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Reinvigorating object biography: reproducing the drama of object lives

Jody Joy

Abstract

The *World Archaeology* volume 'The Cultural Biography of Objects' (Marshall and Gosden 1999) retains its currency ten years after its publication and the ideas highlighted in it continue to be developed. However, the relative success of biographical studies which rely on anthropological or historical information compared with biographical studies of prehistoric objects is evident. Through the example of a British Iron Age mirror this paper explores ways of redressing the difficulties of applying a biographical approach to prehistoric objects.

Keywords

Biographical approach; life history; use life; life-cycle; relational approaches; mirror; Iron Age.

Objects have always been at the centre of archaeological research but, prompted by the increasing prominence of object studies in the social sciences, archaeologists have become more interested in relationships between people and objects. Objects are not just a product of society, they are fundamental to it (Thomas 1996: 141). Anthropological studies illustrate that objects in some societies take on the personalities of people or have lives that are seen as similar to persons' (Battaglia 1990; Gell 1998; Hendrickson 1995; Hoskins 1998; MacKenzie 1991; Munn 1986; Strathern 1988). The biographical approach provides a method to reveal relationships between people and objects. It was first put forward by Igor Kopytoff (1986). He suggested that it is possible to write the biographies of objects, just as we write the biographies of people, by following object lives from birth → life → death. An object is produced, or 'born'; it is involved in a particular set of relationships during its lifetime; it also 'dies' when it is no longer involved in these relationships (Holtorf 1998). If objects accumulate histories over time, it should be possible to reveal relationships between people and objects by unravelling object histories (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 169).

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Kopytoff's biographical approach was first published in a social anthropological volume, *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai 1986), and featured prominently in the work of some post-processual European prehistorians (e.g. Thomas 1996: 78–82; Tilley 1996: 247–324). In the *World Archaeology* volume 'The Cultural Biography of Objects' (Marshall and Gosden 1999) the full potential of Kopytoff's biographical approach for archaeological research was highlighted as various papers provided different templates of how to approach object biographies (see Gosden and Marshall 1999: 176). A number of themes run through the volume. Many studies examine how the perception of and meaning of objects is transformed through exchange (Gallardo et al. 1999; Hamilakis 1999; Peers 1999; Saunders 1999; Seip 1999) or through performance (Gosden and Marshall 1999). Other papers explore the biography of long-lived objects whose lives extend beyond different systems of understanding and undergo a series of 'reincarnations' (Gillings and Pollard 1999; MacGregor 1999; Moreland 1999; see also Eckardt & Williams 2003). Rainbird (1999) even suggests that the biography of one set of objects can be transferred to another through a process he terms 'biographical entanglement' (see also Joy 2002). Different mechanisms of biographical change are identified. Portable objects build histories through exchange and circulation (e.g. Peers 1999) and static objects, like monuments, acquire histories by virtue of their longevity as re-interpretations gather around them (Gillings & Pollard 1999; Moreland 1999; see also Holtorf 1998; Last 1998).

Subsequent to the publication of the *World Archaeology* volume, articles have sporadically appeared that extend the variety of approaches to object biography. Whitely (2002) shows how objects are valued because of their biographies: the histories acquired throughout their lifetimes confer meanings on other objects and on the individuals interred with them in burials. Fontijn (2002: 28) demonstrates the importance of the decisions of smiths in determining future life trajectories, as object form can define the 'biographical possibilities' of metal objects (see below). Woodward (2002) examines extended biographies of Bronze Age beads and beakers following the fragmentation of the original artefact. The creation of a full life history of a single object has been attempted only rarely, however (although see Spector 1993).

Archaeological approaches to object life histories

Implicit throughout the *World Archaeology* biography volume is a single understanding of object biography, derived from social anthropology and adopted largely by European post-processual archaeologists. However, archaeology also has its own traditions of examining object life histories.

