

Mobility, Meaning & Transformations of Things

shifting contexts of material culture through time and space



edited by Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss

Introduction: Biographies, travels and itineraries of things

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"We want to convey the sense that a 'world' – an often fragmented and fragile set of material and non-material assumptions and resources – can itself be made mobile, seemingly translated from one [...] location to another, even as it is transformed in the process"

(Basu and Coleman 2008, 313, our italics).

In his well-known essay, 'Resonance and wonder', Stephen Greenblatt (1990) starts with an anecdote about a priest's hat, displayed in an exhibition about the history of Christ Church College in Oxford. There is more to this red hat than meets the eye. Beyond being the hat of Cardinal Wolsey, the founder of the college, it had been a Christ Church College archived item since the mid-nineteenth century, after an itinerant history that included several owners. As Greenberg notes, it is this particular tale of the object's shifts and moves, including occasional threats to its material existence, which evokes the visitors' interest and curiosity. Cultural artefacts never stand still, are never inert. Their existence is always embedded in a multitude of contexts, with tensions surrounding their roles, usages and meanings. Objects are meaningful only in relation to conflicts, negotiations and appropriations. Things shift in a wide range of modes, and very often it is through these particular alterations that they assume a specific meaning. The specific advantage of this focus on mobility is to "shed light on hidden as well as conspicuous movements of peoples, objects, images" (Greenblatt 2009, 250). The objective of this volume is to raise awareness of mobile things and their various kinds of shifts, and subsequently, of their changing roles and meanings.

The contributions to this volume deal with the mobility of things from the point of view of different disciplines. Within the framework of material culture, questions about mobility and the focus on shifts of location and meaning have been addressed predominantly through two concepts, *biographies of things* and *travelling objects*. Both concepts refer to shifts in space and time, as well as to the transformation of things through different contextualizations. When preparing for the conference that provided the opportunity to present the chapters assembled in this volume, we had the impression that, although each of these concepts is useful, they also have some serious limitations.

In the following pages we shall present our perceptions of the achievements and shortcomings of these concepts before trying to present a synthesis. We deal with these concepts by understanding them as metaphors. *Object biographies* and *travelling objects*

work through metaphorical associations, drawing their meaning from quite different domains of the social. This contributes to their success, as they have come to be two of the most frequently used metaphors for dealing with material culture. And yet, some of the associated images are misleading or at least problematic. The aim of this volume is therefore to overcome the unnecessary reduction in how we perceive the mobility of things, which is arguably an unintentional by-product of these metaphors.

We shall underline our objective by suggesting another metaphor, which appears to be much better suited to capturing the mobility of things, and particularly the mobility of those objects featured in the chapters of this volume. We propose the term *itineraries*. The idea of an itinerary combines the pathways, stations and transitions of modern-day travellers, as prescribed, for example, in a flight schedule, with the much older idea of a particular path such as a pilgrimage, leading to the transformation of the traveller by successfully passing through discrete stages.

Biographies of objects

Since the appearance of Igor Kopytoff's seminal article 'The cultural biography of things' (Kopytoff 1986), first published in the edited volume 'The social life of things' (Appadurai 1986), the biographical perspective has been salient.¹ Looking at the biography of an object as a means of approaching its *social life* is a widely adopted strategy. The passages of an object from its *birth* to its *death* or destruction – that is, to when it becomes rubbish – occur through different stations, and each moment in the object's lifespan seems to have a distinct role (Hahn 2005, 40–45). For example, a new car evokes a quite different context compared to a used one, and once a car has achieved the status of a classic car, it is again quite differently perceived. Changes not only happen at the level of perception and contextualization, but also in usage: what is new warrants greater care and caution, whereas a car of a certain age may be expected to resist more enduring practices. Again, if the car is quite old, and if it has become a rare item, special caution is called for to preserve what is then considered something unique and therefore of specific value.

Kopytoff's particular achievement is to connect the passage through different contexts to different valuations. It is not always use value, but in some moments of an object's life also a mnemonic value or a personal value, which is attached to the object. Whereas the *new object* may appear on someone's horizon as a commodity with a fixed or negotiable price, in later stages of the biography there may be moments when the very same object becomes an unalienable personal object (Weiner 1992; 1994). More generally, Kopytoff points to two opposing tendencies, which can be identified in almost all biographies of things. He labels these tendencies 'commoditization' and 'singularization' (Kopytoff 1986, 65). It is never simply an individual owners' desire to sell an object at a given moment, but a topic of social and cultural negotiations, which gives more or less legitimacy to each of these tendencies, and sometimes even intentionally excludes one of them when dealing with an object. For example, once they reach a certain age objects of art are no longer allowed to be sold on the art markets of many European countries.

