



Book Reviews

OBJECTS OF THE PAST IN THE PAST: INVESTIGATING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLIER ARTEFACTS IN LATER CONTEXTS BY MATTHEW G. KNIGHT, DOT BOUGHTON AND RACHEL E. WILKINSON (EDS)

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Objects of the Past in the Past explores the issue of artefacts often referred to as 'out-of-time' objects. These are items which in different ways are identified as old when they entered the archaeological context in which they have been found. Their antiquity might be indicated by comparison to other items with which they were found or their condition at time of deposition or evidence for reuse in a more recent period. The authors grapple with the complex issues of dating artefact manufacture and use compared with dating the context in which they are recovered. There are no solutions but instead an opening up of how to consider these problems from an artefact basis; the authors explore alternative scenarios that do not assume single episodes of use and deposition. The volume brings together a series of case studies as separate specialist authored papers covering several periods of time. These enable the reader to reflect on the implications of different period specific evidence to our overall interpretation of finds based evidence. It is a well-illustrated volume and the background research for each paper is very thorough. An extra bonus is the open access digital format of the book (free downloadable pdf) which makes it available to a wide audience; something that is particularly pertinent given the restrictions imposed on library access by the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to be able to work from home. The book can also be purchased in printed format for anyone who prefers reading on paper or has difficulties reading long text on screen.

The case studies cover a period of almost 3,000 years c.1300 BC – 1800 AD but include even older material in the discussion of fossils in Roman and Tudor contexts (Lewis, Chapter 6 and Leeming, Chapter 9). The volume began as a TAG session which laid the foundations for this publication. It commences with a description and discussion of the topic by the conference session conveners and editors of the volume (Chapter 1: Matthew Knight, Dot Boughton and Rachel Wilkinson). This introduction alone stands as a useful essay on the different approaches to studying and interpreting objects that appear to be older than their context. They are organised into five main categories: 'Objects of memory and heirlooms'; 'Objects for securing

identity'; 'Magical objects and amulets'; 'Objects of mythology'; 'Reappropriated, reused and recycled objects'. As the authors state, these are not mutually exclusive interpretations. The alliteration in the final category is appealing but I find the term reused to be misleading: here it covers objects that have seen continuity of use either maintaining their original function or with an altered function. I interpret reuse to mean items that have stopped being used and then are used again after some time has passed as opposed to items with a sustained, long-term use or that have been curated over time. Setting aside semantics the authors do address the challenges of identifying such objects and this is further examined in the case studies.

The volume has a chronological order starting with the Bronze Age hoards and moving on via the Iron Age, Romano-British period and medieval evidence to post medieval buildings, coming full circle at the end with Bronze Age objects reused in an 18th-century context (Bell, Chapter 10). The focus is upon evidence from Britain and Ireland, and later prehistory dominates, as is to be expected from editors whose research focuses primarily on this region and period. The authors all consider whether the age of the older objects was an explicit, implicit or irrelevant factor in their more recent treatment; be that at the moment of final deposition in the ground or their last stage of use before loss and discovery. Artefacts discussed include metal weapons and tools, dress ornaments (in particular brooches), coins, gemstones, fossils and statuettes as well as modern mixed material objects incorporating ancient items. There are some real gems of information that might be unexpected by the reader dependent on their own research background. For me these include the re-appropriating of Bronze Age weaponry in late 18th-century Ireland as weapons in active combat (Bell, Chapter 10) in contrast to the more typically assumed ritual significance given to ancient objects (see, for example, The Hammer of St Martin discussed in Chapter 1). As a prehistorian I enjoyed the opportunity to compare the more recent evidence with our interpretations of older remains. As an archaeologist I find some comfort in the longevity of interest in and maintenance of old objects as exemplified by the evidence presented here. We may not be the oldest profession but we certainly embody very ancient fascinations with the past.

The first three papers take on the challenge of poor and vague contextual data in their examination of hoards from the Bronze Age and Iron Age (Knight, Chapter 2; Boughton, Chapter 3; Davis, Chapter 4). These are all ambitious but detailed studies of how we may use artefacts and minimal contextual evidence to explore not only the longevity of connections with particular landscape locales, but also potential intentional past connections made with objects from their past. Matthew Knight addresses the dilemma of the extended and overlapping date ranges for metalwork in Bronze Age Britain and how this impacts on the certainty of his interpretation. He clearly explains the limitations of, and problems with, the contextual data which highlights the speculative nature of his conclusion. Dot Boughton argues that the history

of the objects and how they were brought together may be complex. Alex Davies proposes that difference maybe the key to the special treatment of old items in the Iron Age and their inclusion in hoards as opposed to the specific antiquity of the object. All highlight the issues we face with dating the creation and use of objects versus the date of deposition.

To say with confidence that something is out of time in a context we need to know the actual time span in which it was current and the precise context that shows both this and the more recent finds were deposited at the same time. If not, we wallow in the realms of speculation. The authors should be credited for taking on the problematic data and for being open in their publication of the evidence on which they base their arguments and the issues with the context of these finds.

