

Preface

Small traces, big issues

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Within this volume are a series of papers that explore how non-destructive analytical analysis of material culture from European Mesolithic to Bronze Age contexts can contribute to understanding material life-histories or biographies. It builds upon an emerging body of work that utilises the principles of use-wear analysis especially to explore object histories (e.g. Van Gijn 2010), rather than simply function. Here, this is enacted through a particular lens, giving attention to those things caught up in practices we label as ritual (e.g. hoarding, burial, intentional destruction), and so inform the nature of those practices themselves. In its approach it pulls together two important strands current in later prehistoric research: an increasing interest in things on their own terms and their position within social worlds (cf. Olsen 2010; Miller 2008); and the renewed impact of scientific analyses and the potential of such to pose new questions as well as address existing ones.

Several themes emerge, of which attention might be drawn to those of scale, time/space, trace and value. Research of the kind reported here reminds us of how successful archaeological work must always involve ‘tacking’ between scales. Many of the papers report on how close observation of microscopic and macroscopic traces help determine the utilisation, working and life-histories of items of portable material culture, which can then be framed within process enacted across locales (e.g. settlement and cemeteries) and landscapes. Temporal scale takes in traces that might be formed in a matter of seconds, minutes or hours – wear on the edge of a flint tool, the breakage of an axe or quern, or re-sharpening of an arrowhead, for example – but which may endure over their systemic lives and across the millennia to become the focus of analysis. Papers in this volume describe timescapes both long and short, and highlight the varied temporal currencies of things. Kogălniceanu, for example, contrasts the extended and complicated lives of *Spondylus* shell ornaments against the systemic brevity of ceramic figurines made for deposition in the grave.

It is, of course, the coming together of time, space and interaction with people, places and other things that lies at the heart of object biography (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999). Understanding how objects hold time, space and trace of their engagement with people, gestures, other materials, and the social conditions within which they operate, is really at the heart of the studies here. It is nicely articulated by Bjørnevad’s study of South Scandinavian Mesolithic hoards. The notion of itinerary

provides another route (Joyce and Gillespie 2015), paying attention to how things operate in motion, and tracing the places where objects are active and where they come to rest. Those studies focused on grave items by Kaňáková, Kufel-Diakowska et al., Cendrowska provide cases in point, since they identify the prior lives of objects in settlements and in landscape tasks before their final coming to rest in funerary settings – roles that shift according to place and practice. Perhaps part of the power of these objects comes from that movement through habitual worlds and places, which is then reflected upon at the point of burial?

Ultimately, being able to pick up upon biography and/or itinerary is dependent on being able to see changes brought about to things through their interactions with the world. This is where trace and transformation become so important. Sometimes it is a case of focusing on what is missing (the signature of fragmentation); in other instances it is the patina of age and handling; or the microscopic wear and flaking of the edge of a stone tool (Bye-Jensen 2019). Such traces remind us that things are mutable, and any sense of material stability is often a matter of observation rather than physical reality (Ingold 2007). That capacity for transformation was drawn upon within prehistoric worlds. Wear and patina provided authenticity and temporal depth for certain kinds of inalienable objects that circulated between (and captured) people. Materials of flint and other stone could be readily transformed through percussion and burning, offering potential for new, extended, lives. Conversely, deliberate fragmentation, as Bjørnevad, Larsson and Řídký et al. show, sometimes negated the potential of objects like axeheads, querns and microliths to retain their existing roles, and took them into different spheres, even perhaps different ontological domains. Transformation allowed translation, and with it interaction with spiritual and non-corporeal realms.

We tend to see one kind of transformation – wear – in rather negative terms, being indicative of indicative of age, obsolescence and redundancy. Perhaps this is why we expect that objects provided as offerings should be pristine, in graves and as part of votive hoards for instance. The new and unadulterated is equated in our world with value, and the provision of the new with proper respect. This is very much a perspective engendered through modern consumer culture, but it is not one that holds in traditional societies, such as those of later prehistoric Europe. Papers here by Cendrowska,

Kaňáková, Kogălniceanu, Kufel-Diakowska et al. highlight the inclusion of used, sometimes quite old and worn objects within grave assemblages. This suggests qualities of patina, association, connection, durability and authenticity mattered, because they were inextricably linked to the people and processes that generated them. They might speak, too, of the emotional attachment to things that often comes through routine familiarity and co-presence (Miller 2008), the sheer weight of inseparability that can exist between people and things in the heightened environment of mourning (Hallam and Hockey 2001), and of the pollution of death and its effects on things. It reminds us that things become agential through action.