The *chaîne opératoire*, which is derived from Mauss and Leroi-Gourhan, is used to examine the sequence of events and decisions employed when artefacts are manufactured, particularly to examine the technology of Palaeolithic objects. For example, Dobres (1995) examines social relationships, which are defined and reaffirmed through technological acts, by breaking down bone and antler technology in the French Pyrenees into a sequence, revealing the actions of social actors in the 'creation of their material world' (see also Dobres 1999, 2000; Dobres & Hoffman 1994). 'Use-life' analysis of objects for evidence of

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wear and damage can also inform us of aspects of the life of objects, for example, how long an object was used for and for what purpose (York 2002: 79).

Full object life histories have been used, particularly in North America, by processual archaeologists seeking to explain the formation of the archaeological record (Schiffer 1972, 1987). This taphonomic approach takes account of the observation that artefact lives are not static (see also Binford 1983). Processes such as procurement, manufacture, use, maintenance and discard, as well as storage, transport, re-cycling and re-use are all important in determining how artefacts eventually enter archaeological contexts (see Schiffer 1972: 157–60). Behavioural archaeologists (see Schiffer et al. 2001) also employ the idea of object life history as part of a sophisticated model where criteria such as 'performance characteristics' are compared at each stage in the object life-cycle to explain artefact variability (e.g. Schiffer and Skibo 1997; Skibo and Schiffer 2001) and technological change (e.g. Schiffer 2004, 2005a, 2005b).

The *chaîne opératoire* is limited to the sequence of manufacture rather than the context of the full life of the artefact (see Schiffer et al. 2001: 731). Use-wear analysis also provides clues about the duration, type or intensity of usage, but it must be stressed that the technological and functional properties of objects cannot be divorced from their cultural and social significance (Jones 2002: 84). Examination of use-life also acts to reduce the importance of the production process in object lives because from a use-life perspective the object is made to perform a certain function and it will be used until it is no longer useful in performing that function (Bradley 1998: xx). The *chaîne opératoire* and use-life analysis are useful in terms of building some aspects of object lives but are limited as they do not address the full life of an artefact.

Biographical and life-history approaches

Two approaches which follow the full life of objects can be distinguished, anthropologically inspired 'biographical' approaches and archaeological object 'life histories'. Like studies following anthropological approaches to object biography, many life-history studies focus on historical case studies (e.g. Schiffer 2000, 2005a, 2005b). In each case the merit of examining decisions at different stages of the artefact life-cycle to account for technological or artefact change is clearly demonstrated.

The life-history approach has largely been ignored by those following the anthropological biographical approach (although see Tringham 1994). This is probably because the two approaches use a different language, often operate on different scales and set different objectives. Although they can operate on a number of different scales; for example, to investigate individual telegraphs, a telegraph network, all telegraphs in one nation or all telegraphs in the world (see Schiffer 2005b: 485–8), the majority of life-history studies operate on the macro-scale and seek to explain long-term changes to artefacts and technology. The relationships between people and objects are examined but they are sought to account for changes in technology or artefact form. Biographical studies, on the other hand, often examine single artefacts or distinct geographical and chronological assemblages. As was stated in the introduction to this article, one of the specified motivations of the biographical approach is also to reveal relationships between people and objects (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 169). However, this is from the dynamic perspective of objects actively involved in social relations. The interplay between people and objects is missing from life-history studies. Despite the

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merits of the life-history approach, as this study is focused on reproducing the 'drama' of prehistoric object lives, I will now concentrate specifically on biographical approaches.

Problems with the application of the biographical approach to prehistoric objects

The biographical approach has benefited many studies. For example, by adopting a biographical perspective Gerritsen (1999) was able to demonstrate the often dynamic life courses of prehistoric houses in the southern Netherlands (Vellings 1999: 98). Many other examples fail to realize the full potential of the biographical approach. They may mention biography only in passing, perhaps by discussing key anthropological texts in the introduction and concluding that the objects under scrutiny had 'rich' or 'complex' biographies, without specifically exploring them. It seems acceptable merely to refer to the biographical possibilities of an object but fail to reveal the relationships between people and objects which is an inherent part of the biographical approach.