Particular moments in the life history of an object may be more revealing for its social embedding; a closer look at these instances can show how significantly the role of an object has changed. The ways in which histories of objects and people inform each other can be described through a closer examination of the moments of transformation of objects and also of people themselves (Gosden and Marshall 1999). This is not only a question of socially acknowledged meanings like stigma or prestige, but also a practical question of the knowledge required for dealing appropriately with the object in question. Furthermore, the stories associated with an object and evoked by its presence require special care (Svensson 2008). This applies to old things that may have special relevance as memory objects, reminding the owners about specific events in their lives. The close relationship between durable objects and tradition has already been highlighted by historians (Assmann 1992; 1995). Objects of tradition can be regarded as actors of evocation (Seremetakis 1994). They can be relevant for individuals, but also for collective events, which significantly change the course of many people's lives (Kuntz 1990).

In his book 'Tradition', Edward Shils (1981) devotes an entire chapter to sometimes astonishing effects of the shifting meanings of objects with a particular longevity. At first glance this text consists of little more than a list of the kinds of objects that exist for a long time and therefore play an important part in the memory of earlier historical eras. The sometimes varied and dramatic histories of monuments, archaeologically identified treasures etc. are good examples of object biographies. These things appear, then they disappear or are forgotten – sometimes for centuries – and then, in new horizons of time, or in different environments, they reappear to play an entirely new and different role. There is no doubt about the continuity of the material objects as such, but sometimes this continuity is simply the basis for a completely new definition of them. A poignant example in this volume is how the beehive huts among the Mao of Ethiopia have lost their erstwhile practical functions to become phantom dwellings, which, as Alfredo González-Ruibal explains, was necessary to produce an idealization of the Mao as an independent forest people that was no longer tenable. Currently, studies of memory and material culture have stressed this point: even materially unchanged objects and memorized topics might assume quite different roles. The stories associated with things are also relevant for new objects, that is, innovations. In cases in which people have little experience in practical matters, they are more sensitive to cautionary tales reporting harmful consequences. These warnings are especially frequent in the context of technological innovations, but new kinds of food are also typical. People are inclined to believe stories about the malfunctioning or harmful consequences of the consumption of new foodstuffs, and it may take some time for individual experiences to become sufficiently widespread for such fears to be overcome.

All these implications can be related to the concept of biographies, and they show how much an object's perception can change during its lifespan. More recently Janet Hoskins (1998) has shown convincingly that objects can be charged with meaning within quite brief moments if they are present in specific contexts of an individual's or a family's life. Objects that were present during a marriage, or in the instance of an accident, are subjectively much more important than other, materially identical objects that have not been present at the event in question. Biographies of things, Hoskins says,

are entangled with people's histories. They jointly create a network of relevancies. The immanence of an object cannot explain why it is meaningful at a later moment.

This brings us back to our initial scepticism about the metaphorical meaning of the term *biography*. A biography covers a lifespan, representing a basic linearity of ageing that unfolds a multiplicity of attached stories, meanings and so on. Hoskins extends this notion by referring to the image of a network. The network has knots which are constituted crossings between things and people. Instead of the suggested linearity of a biography, the network of lines, that is, the many biographies, and the nodes, or crossings of the lines, better represents the mutual transformations caused by the interaction between people and things (Küchler 2001).

Against this background it is unsurprising that a fair amount of recent research on object biographies deals with the assumed *end* of things. More than any other moment of an object's *life*, describing the *end* of an object reveals the problems with the metaphor of a *biography*. The *end* of an object is a vexing perspective.² Even the observation of decay can be accompanied by disgust as well as with empathy and the specific revaluation of the object in question (Buchli and Lucas 2001; DeSilvey 2006). The change of the surface of an object is a feature that can engender positive emotions as well as its dismissal. An object can fall into pieces and be re-established (Gregson *et al.* 2009). The idea of a definite disappearance or final step, similar to the death of a person, that is inspired by the term *biography* hardly captures all of the changes that can be observed in the context of an object.³ As Anamaria Depner suggests in chapter six with respect to a single discarded earring, new meanings can emerge for an object that ended its use during its first *life-span* – considering the after-live as a second life. This invites us to imagine those things that become waste. We find many cases in which they just cause more trouble in the status of waste, or produce new meanings and permit new usages after being discarded. Archaeological evidence show that objects may gain new functions once they have been designated as *rubbish* by their original owners (Rathje and Murphy 1992). Radical changes in the valuation of materials and objects may also lead to the re-use of waste. What had been classified as worthless becomes at a later moment an object of valuation and desire (Stam 1999).

