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Materiality in Archaeological Theory

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Introduction

Materiality is so enmeshed in our everyday existence that it has a kind of impenetrability. We are in touch with it so intimately that it vanishes. And yet of course it is always very much present. As I write, I sit on a Greek “kafeneio” chair, a simple wooden frame with crisscross rope that leaves its pattern on my legs, at least when I am wearing shorts. The wooden table is simple plywood on dexion. The table, the chair, the wooden floor, the computer, the ceiling fan, the dust, the coffee cups: together they are touched, seen, heard, smelled, and tasted, and somehow despite all these senses at work they go largely unnoticed. Writing brings them momentarily to the fore, though there are other ways too in which they can be made to appear. Many contemporary artists bring the artifacts of the everyday into presence by creating new kinds of encounter with them – from rendering them oversized, as in some of the work of Claes Oldenburg, or at miniature scale as in Slinkachu’s almost invisible street scenes, or through redisplay (e.g., Jeff Koons). Sometimes, dramatic events can make the everyday appear to us in a very different light, as, for example, with the house interiors of New Orleans damaged by the floodwaters from Katrina (Wilford 2008). And these two can even come together when contemporary artists redirect their practice in the aftermath of such events, as with the “Floodwall” of Jana Napoli, or the photographic reportage of artist Robert Polidori (Fig. 1). These can help us briefly experience the elusive sense of materiality that is part of our everyday lives.

Arguably, it is the constant exposure to thousands of commodities in the twenty-first century West that forces a kind of drawing back from the

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Fig. 1 “6539 Canal Street, New Orleans, September, 2005” (© Robert Polidori and courtesy the artist, and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York)



overwhelming world of materiality. Or perhaps it is the fine-grained engineering of many products that makes our reliance on them so seamless: the thermostats for the silent control of heat in our houses, the ergonomic design of our cars, or the custom orthotics for our feet. But are either of these points valid – is the contemporary world really qualitatively different from the past? In fact, various authors suggest not: that this “condition” is actually part and parcel of being human. We may now sometimes feel choked by materials, but to be human has always been to be material or “artificial” (Taylor 2010). A fascinating set of stories can be traced back through early and later prehistory that document the “gradients” of change in materiality, between, for example, “instruments” and “containers” (Gamble 2007).

Yet despite the integral role of materiality in being and becoming human, the everyday world of stuff is endlessly overlooked both in our everyday lives, and to a surprising degree, perhaps consequently, in our archaeological practice and theory. Although archaeologists necessarily devote much of their attention to things – whether we call them artifacts, material culture, materials, or technologies – definitions of “materiality” have not been forthcoming. While it may seem

at one level a term that we might take for granted, a flurry of recent research on materiality shows that it can actually lead in a number of different directions.

Definition

Let us try to think about what defines this phenomenon we call materiality. How is it different from or preferable to some of the other terms mentioned above, such as “artifacts,” “materials,” or “material culture?” Each of these terms can come across as static and categorical, whereas materiality has the advantage of being more relational. Artifacts imply that only things made by humans are relevant, a shortcoming that materials avoids; the latter could, after all, apply to metal ores, or pebbles on a beach. However, this is perhaps not sufficiently differentiated from the way in which a materials engineer might talk about materials. Material culture more obviously includes the cultural component that concerns the social scientist and humanist, though it does also risk portraying a polarized world of materials on the one hand and culture on the other, with the former acted upon by the latter. Materiality as a term does not make obvious this human

component (sociomateriality could be a solution, but is unwieldy). Yet another term on offer is material world(s); this has the advantage of conveying the plural, ensemble quality of human–thing relations, but again it does not naturally include the human, and like “material culture” it too is static. Thus, none of the terms available quite gives us what we need. Though not perfect, materiality may be the term that gets closest. It does have the distinctive advantage of conveying process, the ongoing dynamic of human–artifactual relations. And it does help to downplay the duality between mind and matter that is really one of the fundamental aims in materiality research (DeMarrais et al. 2004). Though this acts as a useful general guideline, there is an argument for being more specific, which entails considering the multidimensional nature of materiality. In this light, what we need is a concept that can cover four key areas: the dependent (material relations), codependent (social relations), independent (vital), and interdependent (plural) properties of things and objects (Knappett 2012). Admittedly, it is ambitious to try hanging all of these properties on the term “materiality” alone, but this is what it seems to require. One can understand both the reluctance (Miller 2005) and the insistence (Ingold 2007) to define materiality.