The primary problem encountered by prehistoric archaeologists when attempting to reconstruct object biographies is the quality of information available to them. Put simply, unless the object under scrutiny has a recorded history, the evidence available is not sufficient to reconstruct a full life history, with a birth, life and death. The best possible outcome when constructing a biography for a prehistoric artefact is that there is evidence for production and good contextual evidence of death. A further problem is that archaeologists most often encounter objects at the moment they ended their social lives. To reconstruct biographies it is necessary to work backwards from death to production (see Holtorf 2000–1, 2002a, 2002b). In reality as an object is living out its life it is not restricted to a single life path. Many historically or anthropologically situated studies have shown that the life trajectories of objects can often alter dramatically. They can also be re-interpreted a number of different times throughout their life, undergoing successive 'reincarnations' (Moreland 1999: 198). The life of an object does not necessarily follow a linear pattern. After its creation an object can die a number of times as it becomes a part of and leaves different spheres of relationships. It can also have a number of different simultaneous lives which can run concurrently as it acts in different relationship webs. In addition, as has been aptly demonstrated by biographies of long-lived monuments, the biography of some objects is further complicated because they extend over a series of human lifetimes. This means that at each juncture of the life of an object the meaning and role of that object can be influenced by attitudes and perceptions of the past (Moreland 1999). How an object is interpreted can be dependent then upon how its past is perceived and an object can undergo a series of transformations of meaning, or jumps. Objects can also act to extend the agency of human actors across space and beyond the limits of their biological lives as they are exchanged and used (Gell 1998: 17–18).

Recreating the 'drama' of prehistoric object lives

So where do we go from here? Can we re-create the drama of the lives of prehistoric objects by following their biographies or is the evidence available to us too limited? I argue that we can do better.

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Examining object biography from the perspective of birth, life and death provides a convenient narrative structure and is integral to the notion of biography and the analogy of life history. However, it can be counterproductive as it also highlights the limits of our knowledge and serves to underline what we do not know. The 'ideal' birth, life and death cannot be re-created because of the limits of archaeological evidence so why make the effort? In Melanesian society the body acts as a register of the social relationships that constitute a person: it is a 'microcosm of relations' (Strathern 1988: 131). A person's biography can be seen as the sum of the social relationships that constitute that person. Just like people, objects can act as 'agents' in a relationship or be acted upon as 'patients'. If objects are ascribed relational agency, like people, the biography of an object can be seen to comprise the sum of the social relationships that constitute the object (Gell 1998: 17–18, table 1). Following Strathern (1988), if identity is multiple and made up of relations with other people, biography cannot be viewed as purely an historical narrative; it is relational. Object biographies therefore can also be seen as non-linear, consisting of a series of connected jumps as the object becomes alive within certain clusters of social relationships and is inactive at other points in time and space, undergoing a series of different lives and deaths. Conceiving of an object biography in this way has the advantage of allowing us to pick up on the biography of an object at specific points and in particular contexts where the archaeological evidence will allow us to and not feel that the biography is lacking because we are unable to construct a neat linear life story for it. What makes this methodology biographical rather than purely relational is the continuation of the material form of the artefact and the structuring of these relationships as a biography.

The majority of biographical studies focus on exchange; objects acquire biographies as they pass between people. However, mechanisms other than exchange can alter meaning and generate biographies (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 174). One specific context highlighted by Gosden and Marshall (ibid.), and increasingly prevalent in archaeological discussions (e.g. Inomata and Coben 2006; Pearson & Shanks 2001), is ceremonial performance. It is through the drama in the performance of actions relating to the object that meanings are created and made explicit (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 175). Using the evidence from the object and its depositional and societal contexts, it is possible to infer aspects of the performances in which they participated.

The interplay between objects and people is also missing from existing prehistoric studies; this is something that historically or anthropologically situated object biographies often communicate well (e.g. Hoskins 1998; Peers 1999). One of the most compelling examples of object biography is Hoskins' example of a small woven bag made to carry betel nuts. The bag belonged to Maru Daku, a respected Kodi story-teller from the western tip of the Indonesian island of Sumba (Hoskins 1998: ch. 2). Hoskins found that Maru Daku constructed narratives about himself through his betel bag and throughout her fieldwork she found that identity on Sumba is intertwined with possessions which are used as a 'pivot for reflexivity and introspection' (ibid.: 198). Examples like this highlight the potential for relationships between prehistoric people and objects.