And how does one classify items in tombs that are dedicated to accommodating the dead in their afterlife? Two contributors to this volume provoke such a reflection. Joseph Maran treats amber objects found in Early Mycenaean burials as challenging their assumed usage as jewellery alone, while Gordana Ciric examines Roman coins in medieval cemeteries in terms of their transformed functions. Are these things *dead*, or is it more appropriate to speak about a *second life*, as they are rediscovered by archaeologists, or worse, by a robber? Objects might become valuables merely by virtue of their having been excluded from everyday life at an earlier stage of their existence. These reflections about the afterlife or second life of things do not sit well with the metaphor of biography. This lack of fit should be perceived as a problem in the concept as such. We should look for a different understanding, a more differentiated concept, taking into account the aforementioned aspects of networks as the mode of production of meaning, as well as the surprising relevance of resurrections of things.

Travelling objects

This perspective on the mobility of things is closely related to the idea that things follow specific pathways, which may be routes and destinations that have little in common with those of people, institutions or traditions. An important example of this is the diffusion of cultivated plants, which were adopted in many places worldwide, even though the farmers growing these plants might have had no idea about the origin of these plants (Hancock 1992). The global distribution of plants like maize and coconuts indicates how things may travel and thereby change peoples' ways of life wherever they arrive.

For the objective of this edited volume, it is of some relevance to inquire about the specific features of things as material objects when they travel. Since the important essay of James Clifford (1992), 'Traveling cultures', the mobility of cultures in a larger framework has loomed large in cultural anthropology. The same applies to archaeology, as shown in the works of Mary Helms (1988). However, the interest of the contributions in this volume is more specific. It is not about the travelling of cultures as such, but more distinctively about the mobility of the objects, which sometimes differs from cultures. Stepping beyond Clifford's seminal paper, we need to conceptualize the specific modes and transformations that occur when things move.

In many cases, things that are perceived as originating elsewhere play a specific role. They may be assigned a superior value on account of their *coming from elsewhere* (Orlove 1997; Hooper 2000). One possible reason for this is the idea that *traces from the origin* have been inscribed in the actual object (Benfoughal and Boulay 2006, 16). Another possible reason is an imagined distance between origin and actual place of usage. Travelling over a great distance without damage lends these things an aura of particularity.⁴ Archaeology has many examples of things of outstanding value and renown that were transferred over long distances. This holds true for Mediterranean imports to the Celtic cultures of Southern Germany. These valuable objects represented the particular social rank of their owners and helped distinguish the class of noblemen from the rest of the society (Biel 1985). A good example in this volume is provided by Annelou van Gijn and Karsten Wentink, who show how, in the Middle Neolithic, Michelsberg tools imported to the wetlands lost their original function and acquired a special status that helped define the identities of the importing societies. Similar phenomena have been observed for modern societies, for example, in the case of *Western Goods* in many previously colonies (Belk *et al.* 1997). The particular appreciation of things that had been travelling is usually explained by the general acknowledgement of a social or cultural hierarchy. In the context of modern colonialism, Richard Wilk (1996) speaks about 'emulation', articulated by such preferences for things from abroad. Through the acquisition of goods from the metropolises, consumers in the former colonies may overcome the subjectively perceived desynchronisation. The sense of being backward can thereby be eliminated.

We should not forget the more general fact that the European history of consumption has always included a preference for exotic commodities. Examples of this are tea, coffee, silk and Indian cloth (Wills 1993), but also porcelain and many other goods. More recent examples are the products of Italian cuisine or non-European artwork. Their imagined distance and uniqueness, or at least exclusivity, rendered these travelling goods constitutive elements of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899). Writers of

novels were well aware of this, and the outstanding role of things that travelled across continents, or at least from one country to another, became a recurrent theme in belletrist literature. In novels, such travelling things have particular value, either because of their uniqueness, or because of their association with specific events (Niehaus 2009; Schmidt-Linsenhoff and Coskun 2010).

