

Session title: THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Organizers: Jody Joy, The British Museum, UK
Kristin Armstrong Oma, University of Oslo, Norway

Time: Friday afternoon

Room:

Session abstract:

It has been over 20 years since Kopytoff (1986) first suggested that like people, objects could be seen to have biographies. Kopytoff demonstrated that the meaning and significance of objects can change depending on context. By following the life of an object it is possible to uncover multiple meanings which can be structured into the narrative framework of a life-history.

Following the publication of Kopytoff's work, the biographical approach has been readily accepted into the mainstream archaeological arena. Biographical papers have regularly featured in journals and at conferences, which successfully detail the births and deaths of objects. However, in many cases it has proved difficult to say something of the lives between the birth and death of objects. This session seeks to address this problem, looking for new ways of overcoming it. Our aim is to further the pursuit of the biographies of objects as well as the complex networks of which they were a part.

Paper abstracts:

INTRODUCTION

Kristin Armstrong Oma, University of Oslo, Norway

PIERCED AND PRIVILEGED

Gavin MacGregor, GUARD, Univeristy of Glasgow, UK

The excavation and analysis of an early Historic period cemetery (c AD 800 – 1100) from Midross, Loch Lomond, Scotland, has revealed a number of objects that potentially have distinct biographies. It can be suggested that objects, like human agents, are situated in social networks: thus rather than discrete individuals they are social actors. As such, associated meanings are extended, both temporally and spatially, through relational networks. Intrinsic to our analysis of these networks are the tensions between our understandings of the routine and unique. From this perspective, I wish to consider the biography of these objects and the implications that they have to our interpretation of their deposition.

HAD BROKEN BONE COMBS POSSIBILITIES FOR NEW LIFE?

Heidi Luik, Tallinn University, Estonia

Fine comb teeth that often broke in the course of use were the weakest part of bone combs. There were two possibilities in the subsequent life of such combs – it was either thrown away or repaired. If repaired the broken part could be replaced or the shape of the artefact was modified. The possibility chosen might have depended on the skills of the repairer. In both cases the biography of the comb would continue in the same function and meaning as before breaking.

Sometimes it was not possible to repair the comb in the way that it could be used for combing again. As case studies the biographies of two combs from different periods will be presented. The first is a Viking Age comb-shaped pendant from Rõuge. The broken side of it was cut smooth and it was probably used as a pendant again. Could the modified pendant have the same meaning as the comb-shaped pendant originally, or was it changed after acquiring a new shape? The second example is a double comb from medieval Viljandi. It can be supposed that it was intended to make a gambling piece from this comb – i.e. an object with quite different function and meaning. Artefacts don't have biographies without people. Is it possible to find out who tried to give a new life to the broken artefact and why?

EARLY CHRISTIAN GRAVE MONUMENTS – A DISCUSSION OF THE LIFE AND REUSE OF MONUMENTS

Cecilia Ljung, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden

This paper deals with the tradition of early Christian grave monuments (also known as Eskilstuna cists) with runic inscriptions and/or rune stone style ornamentation and the reuse of the monuments in medieval times. The early Christian grave monuments, as well as the rune stones, often have varied biographies stretching over time. They were originally erected in the 11th Century as monuments in the graveyards of the earliest churches in Southern Sweden. However it seems as if the monuments were not left standing for a long time, instead they were incorporated in the Romanesque churches or reused in later medieval burials. The significance of the deconstructed monuments has been widely discussed; the debate has either focused around functional or symbolical explanations. I argue that it is essential to consider the role of the monuments in relation to the 11th Century memorial tradition to be able to discuss the destruction of the monuments as well as the reuse of them in different contexts. Further it is of importance to take the local contexts as well as the temporal differences into account when examining the biographies and the changing meanings of the monuments.

REPRODUCING THE DRAMA OF OBJECT LIVES: A BIOGRAPY OF AN IRON AGE MIRROR

Jody Joy, The British Museum, UK

The biographical approach has become increasingly popular as a method to reveal relationships between people and objects. However, a distinction can be drawn between the relative successes of biographical studies which rely on anthropological or historical information compared with biographical studies of prehistoric objects. Through the example of a British Iron Age mirror I explore different ways of building a prehistoric biography, with the aim of reproducing some of the drama of the life of a prehistoric object.

A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO HUMAN AND ANIMAL BONE OBJECTIFICATION IN IRON AGE SOUTHERN ENGLAND

Mike Lally AND Pip Stone, Archaeological Solutions, UK

This paper will investigate the theme of human and animal body objectification in Iron Age southern England. Investigating objects using a biographical approach has become an increasingly popular strand of archaeological enquiry in recent years. Traditional biographical approaches have focused heavily upon the human investment provided to objects of perceived social worth; with objects taking on the aura (Benjamin) of those humans associated with them. In a sense, certain objects are understood to offer archaeologists a window into their temporal worlds and different networks of association (after Latour 1997).

That human and animal bodies were objectified during the Iron Age has been discussed elsewhere (Lally 2008; Hill 1995). Rather than focus solely upon the evidence for objectification, the current paper seeks to further investigate the agency and biography of these objects. Using specific examples, consideration shall be given to the nature of human and animal identities at this time, along with the possibility that in certain instances, human and animal identities were blurred during life, or transformed and manipulated in death for the purposes of objectification and eventual deposition. Drawing upon a combination of biographical and wider social theory, the authors will question the nature of human:object relations during the Iron Age, arguing that in some instances, no dichotomy appears to have existed; with both humans, animals and other objects being perceived in similar and equally important ways. Finally, it will be argued that 'blurred' objectification may provide an important means of approaching and understanding instances in which human and animal bodies were manipulated for the creation of everyday and special objects.

SOCIAL NARRATIVES: POTTERY BIOGRAPHIES AND THE NEOLITHIC PRACTICE OF PIT DEPOSITION IN NORTH-EAST ENGLAND

Ben Edwards, University of Durham, UK

This paper examines the relationship between the pottery of the British Neolithic and the social practice of artefact deposition. Specifically, it is concerned with the manner in which the biographies of pottery, its breakage, re-use, and curation, played a determinant role in its eventual disposal. The meaning of pit-deposits and their material culture may be lost to us, but a narration of their biography reveals that broken pottery cannot be simplistically categorised using contemporary Western

classifications. A narrative of the lives of pottery fragments highlights their central role in securing the social reproduction of Neolithic groups.

Data is drawn primarily from pit-deposits in north-east England, where there is sufficient evidence to comment upon the 'birth', 'death' and, crucially, the complex social role of ceramics between breakage and deposition. The large data-set allows statistically valid trends in fragmentation, abrasion and selection for deposition to be identified, all of which can then be related to the form of the pits utilised for disposal. The quality of this evidence highlights both the interpretative potential inherent in the biographical approach, and the constraints placed upon us by material remains.