To re-create the drama of prehistoric object lives it is necessary to approach archaeological evidence in more creative ways. Some authors, such as Spector (1993) and Tringham (1994), have attempted to bring relationships to life through imaginative narrative. Although these interpretations communicate the drama of object lives very effectively, a high level of authorship is required to carry it off. Very often the information

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available to prehistorians has not been fully exploited. Studies often concentrate on information from depositional contexts but do not examine what is written into the artefacts and do not utilize data gathered from the scientific analysis of objects to aid in the construction of object biography (although see Jones 2002). Although use-wear analysis and the *chaîne opératoire* do not examine the full life of an artefact, they are useful tools in building object biographies. For example, studies of use-wear and artefact damage (e.g. Bridgeford 1997; Taylor 1993) have demonstrated that objects of the same type found in different depositional contexts can have very different use and damage histories, highlighting alternative life trajectories. Marshall (2008: 63–5) has usefully drawn a distinction between what she terms 'inscribed' and 'lived' objects. Inscribed objects are marked out as socially powerful at the time of production. Meaning and significance is built into the object when it is manufactured, which can be added to and alter during life. Lived objects on the other hand may be so called 'everyday' objects that acquire meaning through social action. These are more difficult to identify archaeologically as their meaning and significance is dependent upon context.

As Kopytoff (1986: 66–8) suggested, one potential way to counter some of the deficiencies in the available evidence is to study a group of objects. Despite problems associated with identifying a suitable group when examining solely archeologically data, by examining object groups it is possible to identify an 'idealized' life for a particular artefact type and spot those objects that deviate from the 'norm'. It is also possible to infer possible life trajectories by observing what did not happen, particularly when questioning why objects were deposited in specific contexts and not others.

Relational biographies

To summarize, the biographical approach that I advocate in this article seeks to identify relationships between people and objects, piecing together evidence from artefacts and archaeology to examine the role of objects in social relations. Biography does not necessarily have to follow a coherent narrative. If the biography of an object is viewed as non-linear and comprised of the sum of the social relationships that constitute it, the limitations of prehistoric evidence are not unduly highlighted. Relationships can be revealed where the archaeological evidence allows us to think about it in imaginative ways. Biographical information resides in the artefact, in the patina of age, wear and repair it acquires through its life. This information can be uncovered through analysis of use-wear and the properties 'inscribed', or built into, the object at the time of manufacture, through examination of the *chaîne opératoire* of artefact technology (see Dobres 1995). Inferences can also be drawn from the affordant properties of artefacts (see Knappett 2004, 2005: ch. 3); by examining the possible uses for artefacts, it is possible to comment on potential biographical trajectories. The biographies of individual objects are unique (see Holtorf 2002b) and biographical analysis should be confined to the scale of the individual object. However, it is also possible to make inferences from data gathered about similar artefacts to suggest a 'typical' life and detect any deviations from the 'norm'. Data can also be inferred by asking what did not happen to the artefact. Finally, analysis of deposition context can reveal relationships formulated at the time of deposition.

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Reconstructing the life of an Iron Age mirror from Portesham, Dorset

In the following biography of a British Iron Age mirror found at Portesham, Dorset (Fig. 1) I present some of the social relationships it accumulated over its lifetime. Approximately sixty mirrors like this one have been found throughout the British Isles in graves, watery contexts and settlements (Joy 2008a). They are made of bronze or iron and date from the third century BC to the first century AD. Mirrors have often been interpreted as high-status objects and the property of women (e.g. Fox 1958: 84). By creating a biography of the Portesham mirror I demonstrate the usefulness of the biographical approach to prehistoric research.