There has been a paradigm shift in the recognition of travelling objects. In archaeology as much as in cultural anthropology, objects of a definite form have long been associated with a specific culture. In both disciplines, the assignment of territories and time horizons has contributed to the qualification of things of a specific form as indicators of continuity and cultural coherence at the locality under investigation. Things found at one place that obviously came from elsewhere figured as less relevant in describing the local culture. The unity of production, distribution and consumption was considered an essential condition for the local reproduction of culture (Hahn 2008): craftspeople produced a particular form because the tradition required these procedures. In households, these items were in use because the usage of any others appeared to be against the cultural order of that community.

Globalization attributed quite a different role to travelling things: objects are relevant, not because they are associated with a place, but because of their mobility. Culture is constituted by the local transmission of traditions, inherited knowledge or regional specificities that, through exchanges and transnational relations, were often constituted by commodities traded over long distances. In this framework cultures as such do travel, but more relevant is the mobility of things. Global flows of goods were one of the core domains of exchange and mobility, as described by Arjun Appadurai (1990, 296) in his term 'ethnoscapes'. Globally travelling goods and their particular appreciation were an important argument for the cultural dimension of globalization; they were crucial for the popular metaphor of *flows* of people and goods. Particular items that fit well with this metaphor are media devices (TV sets), fashion and communication technologies, such as mobile phones.

We refer to the relevance of travelling goods in the early, predominantly affirmative phase of globalization, in order to highlight the limits of this approach. The power of the *flows* and images of global *circulation* was convincing only for a brief historical moment. Very quickly critical voices reminded the globalization theorists that social and cultural differences have not disappeared. On the contrary, their endurance has led to new forms of violence worldwide (Appadurai 2006). Borders and spatial limits did not become irrelevant, and the differences between rich and poor had not been dissolved (Garhammer 2003; Nyamnjoh 2004).

It is more appropriate, therefore, to speak of the reconfiguration of space and new practices of emplacement (Englund 2002). Globalization brought about the emergence of new borders that blocked the mobility of particular goods, like weapons, medicine and drugs. Peter Oakley demonstrates in chapter five how the movement of substances like gold or silver have, through the hallmarking process, been restricted to territorial borders. Things like media, on the contrary, easily cross those borders. It is more appropriate to state that the metaphor of travelling things applies to just some goods at specific historical moments. The same holds true for the image of *flows* that was able to gain some resonance only at a particular moment and in the wealthy societies of the West.

Considering the perspective of those countries that are removed from these flows, or that participate in them only to a very limited degree, Gültz Ger and Russell W. Belk coined the term 'consumptionscapes' (Ger and Belk 1996). By referring to landscapes of consumption, Ger and Belk underline the fact that the commodities in question circulate easily in some areas, but are not available to people living in other regions of the globe. The condition of particular societies and their specific integration into global markets is more important than the circulation, flows or travels of goods. Economics and governmental regulations, among other forces, work for or against their mobility.

Our criticism of the metaphor of travelling goods is related to these deficits in explaining unequal access to things. After all, it is not things as such that travel, but people and their economic and social status that place these commodities in or out of their reach. As Mario Schmidt argues with respect to wampum beads in chapter ten, objects could even be perceived as accessible status objects while actually operating to preserve existing hierarchies. It may be misleading to suggest that things travel. It is more appropriate to speak of social, economic and cultural differences that push things from one place to another, or even obstruct their movement. The mobility of things is not an autonomous experience, but the consequence of particular practices and cultural differences.

Itineraries of things

So far we have dealt with two approaches to the mobility of things, and pointed out their respective strengths and shortcomings. There is no reason to doubt the important contribution of the two concepts for progress in material culture studies, in particular in the effort to deconstruct the image of things as static or unchangeable. However, we have pointed to these concepts as being only a partial reflection of the actual range of objects and their roles. The shortcomings of the *object biographies* metaphor are evident: moments like *birth* are difficult to pinpoint, and similar problems emerge with respect to the object's *death*. Archaeological and ethnographic investigations more often attest to the transformations of things. New objects emerge through the remodelling of other objects, and objects that have been buried receive much more attention upon rediscovery. We have also pointed to the increased interest in waste and garbage, which can be interpreted as an afterlife of things.

The metaphor of *travelling* things also appears problematic to us. The assumption of mobility as a universal property that is somehow inherent in all things is implausible. The image of a journey or of travel undertaken by the object is somewhat biased in having prioritized a specific group of objects: mobile items provoke more attention than those that, for various reasons, cannot travel.

