, the placement of a large unused flint blade along the inner forearm of a child aged c. five years, Grave 6, Nederst (see Figure 9 in Kannegaard 2016) raises the possibility of stone and human bodies undergoing, on occasion, similar hybridization. The blade length approximates the length of the child’s forearm, possibly intended as a mineral equivalent of the fleshed one. While it is not inconceivable that a child of this age would use a large blade, the positioning here is unusual.

Intertwined lives

Lithics also seem to have gained significance through active use in the funerary rite prior to their deposition with the deceased. Here their role in key human transformation and rites of passage rendered them powerful objects. Arguably the most striking examples of ‘funerary rite tools’ are the ochre working flint blades from the Danish site, Nederst (Kannegaard 2016), the ochre and hide-working axe from burial 57 Zvenieki, Latvia (Petrović et al. 2024) and the polished shale adze with wood-working traces from Hermitage, Ireland (Little et al. 2017).

At Nederst, several flint blades, found in ochre-filled graves, were found to have mineral-working traces commensurate with the scraping of red ochre nodules to produce power (Kannegaard 2016). Ochre is a common and symbolic aspect of Mesolithic funerary traditions (Ahola 2019; Zagorska 2008). Traces of working ochre, also hide-working, possibly the rubbing of ochre into hide, were macro- and microscopically visible on the axe from burial 57, Zvejniki (Petrović et al. 2024). These traces were not located on the working blade edge, as would be expected. Instead, the lower flat axe surface was used (Figure 2). Researchers have suggested its use may have been linked to the making of funerary shrouds, with archaeoanthatological analysis revealing evidence for wrapping of the female individual buried with the axe (Nilsson Stutz and Larsson 2016). Importantly, the axe itself appears to have received similar treatment, with evidence suggesting it may have been placed into a decorated hide pouch or similar shroud-like wrapping before final deposition (Petrović et al. 2024), as well as being ochre-stained like a buried human. Here, the axe seems to have been treated in the same way as a person, due to its special role, a point that will be discussed in further detail below.

At Hermitage, Ireland, a polished adze was found in a cremation burial pit thought to have also contained a grave post marker. Despite being a well-made, typically curated type of tool, this adze was made with haste and used relatively expediently to chop wood (Little et al. 2017). Its making and use – possibly to chop the tree for the grave post and/or wood for the cremation pyre – may have been conceived as part of the planning and enactment of the funerary rite (Little et al. 2017). Like the Zvejniki burial 57 axe, the Hermitage axe appears to have undergone its own transformation or ‘death’. The final act prior to deposition of this adze was the deliberate blunting of the blade edge, effectively ending its use life, disabling it from further use, unless re-sharpened (Little et al.



Figure 2. Axe from burial 57, Zvejnieki, Latvia. Use-wear and residue analysis showed that the lower/flat surface (visible on right) was likely used in an unconventional way to work ochre into hide. The axe was then placed into what appears to have been a decorated pouch or wrapping within the grave of an adult female individual (see Petrović et al. 2024).

2017). If this method of destruction was to ensure the potency, or affects, of the adze, made sacred by virtue of its involvement in death rituals, could not easily be used again by the living, why then was it not simply smashed and broken? It appears that a more intrinsic objective in this case was to kill the adze, negating its key affects, whilst still retaining its bodily form.

Decommissioning of objects is a mortuary behaviour recognized amongst both some contemporary and prehistoric societies (as well as many other cultures, globally); such practices are believed to ensure dangerous objects were decommissioned from further use and may have been deemed appropriate on the death of their owner (Gravel-Miguel et al. 2017; Jordan 2001). Further examples of this practice in Mesolithic and Neolithic hunting and gathering societies of Northern Europe, are evident: lithics were sometimes broken into parts, such as the many lithic projectiles from Finnish Stone Age burials, missing their vital active part – the tip (Ahola 2017); while a flint knife from burial 3, Kubenino, Russia was deliberately snapped, with the middle section retained and the two ends placed under the head of a so-called ‘Stone Age giant’ (Foss 1938 cited in Ahola et al. 2020).

From intertwined biographies to animate beings

This evidence for the decommissioning or ‘killing’ of some lithics, plus the parallels between the treatment of human bodies and lithic materials in mortuary contexts suggests that some objects were understood as animate beings. Parallels between human and lithic ‘bodies’ can be seen in a range of funerary and non-funerary contexts in Mesolithic Europe. Examples include what has been described as ‘limestone balls and phallus-shape limestone rod’, excavated from grave VI-17,

Dudka, Poland (Gumiński and Bugajska 2016). Likewise, at Nivå 10, Denmark, in a double burial containing an adult male and a 3–4-year-old child, a penis-shaped stone was placed partially under the male's neck (Jensen 2016). At the site of Åmose in Zealand, two flint nodules, one natural, representing a penis form, the other engraved figuratively, interpreted as a vulva, have been recorded (Fischer 1974).