The Portesham mirror is an 'inscribed' object; it was marked out at the time of production and invested with agency, equipping it for its future life (Bradley 1998: xx; Fontijn 2002: 28; Marshall 2008; Strathern 1988: 176). The mirror was probably made in southern England sometime early in the first century AD. It is a complex artefact made of multiple bronze components (see Fig. 1). It has a cast bronze handle, a sheet metal plate elaborately decorated on one side and highly polished on the other and a bronze edging which protects the plate. Figure 2 is a kind of *chaîne opératoire* of mirror making and shows the different production processes required to make the Portesham mirror. It was created to examine the potential biographical information written into the mirror at the time of its production. It divides production steps into stages (the grey boxes numbered 1–7). Different individuals were involved at each stage, which provided different settings for social interaction.

Collection and processing of ores (1) and metal smelting (2) were the first two stages. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. Copper and tin ores are found in the highland zones of Britain (Northover 1984: 126), predominantly in the west and south west. Extraction of ores in mines probably continued throughout the period even though evidence for mining

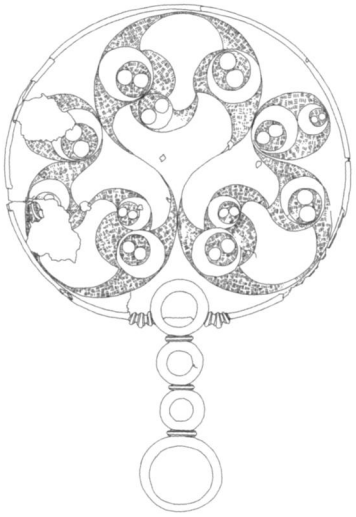

Figure 1 The Portesham mirror (drawn by author after Fitzpatrick 1997).

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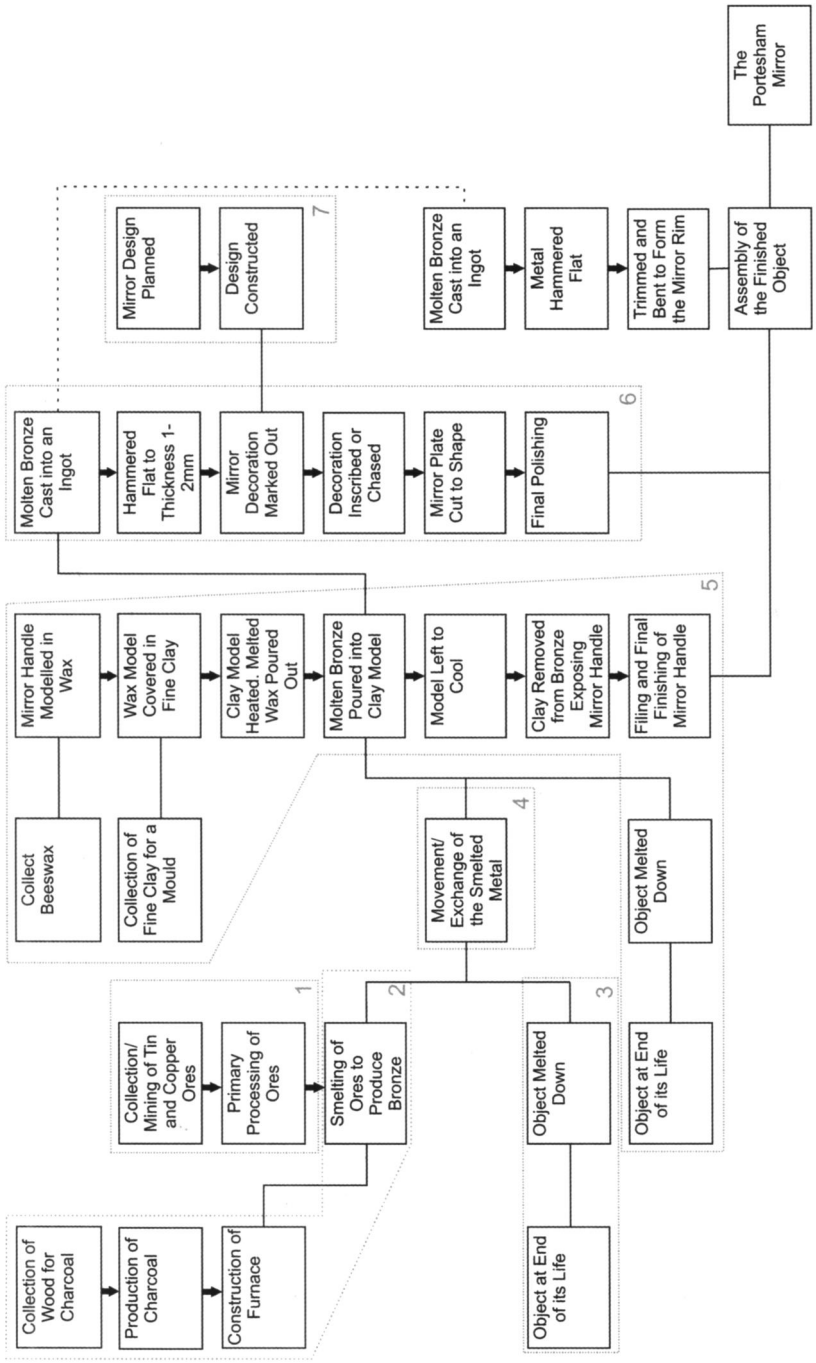