Historical Background

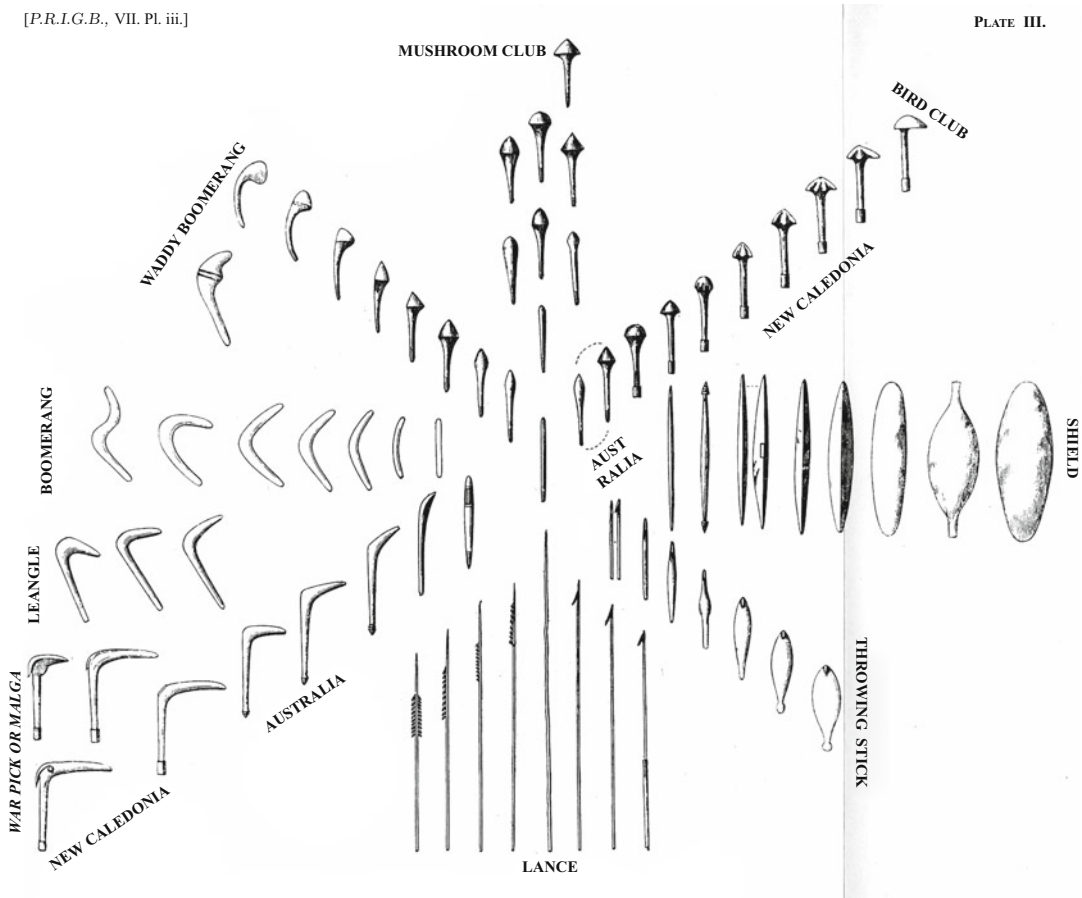
It is curious that only relatively recently has the urge to reconnect mind and matter, or the social and the artifactual, been felt. This move notwithstanding material culture is still often described as a reflection or an expression of social organization or cultural ideals. In archaeology, Tim Taylor has attributed this to the deep influence of Gordon Childe (Taylor 2009: 298). Much of the subsequent social archaeology has fallen into a similar Cartesian separation. Indeed, even some of the archaeological literature seemingly aimed at materiality uses terms such as “materialization,” which reinforces the idea that something social exists prior to the artifactual, with the

