Beyond Provenance

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Preface: FLAME and the ‘Oxford System’

The intention of this volume is to present a coherent explanation of what has become known as ‘the Oxford System’ for interpreting the chemical and isotopic data from archaeological copper alloy objects. This system began with the DPhil of Peter Bray (2009), motivated by his conviction that the variation observable within the chemical data was not simply ‘noise’ but contained evidence of human behaviour. This resulted in the definition of what are now known as ‘Copper Groups,’ and was combined with ubiquity mapping to study the movement of metal in the British and Irish Early Bronze Age. These ideas were subsequently developed over several years with the support of the Leverhulme Trust and the John Fell Fund, gradually being extended to deal with alloy data, and finally lead isotope data. In the meantime the opportunity arose to submit an application to the European Research Council for a large-scale project to study the circulation of metal in the Bronze Age across the whole of Eurasia, which was awarded and began in October 2015. The title was ‘the Flow of Ancient Metal across Eurasia’ (FLAME). Part of this project involved further developmental work on the interpretative systems, and the creation of a large open access GIS database of all of the known chemical and isotopic analyses of Bronze Age copper alloy metalwork from all of Eurasia north of the Himalaya. This database will also contain embedded tools which allow the implementation of the interpretative methods developed within the project.

This volume is not a summary of the outcomes of the FLAME project—that is still ongoing, and data continue to be entered into the GIS database. It is specifically intended to describe in some detail the methodologies proposed for interrogating these data, and to explain the philosophy underlying the whole project, since it is quite different from much of what has gone before. Several papers (listed at the end of this preface) have already been published which explain different aspects of the methodology, but inevitably they are rather brief because they are in the peer-reviewed journal literature. Moreover, our ideas have developed rapidly over the past five years, and sometimes the emphasis of how we see the system has changed. Here we present what we now see as an integrated system, and we also have the opportunity to explain the methodology and philosophy in much more depth than has been possible previously. We illustrate the methodology with some examples taken from recent work in Oxford.
**FLAME and other relevant recent publications from Oxford**


*In press*


*In preparation*


Pollard, A.M., Liu, R. and Rawson, J. (in prep.). Every Cloud has a Silver Lining: using silver concentration to identify the number of sources of lead used in Shang Dynasty Bronzes.