Figure 2 Stages in the construction of the Portesham mirror (drawn by author).

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is limited (Dungworth 1997: 48; Northover 1995: 287). The relative scarcity and geographical marginality of copper and tin ores mean that primary ore processing and smelting may have taken place close to where the metal was extracted. Metal was probably exchanged as recycled bronze artefacts (3) and ingots (4). Analysis of the different component parts reveals that the handle and plate were made of metal from different sources which had been smelted and processed in slightly different ways. From the amount of mixing, it is probable that the majority of the bronze had been recycled from other artefacts (Fitzpatrick 1997). An extensive chain of relationships, exchange of items, re-use of material and movement of metal were formulated to obtain the metal to make the mirror and inform us of the complexity of the exchange and movement of metal in later Iron Age Britain.

The three mirror components were made separately before they were assembled as a single artefact. The handle (5) and plate (6) required different skills to make. The handle was cast using the lost-wax technique (see Stead 1996: 12). Importantly in the lost-wax process the mould is destroyed, meaning that the handle is a unique artefact. Making the plate would have been time consuming and laborious. A cast ingot of bronze was hammered flat to a thickness of between 1 and 2mm. The plate was trimmed to shape and polished. The plate was decorated before the mirror was assembled as some of the decoration is obscured by the edging. Mirror design was not necessarily created by the same person who engraved the lines (7) (see Joy 2008a: ch. 4, 2008b). The handle and plate were then attached. The plate was wedged into a slot pre-cast into the handle. This join was secured with a rivet and the bronze edging. Final polishing and finishing took place after the mirror was assembled as a single artefact as analysis of the plate at the juncture with the handle has revealed a surface close to, but not in its final, polished condition (Fitzpatrick 1997: 64).

This analysis provides clues to the structure of metalworking at this time. The mirror could have been made and decorated by several individuals. However, the manner in which the different components of the mirror come together to form a well-ordered and coherent artefact indicates a particular person or group was responsible for coordinating its making. They wanted the mirror and caused it to be made by formulating specific relationships centred on the production stages highlighted. The performance of making the mirror provided different stage-settings for relationships to be reaffirmed or renegotiated. By decorating it and adding edging, the number of relationships was potentially increased. It is possible that the context of its production was remembered throughout the lifetime of the mirror, acting to emphasize the social influence of the people who made it.

The form of the mirror acts as a 'material metaphor' (Tilley 1999) as it refers to and gathers up different elements of a series of types of object forms, recognizable from the later Iron Age, and combines them into a single, multi-component object (Fig. 3). For example, the sheet metal of the plate could refer to other sheet metal artefacts like cauldrons. The decoration on the mirror plate is similar to the decoration found on sword-scabbards, horse harnesses and some types of pottery. The shape of the binding is like a torc. It also resembles the binding around wooden shields and other wooden objects. The handle is similar in form to horse bits when they are laid out flat. Finally, the actual shape and form of the mirror refer back to earlier mirrors. It is possible that by making the

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Figure 3 The mirror refers to other types of Iron Age material culture (drawn by author).

mirror in this way potential meaning and significance were inscribed into the artefact as people who encountered it could make associations and linkages between the mirror and these other objects. The addition of the bronze binding acted to re-emphasize the bringing together of all these elements into one material whole. Perhaps the form of the mirror, inscribed at the time of production, drew upon an idealized sense of continuity with the past, present and future providing the potential for it to act within multiple social spheres.

