

Looking through the crystal ball: Ethnographic analogies for the ritual use of rock crystal

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During the last few years, there has been increasing evidence for the utilisation of rock crystal by prehistoric groups in Europe, including mining and long distance exchange. The fascination with this transparent and geometrically formed mineral seems to be almost a universal phenomenon throughout history. Even nowadays that we are aware of the geochemical processes leading to the formation of crystalline quartz, it remains unbroken. Furthermore, rock crystal plays an important role within cosmological belief systems of recent traditional societies. Based on an in-depth study of ethnographic literature from various regions around the world, with a focus on North America, the paper presents several examples for the ritual use of rock crystal. These include gift exchange, hunting magic, and initiation rites. Combining different scales of analysis, the paper is on the one hand concerned with specific artefact types, and on the other hand, illustrating general patterns on an intercultural level. The knowledge gained through the examination of ethnographic data is of significant value for the study of rock crystal in an archaeological context, in so far as it increases the range of possible interpretations. In a more general sense, the paper argues for the analysis of lithic materials from a substantivist perspective.