Most elaborate is what has been interpreted as a stylized male engraved flint core at the Homegård V, Danish settlement site (Fischer 1974). In the case of the Homegård refitted artefact, links between the phallic shape of the natural flint nodule and the male form etched onto its surface, have been drawn (Fischer 1974; see also Conneller 2011; Płonka 2021). Post-engraving, the nodule was knapped, producing three cores and 67 flakes, heaped together. These have been refitted, but some blanks are missing (Fischer 1974). It has been suggested that the missing blanks may have been taken elsewhere, bound up in male rites of passage such as those 'connected to circumcision, tattooing or scarification' (Conneller 2011, 87). Each of these functions requires incising the skin, not unlike the process of engraving the cortical skin of the nodule, producing parallels between lithic and human bodies. Despite the true scale of these practices remaining unclear, similarities between fragmentation of flint (and other types of stone) bodies with the widely spread Mesolithic practice of scattering disarticulated human remains (Cobb and Gray Jones 2018; Nilson Stutz 2003) come to mind. In this way, parallels between the practices of fragmentation of stones and human bodies, and indeed their assembling in similar contexts, generated understandings of past worlds.

In Mesolithic Europe, gendering, perhaps even sexualizing, of stone appears to have been expressed across different contexts: those associated with everyday life as well as death, and through different artistic expressions, including deposits of naturally occurring phallic-shaped nodules. It is not difficult to appreciate the potency of these objects; alongside their profound maleness, expressions of sex, sexuality, fertility, enduring life, and life cycles appear the most obvious.

A limited range of lithic typologies exists within mortuary contexts. Blade and flake forms predominate; often unretouched, deposited singularly, or in small numbers. Morphologically, complete blades bear likeness to the human form. The proximal end, with a pronounced bulb of percussion (if knapped with hard hammer percussion) representing the head and upper body, and the narrow, tapered, distal end representing the lower body. Scars, in the form of previous blade removals, serve as a reminder of other related lives and experiences. Cortex, if present, and as discussed above, resembles skin; its absence akin to the naked, or even defleshed, bodily form. While not as explicit as the impressive figurines made from flint, known from other prehistoric European and Near Eastern hunter-gatherer cultures (e.g. Floss et al. 2014; Kaufman et al. 2018), this level of body modification may not have been necessary to capture their humanness.

Within Mesolithic society, blade forms were given to the dead of all ages, including new-borns. Even taking into consideration that contemporary hunter-gatherer children typically use tools from a young age (Hewlett 2017), it is not physically possible for infants to be tool users. Yet, it is not uncommon within the Mesolithic mortuary record for this age category to be given blades – often just one or two. In grave 8, a double burial at Vedbæk, Denmark, were the remains of an adult female and a newborn (Brinch Petersen et al. 2015). A blade was laid on the baby's pelvis. Blades and truncated blades are common in Mesolithic graves and are often found in the pelvic area, indicating they were worn on the body as knives. A close association with human bodies, particularly the pelvic/genital area, might have elevated perceptions of some blades to that of powerful objects within the funerary sphere. Furthermore, their association with infants provides significant empirical evidence that not all lithics in grave contexts represent personal equipment.

Arguably the best example of lithics being given to non-tool users is their presence in dog burials. At Skateholm, Sweden, an argument has been made for dog burials representing a practice whereby the dog stood in for its owner (Larsson 1989). This idea is linked to the human body being irretrievable for burial and the fact some dogs appear to have been accorded the same burial rites as humans, including provisioning of funerary gifts. Such is the case for the Skateholm dog burials, one of which contained three flint blades at the dog's hip, and another with 'a single flint flake in a position that suggests it was deliberately deposited' (Larsson 1990, 156). If we assume the position that blades were powerful objects, rather than *the dog* symbolizing its owner we might consider that it is in fact *the blades/flakes* who come to stand for dog's owners, perhaps embodying their extended bodily affects. Re-interpreting the Skateholm dog burials is just one way we can reframe the role of lithics, challenging the anthropocentric viewpoint which so often centralizes humans and non-human animals, in the Mesolithic funerary record.