The objective of this volume is to examine the possibilities of conceptualizing the transformation of things through shifts in time and space without falling prey to the problematic implications of the terms *biography* or *travel*. We understand the transformation of things to be an important aspect of material culture. We seek to approach it without taking the *birth* or *death* of things as necessary benchmarks. Nor do we find it useful to refer solely to a model that suggests things that travel.

We argue that the mobility of things has a larger and more comprehensive meaning, which manifests itself in many social economic and cultural processes. The empirical case studies featured in this volume pose an additional limitation on biographies or travel as guiding metaphors. Many of the objects they discuss pass through long periods of stasis before becoming engaged in actual transformations. It is possible that the objects themselves initiate these transformations. But it is also possible that a more general shift in the social order causes a revaluation or even redefinition of the objects, a different usage or a new context, which makes the objects shift. This is what happened, for example, after the neoliberal restructuring of Cameroonian society restored the political relevance of kings, as Jean-Pierre Warnier explains in this volume: offerings became re-signified as containers of ancestral authority. It is important to understand extended periods of stasis not as death and resurrection, but as continuity, and as having a specific potential to transition from an inert state to a state of mobility.

For the complex and sometimes entangled forms of mobility, we suggest the term *itinerary*. More than any other concept, the notion of an itinerary highlights the non-linear character of an object's mobility and the subsequent changes in its contexts and roles. Carl Knappett's discussion of imprints in chapter three is a fitting example of the possible anachronicity of objects that collapses together past and present. An itinerary further suggests moments of inertness as well as moments of rapid transformation. Itineraries describe pathways that do not lead directly to a given goal, but take an irregular and convoluted course with a multitude of meanderings. A clear and concise definition can be found in Webster's Dictionary: "Itinerary, a. [L. *itinerarius*: cf. F. *itinéraire*. See *Itinerant*.] Itinerant; traveling; passing from place to place; done on a journey" (Merriam-Webster 1913, 793).

An itinerary is associated with the *itinerant*, which, in the metaphorical usage, refers to the thing itself. Whereas the traveller does engage in travel intentionally, with a destination in mind, the term *itinerant* emphasises a mobile form of existence. Whoever is *itinerant* cannot stand still. The *itinerant* moves without the explicit intention of travelling. He does so because being *itinerant* is part of his existence. To *itinerate* is also a verbal expression: when things (or people) *itinerate*, they travel along a previously set course, including stopovers. Provided it is made clear that there are external powers that drive a thing to move or stand still, this metaphor fits quite well the objective promoted by this volume. The external driving forces are, of course, the people acquiring things, dealing with them, or trying to get rid of them.

There is a secondary meaning, referring to a priest's itinerary, the prescribed path he has to follow. Although the mobility of things does not always follow a planned route, this also fits our understanding because there is always a cultural definition of those changes in an object's existence that increase its value and those that do not. Objects may gain considerable value through specific transformations, but they can also fail to do so and end up as rubbish. As Selma Abdelhamid shows in chapter seven with respect to Roman amphorae, the choice to discard or reuse them itself entails a social investment in the value attributed to them. Understanding the mobility of a thing requires taking into account that any shift in context or place changes its value.

Itineraries have the particular advantage of moving the spotlight away from the identity or individuality of an object. Questions about the uniqueness of an object can

only be addressed by taking into account the perspectives of the men and women who are dealing with it. Whether an object is an individual item (i.e., it is not divisible) is a problematic question, which needs to be answered differently at any moment of its existence. It is quite possible that material objects become fragmented and reunited later on, or that a fragment of an object is considered to have the same meaning, value (and use) as the object itself (Chapman and Gajdarska 2007). Things have the capacity to be present in different contexts, to appear differently in each of these moments, and finally – due to their sometimes astonishing changeability – to absorb meanings in particular modes. In this volume, Roberta Gilchrist demonstrates how the meaning of medieval heirlooms emerges out of the intersection of two distinct contexts – namely a family life-course and church sacraments – to produce their sacralisation. This kind of capacity is underscored by the metaphor of the itinerary, which gives us new insights into the ways in which values are generated, maintained, rejected or even destroyed.

Things are itinerant without themselves actively engaging in travel. Along their way – which may very well include extended periods of inertness and stasis in the sense of *not being used* or *being buried* – things may appear on the horizon of perception, and they may recede. Wherever they do so they may be perceived as new, but they may also be attributed to a different world. This extraordinary changeability, which is not intended by the objects but inheres in them, should be regarded as a constitutive element of material culture.

