

Rarity and rank in Neolithic France

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The pursuit of higher social rank by possessing artefacts of rare skill or distant origin is a familiar principle (Binford 1962; Helms 1993). *Signes de richesse* ('Signs of wealth') is an exhibition of evidence for this practice during the Neolithic period in France. It opened in June 2015 at the French National Museum of Prehistory, Les Eyzies, where the usual fare is Palaeolithic archaeology (Chancerel *et al.* 2015: 13). The exhibition's main concepts and some of its data spring from the great 'Jade Project' on the acquisition, manufacture and distribution of 'big axes' (Pétrequin *et al.* 2012). The display is alluring, but the underlying argument is flimsy because the conceptual principles remain implicit. For whom, then, was *Signes* designed?

Drawing on 30 collections, including the museum's own, the exhibition comprises 91 pieces or small assemblages. Among the oldest are the worked Atlantic and Mediterranean seashells from 300km inland at Bas-des-Vignes (Figure 1). Axeheads from several regions are displayed, made from sumptuous Alpine jade, Pyrenean nephrite, and polished quartz pelite quarried in the Jura and Alsace. There are pierced discs of jadeite, serpentine and amphibolite, and beads of steatite, jet and green Catalonian variscite. The miscellaneous 'treasure' from Pauilhac looks as striking as when it was unearthed in 1865. The exhibition emphasises delicately fashioned arrowheads and superbly wrought or polished axes and blades of flint from the quarries and mines near Bergerac and the Grand Pressigny; it also shows the cast of a core and blades from La Creusette. From the later Neolithic, there is a Bodrogkeresztúr copper axehead found in Meaux in 1859, now identified by chemical analysis as probably Serbian. The very first metals do, indeed, seem to have been imported from east and south, but it transpires that most of the early copper ingots and blades were made in southern France. So too, perhaps, was the Beaker gold jewellery, which is also on display, from among the finds by Antoine Chancerel and Patrice Courtaud at the Tumulus des Sables. A 'statue menhir' illustrates how late Neolithic dignitaries may have worn or borne their signs of distinction and there are replicas of three others. A wall panel explains how experimental archaeologists calculated the time that went into producing a pierced stone disc. The well-illustrated catalogue (Chancerel *et al.* 2015) is based on 14 careful essays, with three brief contributions on mineral characterisation.

The visual clarity with which the exhibits are presented at Les Eyzies serves to illustrate adroitly the research on sources and craftsmanship. They are in 16 elegant, well-spaced floor cases, with the menhir in a wall case. Painted white, the gallery's walls are decorated with only a few simple motifs. Despite some concern about the susceptibility of the jet, the display enjoys natural light; but the menhir benefits less from it.

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The conceptual weakness is a paucity of information about contexts. It is assumed that we can recognise adequately the original values of artefacts in materials that were rare and, or, difficult to work, and that there is independent evidence for a minority who could



Figure 1. Dentalium necklace and breast ornament, belt fastener of *Spondylus*, limestone bracelet; the latter 104mm in diameter. Discovered in a woman's burial at Bas-des-Vignes, northern France (Musée Régional d'Archéologie et du Vin de Champagne, Épernay, image courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux).

afford or demand such artefacts. These principles are mentioned in the catalogue (Chancerel *et al.* 2015: 16–17) but are not consistently expounded in the gallery. For many of the exhibits, the source of the fabric is evidence of presumed rarity or exotic origin but the labels and small accompanying maps are minimal. If, indeed, the intention is to let us dwell on the exhibits themselves, could we not be given a sheet of notes to consult? Also minimal is the information about the contexts of deposition—is the object from a workshop or a tomb, or is it a stray find? Of course, to have explained that better might have begged questions about how the artefacts worked as 'signs'. Many visitors surely need more guidance than the catalogue's scant hints about context. More explanation is

needed too about how political exploitation of exotica and the patronage of skill may have worked. The catalogue does admit, in its conclusion, that the sociological implications are very broad. To have acknowledged them better in the gallery would have made *Signes de richesse* more exciting.

The exhibition remains at Les Eyzies until 15 November. It will then be at the Musée des Confluences, Lyon, from 1 December until 17 April next year. Will the interpretive problem be more obvious at Lyon's larger and less specialised museum?

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