Finally, what of ritual? It is a difficult term, and a construct really of a scientific rationality. As Brück has highlighted, those practices we identify as ritual are normally marked out by their alterity, but that alterity is a product of cultural difference emergent between ourselves and past actors (Brück 1999). We gloss practices as ritual because we don't possess the framework to comprehend them, or comprehend the logic of their affect. Even the concepts of belief and religion, often lurking as a substrate somewhere under 'ritual', reflect an ontological distinction that emerged in Western modernity (Fowles 2013). What we are seeing are acts that might be glossed in the same way as Fowles describes Pueblo 'doings'. These are active engagements with the world undertaken in order to preserve its order, flow and presence: essential technologies for the reproduction and regulation of all things. To understand these is to get at the heart of life in its myriad forms. The traces observed through the lens of a microscope open up to offer insight into bigger worlds.

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Foreword

This book is inspired by a session held at EAA conference in Vilnius in 2016 that was titled *The Life Biography of Artefacts and Ritual Practice*, chaired by the two editors of this volume. The concept of this session came about in 2015 whilst we were both deep into our respective PhDs. One about Mesolithic hoarding in Southern Scandinavia, the other about activities at causewayed enclosures in Neolithic Southern Britain. Through collaboration we got inspired to create a session at the conference about the “things” in our research, the material culture, that we were both studying. We found out that we both approached the analysis of our artefacts in the same way, namely through the concept of artefact life-biographies. We both employed the idea that it is possible through different approaches to peel back layers of an artefact’s life-biography. Therefore, we set out to see how contemporary researchers in Europe viewed and applied this approach.

This session focussed on creating biographies from material culture as a means of understanding the relationship between the life of an artefact and its final deposition. The aim of the session was to look through the vast span of time from the Palaeolithic to the end of the Neolithic, and let researchers present examples of conceivable “chains of practices” that culminated in ritual(ized) depositions. From well used and unused, to sharpened and dulled and to burnt and broken, objects undergo multiple stages and “chains of practices” prior to the final deposition. However, this life history of an object is all too rarely taken into account when archaeologists discuss ritual depositions. As such research has all too often focussed on the deposition as the ritual, rather than the deposition as part of a larger practice that culminated but is not limited to the deposition. In order to rectify this, in this session the presenters addressed the narratives of ritual(ized) practices by studying the biography of the objects contained within depositions. By studying ritual practices using a biographical approach it was argued that it allowed a better understanding of the temporality of the practices that culminated in the deposition including, but not limited to, the creation, use, transformation, selection, arrangement and curation of artefacts. The ambition was to create a synthesis about life biographies of artefacts from the Stone Age via practises and activities that the material culture reflects.

Through, the various presentations during this session, and the subsequent papers in this volume, it was refreshing to see the widely different approaches to this biographically based method. Some were more methodical, while others more theoretical. Some focussed on the birth of the objects, others on their use-life, others on the transformations that the objects underwent, others on the curation and

structuration of deposition, whilst others attempted to reconstruct the complete biography of the artefacts and the ritual practices. The temporal and geographic scope of these papers, likewise varies– from Mesolithic Scandinavia, Neolithic practices found across Eastern, Central, Northern and Western Europe and even some research that stretches in to the Eneolithic and touching upon the Copper Age and early Bronze Age of central Europe. However, one thing was shared by all authors in the proceedings, the sense that one is able to create a narrative of an artefacts’ life-biography by engaging scientific methods.

These methods incorporated into these studies extended beyond what we originally expected– including TIR and micro FT-Raman spectral analysis, morphometric ballistic analysis, technological analysis, chromatographic analysis, experimental archaeology and of course micro and macroscopic use-wear analysis. These different scientific approaches are used to analyse everything from amber pendants; various lithic, bone, shell and antler tools, ornaments and raw material; as well as ceramic vessels and figurines. The scale of the research ranged from the study of a single artefact, or artefact type, to data from an individual site, to regionalised studies of particular practices as well as comparative studies of different forms of ritual practices.

Whilst some authors focussed on the ritual object or practice itself, others contextualised their results by comparing to sites and features often not considered as ritual, as well as to different forms of ritual practices. In this way some authors were able to contribute to increasing our understanding of the relationship between different scales of practices and different spheres of life. This allowed the identification of unknown and overlooked attributes of these finds and features, a better understanding of the patterning and idiosyncrasies within diverse ritual practices, and even new ways of understanding past landscape perceptions.

It is hoped that both students and more senior academics alike find the range of case studies enlightening and informative. It is also hoped that these papers in their entirety will inspire others to apply or to advance the methodological and theoretical framework to other sets of artefacts and practices further afield.

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