The contributions in this volume demonstrate, through distinct perspectives and with reference to a wide array of things and motilities, the sensitivities promoted by the metaphor of itineraries. If attention to non-linearity is among the foremost of these, it already looms large in chapter two, where Alfredo González-Ruibal discusses the case of beehive huts among the Mao of Ethiopia. Generations of contact with expanding groups and increasing external threats is turning the once autonomous Mao into a marginalized underclass. This historical trajectory is counteracted by the Mao beehive huts. They have lost their erstwhile functionality for the Mao as a forest people, but instead of disappearing they have been frozen in time. The beehive huts have become a mnemonic device and the materialization of collective fantasy for the Mao. It is precisely their stasis – in contrast to their people's decline – that allows them to abolish time and preserve a sense of power and independence that is denied them in reality.

The non-linearity of time remains at the forefront in chapter three, where Carl Knappett takes seals and sealings of the Bronze Age Aegean as an occasion to push the boundaries of how the mobility of objects might be approached. He posits as a challenge to the historicist trajectory of motion the idea of an imprint, which hovers between seal and sealing. Sealings – the impressions of seals in clay – were only ever meant to be temporary. The imprint they leave behind, defined by its durable form rather than its changing substance, evokes both presence and absence. Knappett uses the term *anachronic* to capture this collapsing together of past and present, contact and loss. His discussion highlights the possibilities for objects to resist movement.

If Knappett introduces the collapsing of time conceptually, Jean-Pierre Warnier demonstrates it ethnographically. In chapter four, he explains how kings in contemporary Cameroon are reasserting their long-lost legitimacy because of new political alliances. This opens up a space for the reinvention of royal traditions through which the king

can produce a virtual envelope to encompass his subjects who have gone away into the various diasporas. This ritual containment is enacted through material objects and physical substances that can combine to erase the interval between the old kingdoms and the present moment. Specifically, in the king's offerings, his bodily substances (breath, speech, saliva, semen) and their extensions (palm oil, camwood powder, raffia wine, medicines) are invested with the life and reproductive essence of the ancestors. This essence permeates subjects' lives, children, health, crops and livestock, who thereby incur a lifelong debt to their king.

Political containment can also apply directly to objects, as Peter Oakley shows in chapter five. Recounting the history of minting and hallmarking in medieval and modern England, he highlights the concerted social efforts – including legal instruments and material objects – to contain gold and silver both physically and conceptually. These efforts were perennially renewed and modified in the face of the persistent tendency of gold and silver to exert their identity as substances. Through the stabilization of the substances of gold and silver, political institutions inscribed the representations of their power and defined its boundaries. While the goals of hallmarking varied historically, the social identity of the object – its liquidity or singularization – was always at stake. Finally, as Oakley demonstrates, the institutions charged with hallmarking reflected this identity.

If hallmarking exemplifies the stabilization of meaning, in chapter six Anamaria Depner discusses the possibilities of its de-stabilization. Calling our attention to a single earring given to her by one of her subjects – an old lady in a nursing home – she launches into a meditation about what makes things worthless or meaningful. She observes how the negotiation of the object's meaning entails a reconsideration of one's own position with respect to the object, an exercise which both she and her subject undertake separately but in dialogue. It demonstrates how an object-centred methodology can alert us to how things are interwoven into our daily lives. As Depner shows, the evaluation and devaluation of things can be a deeply meaningful process in terms of personal biography.

Just as Depner insists on the meaningfulness of discarded objects, Selma Abdelhamid, in chapter seven, militates against what she calls a *throw-away-mentality*. The context of her discussion is the reuse of Roman amphorae in ancient maritime transport. She marshals evidence from shipwrecks to show that, contrary to the common assumption that antique amphorae were always discarded after shipment, amphorae were actually reused for transport on a grand scale. The phenomena of reuse is historically suggestive since it required a complex social organization, including a sufficient quantity of containers, work forces to collect, clean and refill the vessels, and a working and stocking space. Thus the transformation of amphorae over time becomes a model for objects' mobility over time and space as a factor in their value, as well as for the social goals and possibilities of this valuation.