Although all authors present the current date ranges given to certain objects types there is limited discussion of how these date ranges have been achieved. It is only in Alex Davies' paper that we find reference to the radiocarbon dating of remains for defining the period of deposition but even then some assumptions on the dating of artefacts are taken for granted without actually considering the detail that contradicts these assumptions (Davis, Chapter 4). As Davis's too brief discussion of poorly contexted Hallstatt brooches shows: it depends how much importance you place on precise archaeological context both in terms of the discovery of the finds and the dating of technological features and other comparable items. An interrogation of the dating schemes relied upon may well be beyond the realms of this volume, but it is an issue that needs to be clearly stated in the context of these analyses. These papers require the author to interpret the context of the evidence and then use this interpretation to understand the deposition behaviour. The result is subjective and open to debate, but the importance is that they have opened the debate.

All the papers have relevance and impact beyond this specific volume but two stand out in this way: Helen Chittock's (Chapter 5) paper and David Bell's (Chapter 10). Chittock's emphasis is on the value of adding the concept of antiques to our interpretation is the vital part of her study. She is very skilled at describing and illustrating the detailed evidence and how it can be understood. Perhaps her task is simpler than the preceding papers in that the objects she investigates show clear signs for repair, use and alteration but herein lies the success of her arguments, they are based on a clear presentation of the evidence. The challenge for Chittock is ascertaining the timespan over which the object was used, altered, repaired and reused. The value is in questioning a conventional acceptance that an old or repaired item in a burial or hoard context is an heirloom. An heirloom is clarified as an object where its value is gained through the connection to individuals and lineages. This is in contrast to the concept of an

antique where the value is in its age and condition, though there could also be personal stories of fables with which it has been connected that increase its power.

Bell's study is of Bronze Age swords with use-wear evidence which can be connected to relatively modern reuse of the items. He combines detailed, macroscopic study of prehistoric metal objects with written and drawn evidence connected to the historical context in which they were reused. Bell is able to show the differences, in a visual and written format, between ancient use-wear and more recent repair and damage. This has implications both for our understanding of Bronze Age combat and desperate measures taken to acquire weapons during the late 18th- to early 19th-century political turmoil in Ireland. This is an important paper on the value of revisiting use-wear studies with a more considered, scientific approach that records the details to better inform our interpretation of past behaviour and object use.

Moving forward in time we step into the realms of written evidence and contemporary illustrations providing a social context of the time (Lewis, Chapter 6; Costello and Williams, Chapter 7; Andrews, Chapter 8; Leeming, Chapter 9; Bell, Chapter 10). These papers take a chronological route through Roman, medieval and post-medieval evidence. They deal with the loved and the unloved in museum collections (see Peter Leeming's ignored fossils from the Tudor Palace of Placentia, Greenwich; Chapter 9). Through a close examination of the literary evidence and the archaeological context of finds, such as signet rings and statuettes, on Roman sites, Lewis (Chapter 6) illustrates that context and detailed examination of the objects is key to confirming the antiquity (or not) of an item when deposited alongside other objects. Murray Andrews (Chapter 8) gives a fascinating description of old textual references to discovering treasure and old objects intentionally or unintentionally in the 14th to 16th centuries. With the aid of literary sources, the artefacts and the contextual information he identifies the value given to ancient coins and engraved gemstones in the 11th to 15th centuries. Andrews shows that discovering old objects, accidentally or intentionally, was a feature of medieval life, if not a common one: from the 6th-century treatise *De Consolatione Philosophiae* to Richard II's men in 1389 searching for treasure for financial gain for the crown during the Hundred Years War. He then employs the archaeological evidence to investigate what these items may have meant to those who discovered, retained and reburied them. Brian Costello and Howard Williams note that later texts give an indication of the social concept for the preservation of lineage and curation of heirlooms. They make a clear distinction between these curated heirlooms and found old items, the antiques to which that Chittock referred. In the context of early medieval burials in Kent that find evidence for the intentional presentation of connections between the deceased and their ancestors or forebears and the living population, those who buried the dead. David Bell's paper (Chapter 10) is the perfect conclusion to the volume covering the different

types of evidence presented in the earlier papers and contrasting the use of objects in the distant past with the evidence for their reuse in the very recent past.

This volume is successful in presenting a range of evidence and interpretations drawn from a detailed understanding of the archaeological remains and context of the finds by specialists in their field. It is both accessible and appealing to a broad audience because it does not assume prior knowledge but provides the detail on which arguments are based so the reader can form their own opinion. The authors successfully demonstrate the need to pay attention to the age and condition of objects and the context of their discovery in our studies of past objects in the present. It does not matter if you agree with each author's final interpretation, they have equipped you with the evidence to formulate what you consider to be the most feasible interpretation. For me this volume's greatest success is inspiring me to research further questions these studies raise.

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Editor*