Some blades placed into graves were regarded as powerful, perhaps animate, beings; this is what made them a suitable companion for the dead. Such a perspective, I argue, accounts for: why so few are ever placed into any single grave, in that they represent individual life forms, possibly representing close kin; why rarely do we see other more formal tool types selected (see axes below for an exception); and why blades were given to non-tool users, e.g. infants and dogs. Hence, some blade offerings may never have been used in daily tasks, formed parts of personal toolkits, or used in performing funerary rites. They entered the grave because *they themselves were a living entity requiring appropriate burial*.

Axe bodies

Another, albeit less frequent, lithic artefact type known from burials is the stone axe/adze. The example from burial 57 at Zvejnieki, discussed above, used for preparing shrouds and itself buried in a shroud, suggests these at times were potent beings which embodied fundamental concepts of humanness, as well as an economic power to transform materials. Flaked and polished varieties of axes are sometimes found in European Mesolithic burials, and like blades, are rarely found in multiples (Ahola 2020). Whilst further research into their occurrence through time and space, and their specific archaeological contexts, is needed, what is evident is that they are known from some of the earliest (Eriksen and Andersen 2016; Little et al. 2017), and more elaborate Mesolithic burials (Grünberg, Graetsch, et al. 2016; Petrović et al. 2024). Problematically, however, we know very little about the lives of axes prior to entering the grave. Other than a small handful of studies (e.g. Eriksen and Andersen 2016; Grünberg, Graetsch, et al. 2016; Little et al. 2017; Petrović et al. 2024), burial axes have received limited analytical attention. As such, it is unclear whether the types of complex treatments axes received as part of mortuary rites at Hermitage and Zvejnieki are indicative of broader Mesolithic cultural traditions.

What we can see, however, is that capturing the complete bodily form of burial axes seems to have been important. At Strandvägen, Sweden, axes retain bodily form in burial and other special depositions with/without human bones (except for burial 14). This contrasts with the more than two hundred broken axes or heavily utilized axes from other contexts at the site (Fredrik Molin pers. comm.; see also Carlsson 2008). Similarly, at Zvejnieki, the more than 40 axes excavated from the adjacent settlement were all either broken or displayed heavily utilized edges, whereas the five recovered from burial contexts were complete and unutilized, except the one from burial 57. Like the axe from Hermitage (Figure 3), the Zvejnieki axe's working blade edge, it seems, was important to keep intact. Elsewhere, having a functional blade-edge appears less relevant. At Dudka, Poland, pseudo axe forms, natural



Figure 3. The Hermitage (Ireland) early Mesolithic polished shale axe - polished to a high finish, albeit with some flake removals remaining. Wood working traces, suggestive of a relatively short duration of use, were identified. The intentional blunting of the blade edge, post-use and prior to its final deposition, is only visible microscopically (see Little et al. 2017).

cobbles shaped like an axe, were found in some burials (Gumiński and Bugajska 2016). Pseudo axes may have provided the same ‘axe essence’ as ‘real’ axes, suggesting they did not actually need to *function as an axe*; their bodily form alone captured qualities of *axe-ness*.

Burying stone bodies

Thus far I have concentrated on developing a new ontological framework for lithics in burial contexts. This makes sense, the placement of objects into graves is linked to broader Mesolithic beliefs and ideologies which make it relatively easy to consider the social and animate personas of lithics. If we accept, however, that, on occasion, lithics in burial contexts were perceived as living entities, how might this translate into other (non-mortuary) contexts?

Lithic caching and other unusual depositions and treatments of stone artefacts provide an excellent way into exploring non funerary ritualized behaviours relating to sourcing, use and deposition (see also Blinkhorn and Little 2018). With the right analytical ‘toolkit’ insights into the special treatment of lithics is possible. A case in point is the flint cache from Star Carr – an Early Mesolithic lakeside settlement in Britain (Milner, Conneller, and Taylor 2018). Analytical work, combining spatial data with technology, refitting and microwear studies, revealed that the cache was in fact derived from a single flint core that had been knapped, producing 57 pieces, most of which were used. Wear traces all resulted from processing animal materials (meat, hide, bone), indicating butchering-related activities. After being used, these butchery tools were deposited together in an organic bag or basket, on a wooden platform extending out into the shallow waters of the lake; an area of the site where more formal ritualized deposition of animal remains also took place (Conneller, Little, and Birchenall 2018).