The goals of reuse are not always so clear cut. This is the challenge confronting Gordana Ciric in chapter eight. Her data comes from the secondary use of Roman coins in medieval cemeteries from the territory of Serbia. As these coins were obviously no longer a means of exchange, the archaeologist is faced with a choice of which approach to take in determining their transformed meaning. Ciric criticizes numismatics for

analysing coins in isolation and calls for a reintroduction of social context. Taking the idea of object biography as her starting point, she speculates about the possibility that, in the repositioning of the Barbarians with respect to the Romans, coins assumed symbolic powers. This leads her to assert that a full account of the meanings of reused coins would necessitate transcending the object-biographical perspective to include theories of exchange and social interaction.

Annelou van Gijn and Karsten Wentink are also pressed to explain the recurrence of objects in different contexts, but they have the advantage of being able to trace their use through laboratory study. In chapter nine, they use microscopic evidence to draw historical conclusions out of large retouched blades and other typical Michelsberg macrolithic tools found in the wetlands at a time when its inhabitants were gradually adopting a Neolithic lifestyle. Their evidence shows that, while in the early part of this period the Michelsberg tools were imported but no longer used, they were later incorporated into indigenous technological system and applied to special activities. Van Gijn and Wentink suggest that this indicates a change among the people of the wetlands, from affiliation with the Neolithic farmers to a gradual appropriation of a new identity. The objects thus reflect the negotiation and expression of a new, Neolithic identity.

Whereas van Gijn and Wentink present a synchronized consolidation of social identity through objects, in chapter ten Mario Schmidt shows that objects can also manifest divergent goals and identities. He focuses on the wampum beads of the Coastal Algonquian as objects that promise their owners self-completion and value. Yet this is a false promise. Schmidt suggests that decorating women and children with ornaments, redistributing beads to poor members of society and paying bridewealth in fathoms of beads blurred the difference between ascribed and achieved status. Political power was beyond the reach of ordinary individuals and women, and yet the circulation of wampum beads strengthened the position of political leaders and added prestige to individuals. They operated, therefore, to grant their possessors the illusion of agency, while actually reproducing existing hierarchies.

Questions regarding social identity can also appear in the value attributed to objects and the uses to which they are put. This is what Joseph Maran turns our attention to in chapter eleven with respect to amber objects in Mycenaean Greece. While amber – exported from a great distance and found in necklaces – is commonly interpreted as a decorative prestige object, Maran shies away from such insinuated semantic stability. Indeed, he finds evidence in Mycenaean male grave assemblages that amber was used in warrior equipment as a protective device that was perceived to be charged with supernatural power. This perception may have been related to amber's materiality: the Tiryns sun wheels of the post-palatial period show amber and gold being used as twin solar materials in objects that were not worn on the body of persons, but rather were integrated in ceremonies as religious paraphernalia.

If Maran raises the issue of Amber's materiality, Roberta Gilchrist places materiality at the forefront of her analysis of medieval heirlooms. In chapter twelve she presents evidence of objects associated with secular rites of personhood and family, such as pottery vessels or items of apparel linked with marriage, being gifted to the church. Gilchrist argues that objects were often selected for curation based on the social value

that was placed on their physical materiality. It is by virtue of biographical objects' (social and physical) materiality, according to Gilchrist, that they were selected and endowed with spiritual power. Objects that were related to church sacraments were likewise selected to be *sacralised* by virtue of their engagement with life-course rituals. Medieval heirlooms were therefore not only *memory objects*, but also *sacred objects*.

Notes

- 1 However, the idea of a biography of a thing is much older and has long been used in popular texts about the material world (Tretjakov 2007 [1929]). For the Francophone tradition, see also Morin (1969).
- 2 This interest might not only originate from the uncertainty about what can legitimately be regarded as an objects end, but also in the potential transformation of objects into useful or harmful substances, or more generally in the cultural consequences of recycling (Norris 2004; Douny 2007; Thompson 1979; Strasser 1999). The distinction between a substance and an object is useful in this context, although this has hardly ever been a topic in material culture studies (Hahn and Soentgen 2010).
- 3 The same applies for the *beginning* of an object as has been recently discussed in studies about second hand objects (Hetherington 2004).
- 4 The notion of the *aura* of an object is closely related to the question of its uniqueness. According to Walter Benjamin's famous essay, the property of having an *aura* is threatened by the increasing practices of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1936). Marlen Stoessel (1983) concisely shows that it is not *uniqueness* as such, but merely the way things are perceived as something special, that matters. This is precisely the context of things coming from *far away*.

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