former “materialized” in the latter (DeMarrais 2004). Rather than ask here why we see a conjoining of mind and matter reappearing in materiality studies now, albeit unevenly, we should perhaps reflect on what has historically prevented its expression. What is interesting is that, according to Taylor, the sense of an inseparable connection between a community and its artifacts was widely held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the term “materiality” itself even used by E.B. Tylor as early as 1871 (Taylor 2009: 299). As Taylor also explains, the “sense of the intricate cultural nexus between artifacts and persons” (Taylor 2009: 299) was also tangled up with an essentialism that bound together cultural and racial identity, expressed in the work of Gustaf Kossina, for example, and subsequently subject to political manipulation and abuse in Nazi propaganda. This set of associations evidently led postwar to a disentangling of the cultural nexus to which Taylor refers, with a separation, or even polarization, of the social and the artifactual (actually already expressed in the prewar years by Childe). As an aside, we might note that a similar path was trodden in early twentieth century art history, with Alois Riegl’s influential idea of “Kunstwollen” in its formalism promoting the idea of a “cultural nexus,” but by the same token also potentially essentializing and hence open to abuse (Elsner 2006). Riegl’s ideas generated much debate, with ripostes from Panofsky and Warburg among others (Elsner 2006), and arguably a similar kind of separation of the social and the material as that seen in archaeology.

Despite the postwar backlash against the idea of a tangled cultural nexus binding together a people and their culture, it is not as if the idea ever completely went away. It remained, for example, in the enduring legacy of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, which has maintained the same organizing principles as originally established when it was founded in 1884, with artifacts arranged according to function rather than geographical origin or period (see Fig. 2). Notable here is that the same E.B. Tylor as mentioned above was keeper of the University

[P.R.I.G.B., VII. Pl. iii.]

PLATE III.



Materiality in Archaeological Theory, Fig. 2 An example of Pitt-Rivers's approach to artifact categorization. (Originally published in 1875; Pitt-Rivers 1906, Plate III.)

Museum of Natural History at Oxford in 1883, adjacent to which the Pitt Rivers was eventually located in 1887, and gave important collections to the Pitt Rivers (Larson et al. 2007). And recently, the Pitt Rivers has been an important stimulus for new work on materiality, not least as the base for Chris Gosden, and more recently for Dan Hicks, both of whom have made important contributions (Gosden 2004, 2005; Gosden et al. 2007; Hicks & Beaudry 2010). And this research base has contributed significantly to the resurgent interest in materiality as a sociomaterial nexus, or what Hodder has recently dubbed the “entanglement” of things with each other and with their human interlocutors (Hodder 2011).

Key Issues/Current Debates

The museum is also a good “laboratory” for thinking about the ontology of artifacts, one of the key issues in materiality studies. If we think about how we engage with materiality in museums, the nature of display is such that we primarily encounter artifacts visually (with some exceptions). This has an objectifying effect whereby we stand back from the artifact as object and consider it consciously (Gosden 2004). This categorical experience of artifact-objects can occur in our daily lives as well, but we are perhaps more accustomed to encounter artifacts in a multisensory way that includes touch, smell, and sound (see opening paragraph). It is this

multimodal experience that immerses us in the material world and makes it appear seamless with ourselves. Gosden (2004) talks about this distinction in terms of “objects,” on the one hand, and “things,” on the other. This distinction does seem to capture something of the shifting ontological status of materiality. It has not been much used in archaeology (though see Knappett 2010), seeing more currency in literary and cultural studies (e.g., Brown 2003). Indeed, it stems from philosophy and the work of Heidegger, whose object/thing distinction comes along with other distinctions, such as “readiness to hand” and “presence at hand” (Heidegger 1971; Wheeler 2005). When something, such as a hammer, is ready to hand, it recedes from view and is smoothly incorporated into our action repertoires. However, when the hammer breaks, it enters a different mode and becomes present at hand, in which we observe the artifact as object, its categorical properties laid bare as we seek to understand them and return the hammer to use. The interaction between these different modes, if indeed they mark a valid distinction, is little understood and is a key issue for materiality studies.