The collection of the metal and the design, manufacture and decoration of the mirror likely took place over an extended period with a number of individuals coming together in the performance of its making. Relationships were established and reaffirmed through these performances and the final result was a dramatic, eye-catching object. By making it in a particular fashion, potential meanings were inscribed into it, although these probably altered throughout the mirror's life.

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I now turn my attention to the life of the mirror and demonstrate that it is possible to comment on this period in the biography of a prehistoric object. Relationships were constituted when the mirror was used, in particular through its relation with the human body. We encounter objects in active situations. The mirror has a number of 'affordant' properties (see Knappett 2004, 2005: ch. 3). It has a distinctive form: a handle and a reflective plate. The handle has a grip and was meant to be held in the hand/s leaving the plate free from obstruction, implying that the plate was meant to be viewed in its entirety. Past interpretations have drawn on the reflective qualities of mirrors to suggest that they served an 'everyday' function as toilet objects (e.g. Fox 1958). Physical appearance is a powerful and meaningful means of communicating social identity (Sørensen 1997: 93). By using a mirror to inspect the body, hair or clothing and to monitor appearance as well as gesture or posture, ideals of how the body should look could be reproduced (Foucault 1990; Giles and Joy 2007: 21). It also became an active part of who that person was, alongside the tools which allowed people to adjust their appearance like tweezers and ear-scoops (Hill 1997), shears, razors, cosmetic sets and grinders (Carr 2000, 2005; Jackson 1985) and different modes of dress (Jundi and Hill 1998; Sørensen 1997). Mirrors facilitated a personal engagement with the self and allowed a person to take direct control over how they looked. This is often overlooked in archaeological interpretations which view 'cosmetic' objects as passively reflecting a general concern for personal appearance and dress (cf. Olsen 2003). The act of looking in a mirror, if it was done in a public place, also communicated something about the person using it. A person was being seen to be concerned with the way they looked through the acts of changing bodily appearance. Messages were also transmitted to others by the movement of the modified human body through time and space. I am not suggesting that people did not take an interest in personal appearance before they made mirrors. However, prior to their use people were reliant on others to tell them how they looked.

The Portesham mirror was found with a brooch attached to the terminal loop of the handle. Other mirrors have also been found with brooches attached to their handles (see Burleigh and Megaw 2007) and/or were deposited wrapped in covering (Fox and Pollard 1973; Parfitt 1998). This evidence could indicate that the brooch was used to secure a covering around the mirror (see Joy 2008a: ch. 5). The covering has greater significance than solely as a means of protecting it from damage. Like the dressing of people, the mirror could be seen to have been dressed as it could have been protected in a whole series of different ways which would not have involved the handle being damaged by a brooch. Analysis of wear patterns on the terminal loop of the handle and the handles of other mirrors suggests that the brooch was attached over a period of time (ibid.) indicating that for much of its life the mirror was covered.

We can also make inferences about the life of the mirror by asking: what did not happen to it? The fact that it was not scratched or damaged and was not significantly worn indicates that it was well cared for and strengthens the argument that for much of the time it was covered up. Like the example of the Pacific north-west coast masks cited by Gosden and Marshall (1999: 174–6), which spent much of their lives hidden away and became 'alive' only when they were used in dramatic ceremonies, the mirror probably spent much of its life not in use. The cover was perhaps removed when

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someone was preparing for a particularly important feast, where they wanted to make a statement about their social position through their physical appearance. The mirror may also have been uncovered in a particular ceremony for which the reflective plate formed a fundamental element. The mirror in this respect is important only in the context of its performance; it was not necessarily 'owned' by somebody.

Piecing together evidence from the artefact and societal context, a picture of the life of the mirror can be proposed. It was most likely carefully covered and out of use for much of the time. This only served to exaggerate its effect when it was uncovered for use in ceremonial performances.

