Material culture has been part of a distinctively human way of life for more than two million years. Recent symbolic and social analyses have drawn much attention to the role of material culture in human society, emphasising the representational and ideological aspects of the material world. These studies have, nonetheless, often overlooked how the very physicality of material culture and our material surroundings makes them unique and distinctive from text and discourse. In this study, Nicole Boivin explores how the physicality of the material world shapes our thoughts, emotions, cosmological frameworks, social relations, and even our bodies. Focusing on the agency of material culture, she draws on the work of a diverse range of thinkers, from Marx and Merleau-Ponty to Darwin, while highlighting a wide selection of new studies in archaeology, cultural anthropology, history, cognitive science, and evolutionary biology. She asks what is distinctive about material culture compared with other aspects of human culture and presents a comprehensive overview of material agency that has much to offer to both scholars and students.

Nicole Boivin is senior research associate at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge. She is editor, with Mary Ann Owoc, of Soils, Stones, and Symbols: Cultural Perceptions of the Mineral World.
Material Cultures, Material Minds

The Impact of Things on Human Thought, Society, and Evolution

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To my parents, Janet and Joseph Boivin
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Members of the Australian Aboriginal community are respectfully advised that this book contains reference to a deceased Indigenous person.
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As those close to me will know, this book has been a long time in the making. Its origins lie in ideas that emerged during the writing of my PhD thesis, and its main thesis has evolved dramatically in subsequent years. I am grateful for the many ‘homes’ I have had during its conception, research, and writing. The book proposal for Cambridge University Press was generated during my time as a Research Fellow in Cognitive Archaeology at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge from 2002 to 2004. I am very grateful to Colin Renfrew and Chris Scarre for their support and encouragement during my time at the Institute. The conference entitled Rethinking Materiality, organised by Chris Gosden, Elizabeth DeMarrais, and Colin Renfrew in March 2003, and published by the McDonald Institute, provided an important venue for me to test out and develop some of my ideas at an early stage.

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Nicole Boivin. Recent symbolic and social analyses have drawn much attention to the role of material culture in human society, emphasising the representational and ideological aspects of the material world. These studies have, nonetheless, often overlooked how the very physicality of material culture and our material surroundings make them unique and distinctive from text and discourse. In this book, Boivin explores how the physicality of the material world shapes our thoughts, emotions, cosmological frameworks, social relations and even our bodies. Material and Non-Material Culture. Sociologists describe two interrelated aspects of human culture: the physical objects of the culture and the ideas associated with these objects. Material culture refers to the physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture. These include homes, neighborhoods, cities, schools, churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, offices, factories and plants, tools, means of production, goods and products, stores, and so forth. When considering non-material culture, sociologists refer to several processes that a culture uses to shape its members' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Four of the most important of these are symbols, language, values, and norms. In Material Cultures, Material Minds, Nicole Boivin invites readers to rethink fundamental relationships between people and material culture. With indifference to disciplinary boundaries, her highly original synthesis shows how the material world plays and has long played a fundamental role in shaping human thought, society and, over the long term, evolution. A post-processualist archaeologist trained at Cambridge University, Boivin became adept at treating material culture as a symbolic medium. Her specialty, however, is geoarchaeology, the study of soils. Through immersion in this