While we cannot rule out that the Star Carr cache represents a lost or abandoned toolkit, the production, use and deposition of lithics, nearly all used in butchering activity, looks intentional. This may be because of the flint’s employment in a specific event of animal processing that necessitated this special treatment. In this case, it seems appropriate to first birth and then bury flint bodies whose short lives had been spent performing ritualized animal-processing tasks. Other Mesolithic

caches, if given similar analytical attention, may reveal other wear patterns and/or unusual treatments prior to their collective burial (Blinkhorn and Little 2018). What the Star Carr cache illustrates is that, beyond the grave, and armed with the right analytical and theoretical approaches, we can challenge economically determined narratives relating to caches and other unusual lithic depositions from non-funerary contexts.

Discussion

This paper has offered a new perspective on the lithic artefacts found in Mesolithic burial contexts. Limited research focus historically given to lithic artefacts in Mesolithic graves has impeded the development of theoretical insights into what their presence in death contexts represents. We have tended to look for a rational explanation, in large part due to their perceived utility and ubiquity within domestic contexts. As such, narratives have circled around similar themes: personal equipment, tools for the afterlife, accidental inclusions. Combined with broader monolithic debates that focus on Mesolithic grave goods as items linked to social status and complexity, we have struggled to appreciate the diverse social roles lithics played in the mortuary sphere. Until we take lithics in burial contexts seriously, variation in the meanings associated with grave goods, as a mortuary practice, will remain elusive.

Some lithics went into graves unused, possibly commissioned for the funeral, or selected from material stores. Occasionally, lithics appear to have been deliberately decommissioned through acts of destruction and deposition. Positioning of tools in hands and in association with other parts of the corpse entangles human and stone bodies, sometimes with no physical demarcation between them – one is simply an extension of the other. The syntax of these compositions is hard to decipher; stone affects, its immortal qualities, may have been drawn on as way of ensuring permanency of parts of the human body. Microwear analysis has revealed important information about their past use prior to deposition. Some appear to have been used for very specific tasks. While impossible to determine definitively, distinctive toolkits, utilized for specialized activities, which extended human bodies and were entwined with human biographies may have required appropriate burial. Evidence is emerging for another type of grave good, ‘funerary rite tools’ – tools which potentially played an active part in commemoration activities. Teasing apart these differences provides vital empirical information about why some lithics came to be deposited into the grave and others did not.

In trying to better understand variation in what lithic grave offerings represent, we are faced with a much bigger question – what is stone in Mesolithic ontology? I have used two case studies – blades and axes from mortuary contexts – to propose a radically different way of thinking about lithics. Their infrequency of occurrence within a single burial context, morphological form, alongside other lines of archaeological evidence, were used to suggest that some blades and axes found in Mesolithic burials may have been regarded as persons. Post-humanist approaches have played a powerful role in changing the way we think about animal remains within Mesolithic burial contexts (Conneller 2013; Živaljević 2015). Living organisms, non-human animals, and plants, from both within and outside of the Mesolithic funerary sphere, are broadly accepted as having social agency within prehistoric hunter-gatherer world views. However, a focus on cellular organisms has inadvertently created a hierarchy that privileges some kinds of beings over others. This restricted mindset within Mesolithic studies has historically excluded seemingly inanimate materials/objects, like those made of minerals, despite such distinctions often lacking in animist indigenous theory (Viveiros de Castro 1998).

By contrast some Mesolithic stones may have been gendered – as expressed through engraving, shaping and the selection of naturally phallic forms. Life cycles of stones, from procurement (conception) to death (deposition) were captured and celebrated in different settings. Transformative capabilities, their essentialness to life itself, containment of other life forms (fossils), an ability to create sparks/fire, may have led to stone being considered a remarkable living thing. And like all living things, on occasion, stone experienced death. The lives of some tools were sometimes cut short by ritual ‘killing’. Other times death may have occurred through natural causes: the everyday attrition accrued over its lifetime. The lives (and deaths) of humans and lithics may have been so deeply interconnected that both required special treatment in the form of burial.

Conclusion

We have reached a critical impasse in Mesolithic lithic studies. Detailed technological and typological classification systems now exist for most regions in Europe, providing an excellent basis for exploring new ontological perspectives of stone as a living entity, moving beyond the idea it was an important part of people’s economic, and to a lesser degree, social life. Revealing the fullness of stone’s social roles requires an integrated analytical approach, building from the microscale, one artefact at a time. While this may be painstaking work, it is vital if we want to reveal the diversity of reasons why lithics were placed with dead. Only then will we come to know more about why they came to rest where they did. In turn, bringing us a step closer to understanding stone in Mesolithic Europe.

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Data availability statement

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within article.

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