Like other decorated bronze mirrors the Portesham mirror ended its Iron Age social life in a dramatic ceremony when it was placed in a grave. It was placed in the grave of a woman of some social standing alongside many other objects. Based on the objects found in the grave, the burial probably dates to around the time of the Roman conquest of southern England in AD 43 (Fitzpatrick 1997: 61). The grave conforms to the patterns of the dominant burial rite at this time in south Dorset (Fitzpatrick 1997; Whimster 1981; Woodward 1993) but stands out from other burials in the region because of the number and nature of the grave-goods. In addition to the mirror and the crouched remains of a mature adult female the grave also contained a number of pots, pig and sheep bones, three brooches, a knife, a bronze pan and a toilet set.

The objects in the grave can be placed into two groups: objects associated with eating and drinking and objects associated with personal appearance. The pots from the grave were probably used to prepare and serve food. The remains of a pig were placed over the front of the body and at the waist and behind the back were joints of lamb. Joints of lamb are found in the graves of both sexes in south Dorset, but pork is more commonly associated with female burials. The bronze pan is a Roman import and is thought to be part of a pan and strainer set, used for straining and preparing drink, specifically wine (Fitzpatrick 1997: 58). As already discussed, one brooch was linked to the terminal loop of the mirror handle; the other two were found at the shoulders and presumably secured a form of dress or mortuary garb which no longer survives. The mirror was placed near to the waist or chest with the toilet set. The toilet set consists of two pairs of tweezers and an ear scoop. Toilet sets are more commonly found in Roman contexts; however, it has been argued that the occurrence of these objects on later Iron Age sites illustrates increased concern for personal appearance and personal hygiene (see Hill 1997, 2001; Jundi and Hill 1998).

It is significant that both objects associated with personal appearance and dress, as well as eating and drinking, were placed in the grave. This communicated something about the dead person, and probably more importantly the dead person's relatives, to those present at the burial (Parker-Pearson 1999). Recent research suggests that people may have signalled their social difference and actively renegotiated their identity, in the later Iron Age and early Roman period, through their appearance (Hill 1997, 2001; Jundi and Hill 1998). This burial took place in a period of social change in southern England when people were actively renegotiating their identities. People were also signalling their social difference through the preparation and serving of food and drink, by eating and drinking new types of food and drink and using new types of utensils (Hill 2002). In the case of the

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Portesham burial this is particularly apparent with the inclusion of the Roman pan, which was probably used in the preparation and mixing of imported wine.

Conclusion

In this paper I have provided a modified methodology to construct a biography of a prehistoric object. The biography of an object should not be restricted to an historical reconstruction of its birth, life and death. Biography is relational and an object biography is comprised of the sum of the relationships that constitute it. I have highlighted the full potential of the biographical approach for prehistoric research by commenting on the 'rich and complex' life of a single prehistoric object, the Portesham mirror. I hope I have added some drama to our understanding of its life. Past interpretations of mirrors have viewed them as the possessions of high-status Iron Age women (e.g. Fox 1958: 84). Adopting a relational approach to the biography of the mirror has provided greater depth to this interpretation. When the mirror was made it provided a stage-setting for relationships and probably objectified these during life, acting as an emblem of the social influence of its makers. It was made with a number of affordant properties which set out the social relationships that could be structured around it, allowing it to operate in particular social spheres. Its life was not constant. For most of the time it was probably covered and was actively involved in social relationships only intermittently. It ended its life in a grave which looks to be that of a high-status woman. However, there is no reason why the mirror was necessarily 'owned' by the person it was buried with. It was made by a number of individuals and was not permanently in use. The grave contained objects associated with personal appearance and eating and drinking which were both important means of social expression at the time. The burial also took place at a time of social change when people were actively renegotiating their identities. The associations set out at the time of production have been manipulated in the grave and the trajectory of the mirror's life has been altered. Instead of referring to past items of material culture and an idealized Iron Age past, this association with the past has been turned on its head and the mirror has been used to reinforce changing social identities and relationships during a period of social change: a symbol of past continuity has been manipulated to reinforce renegotiations of social life and identity.

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