

What can a stone tool tell us about the past?



Among the most common artefacts found during excavations in Samoa are stone tools from basalt, mainly in the form of adzes and scrapers. A typology of Samoan adzes was worked out by Roger Green and Janet Davidson in the 1960s. The form and shape of an adze could be due both to what it has been used for or to the time when this type of adze was in fashion.

Experimental archaeology tests copies of stone tools by carrying out microscopic studies of the wear pattern. This can be compared with wear patterns of ancient artefacts in order to tell us something about those were used for. Archaeologists also study the manufacturing processes of stone tools to understand the level of technology and craftsmanship.

The study of stone tools can also be used to understand interactions between groups of peoples on various islands in the past. There are several adze quarry sites on Tutuila, which probably was selected because of the excellent quality of the basalt there. Geochemical analysis of a stone tool can indicate the composition of the stone and, therefore indicate the quarry site the stone material derived from. Such studies have shown for example that adzes of Samoan origin were distributed as far as the Solomon Islands and Cook Islands already during prehistoric times. It is important that you should handle artefacts with care and do not take them from their original of context before they have been studied and mapped, because the careful study of past material culture can tell you a lot more than you think.

