

**Review of: Cooney, G., Gilhooly, B., Kelly, N. & Mallía-Guest, S. (eds) (2020). *Cultures of Stone: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Materiality of Stone*. Leiden: Sidestone Press. Paperback, 298 pp., 60 bw illus., 45 fc illus. ISBN 9789088908910. Open access: <https://www.sidestone.com/books/cultures-of-stone>**

*Katharine Walker*

People's relationships with the materiality of stone have highlighted its importance in forming the foundations of societies. Through stone, social relations are mediated. This refreshing volume approaches the materiality of stone with great temporal depth and broad geographical scope. It presents a rich cross-disciplinary dialogue about its meanings and significance. A clear, concise Introduction is followed by 17 chapters across three themes, which follow an object biography approach. These are: quarrying and moving stone; making, building and re-imagining with stone; and stone in ritual space and practice. An Afterword by Gabriel Cooney concludes the volume.

Quarrying and moving stone is the theme uniting chapters on the relationship between stone and life in the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century quarry town of Texas, Maryland (Fracchia); Roman colours of power (Dodge); Yapese stone money (Glumac & Fitzpatrick); and models of sculpture production in the Early Middle Ages (Beghelli). When these chapters are considered together, the differences in product scale becomes apparent. They demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the properties of the material held by those working it, as well as symbolism and meaning in attributes such as colour. They show how quarrying can transform landscapes and products can move over long distances, sometimes as valuable exchange objects and symbols of cultural traditions. Stone has an ability to outlast the society which quarried it, shaped it, and used it, and it can be given a new social life in a different form.

Making, building, and re-imagining in stone is addressed in chapters on contemporary prehistoric stone-tool design (Ganchrow); Stormont's stones: The oratory of power through form and materiality (O'Neill); the role of stone fisheries in shaping the cultural landscape of the Minh River Valley, Portugal, (Madail & Malherio); Dialectics of impermanence in Josef Sudek's Prague (Tutter); stones in West Cornwall (Pratt); and sacred granite: Preserving the Downpatrick High Cross (King). These chapters address the relationships between people and things, specifically stone

within an ensemble of things used to create social worlds. The complex relationship between materiality and temporality is a prominent theme. Dualities of permanence and impermanence are explored, as stone weathers and monuments are dismantled. Placed or shaped stones are set against natural geology, an often-blurred duality. Humans have an ability to replicate and design stone objects.

Stone in ritual space and practice is covered by chapters on symbolism in Irish round towers (Kerr); fire and flames on Roman cinerary urns (Brent); stone grave building at the cemetery of Les Tombes at Estagel (Gil); worship and stones on the Cycladic islands (Angliker); Hermes and the stone cairn in Greek Antiquity (Doyle); the significance and meaning of stone artefacts and their sources to Aboriginal people in the Pilbara region of Western Australia (McDonald & Coldrick); and ethnographic analogies for the ritual use of rock crystal (Hess). Human engagement with stone and the relationship between materials and materiality are expressed most clearly in these chapters. They focus on practice and the richness and diversity of the intangible meanings of stone. The importance of stone as an expression of the sacred world and its presence at the heart of numerous religions is striking. What emerges is the role of myth in explaining the origin and importance of different types of stone. It can be sculpted to reflect beliefs or read as a blank canvas to which meanings can be attributed. Place and setting, and its role in the interaction between the living and the dead are important. Another theme is the link created between the human body and stone, an attempt to match the short-term nature of human lives and the certainty of mortality with the permanence of stone.

Beyond the more immediate theme of endurance, Cooney provides examples to illustrate the geographical and temporal depth of the human engagement with stone, and the complexity of its uses and attributed meanings. He demonstrates why stone is such an important part of the archaeological record. Cooney highlights challenges posed by the agreed notion that stone is fixed and capable of conveying meanings into the future. He explains that the life of stone can be ended deliberately as the result of human action; however, it can be reused and given a new life. This complex temporarily makes stone an important element of the material world. It is people who inscribe it with meaning. Cooney concludes with the analogy of travellers leaving stones to guide others on their journeys, with the chapters of this volume leading future researchers.

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The volume follows a conference organised by its editors in 2014 entitled 'Cultures of Stone: Interdisciplinary Research on the Materiality of Stone' held in University College Dublin and is strongly reflected in the chapters included. The book is nicely produced with a contemporary feel. The editing is generally good, and the chapters are well-referenced. There is some slight variation in the quality of the images, in particular the resolution of some maps, as might be expected with chapters from such a range of contributors.

Ultimately, this book invites one to think more closely about the importance of stone. While tremendously diverse as a medium, stone is central to the making of the human world and people's engagement with it. There is something for everyone in this volume. It is a fascinating read that will resonate with us all – a triumph.

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