

Obsimania 101

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Paper Abstract

Obsidian is a naturally occurring volcanic glass which erupts under very specific conditions, typically in geodynamic regions where plate tectonics have created crustal instability and uplift. It can be found within the margins of felsic (rhyolitic) lava flows where the chemical composition (high silica content) causes a high viscosity which, upon rapid cooling, forms a natural glass from the lava. While obsidian occurs in a number of tectonically active regions, obsidian does not occur in all volcanic regions, and it remains rare. Obsidian was, and in some cases still is most commonly used for its extremely sharp edges, notably as a tool (cutting, incising, piercing, scraping, etc.). However, it has had different meanings, uses and circulation networks in different regions of the world, and still has resonance today. In fact, if you search obsidian online, you will find almost 100 million entries ranging from articles in the Earth Sciences, to online gem markets luring you with obsidian's therapeutic and metaphysical properties, to obsidian-inspired popular culture. There are hundreds of scholarly books, articles, blogs, and websites that touch on the topic of obsidian, and yet it remains attractive and mysterious to humans. Starting with a layered definition of what makes up obsidian (chemical, geological, geographical, and aesthetic, to name a few), this paper presents a summary of how we study this material to reconstruct past socio-economic and cultural processes. A number of examples are presented to illustrate the tellurian and ethereal value obsidian has had for humans through space and time, from its use by our hominin ancestors in East Africa over a million years ago to its manifestation in gaming cults and comic books today, demonstrating to what extent the obsidian craze is universal.