Another way of viewing what is essentially the same issue is to take a different tack, from a starting point in psychology rather than philosophy. In particular, in the ecological psychology of J.J. Gibson, artifacts are viewed from the perspective of what they can afford an agent (human or indeed any other species) with a particular action repertoire (Gibson 1979). These “affordances” of an artifact are perceived directly by the agent, rather than filtered indirectly through cultural representations. Though a controversial idea in the psychology of perception, it has some common ground with Heidegger’s concept of readiness to hand, which implies a kind of direct, seamless perception of an artifact’s properties. Archaeologists have made some use of this Gibsonian idea of affordances, but have come up against the problem of how this kind of experience with materiality articulates with a more indirect encounter with the material world, via associations and cultural representations, of the kind envisaged within semiotic approaches to material culture. Again, the issue

of the shifting ontologies of materiality arises and how artifacts seem to oscillate between being both objects and things. One solution proposed to the problem is the development of a “situated semiotics,” based both on Gibsonian ecological psychology and the semiotics of C.S. Peirce, aimed at addressing both the directness of artifact affordances and the indirectness of artifact associations (Knappett 2005). The groundedness of Peircean semiotics has recently been recognized as an important tool in archaeology for the study of materiality (e.g., Preucel 2006; Crossland 2009) and will surely be an area of lively debate in the years to come.

The issue of the articulation of the direct and the indirect in the ontology of materiality raises another related issue, that of its scale. The notion of affordances is useful for understanding aspects of materiality at an immediate, proximate scale, but through iconic or symbolic associations materiality can occupy scales far beyond the proximate. This has relevance both spatially and temporally. Indeed, the critical role of materiality in allowing early human groups a “release from proximity” has been the focus of important recent work by Clive Gamble, who adopts a long-term perspective stretching from the Paleolithic through to the Early Neolithic (Gamble 2007). Gamble uses a distinction between instruments and containers to chart changing materialities, seeing not so much “revolutions” in material culture, but rather shifting gradients over time in how human groups exploit different material metaphors. The shift toward a more concerted use of containers in the Eurasian early Neolithic, both in the form of houses and ceramic vessels, is thus not seen as a revolution but as a strategic employment of a material metaphor that was already long present, the idea of the body itself as a container. The increasing expression of container metaphors in materials subsequently allowed new expressions of identity to unfold through the Neolithic. One can take this a step further and suggest that a clear idea of the human body as container may not in fact have preexisted the construction of houses and pots as containers, but may only have emerged as an effective bodily metaphor through these materialities



Materiality in Archaeological Theory, Fig. 3 Materiality as assemblage: some of the contents of the Temple Repositories, Knossos. Courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum

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(Knappett et al. 2010). If we trace this logic still further forward in time, into later prehistory, we see an explosion of sociomaterial differentiation in the Bronze Age, with an incredible range of artifacts, often operating together in assemblages (Knappett 2009). One of many possible examples is an assemblage from the “Temple Repositories” in the palace of Knossos, deposited c. 1650 BCE (Hatzaki 2009). This includes a wide range of materials – such as sea shells (both original and faience replicas) female figurines (also in faience), a stone cross, faience cups, and storage jars – that were probably part of some cult equipment for use in or close to the palace’s central court (see Fig. 3).

This growing differentiation in materialities over the long-term also has a spatial component. The release from proximity not only involves more and more different kinds of artifacts and technologies, but these tend to come from a broader range of more distant places too. If we return to the example of the Temple Repositories, we see faience technology of Egyptian

derivation, and imported ceramic vessels from the Cyclades and probably the Dodecanese too. And this is not even an especially “connected” assemblage. Other assemblages we might have chosen from the Late Bronze Age involve more complex networks, particularly if we move further forward in time, to c.1300 BCE, when the complex networks of material circulation are quite astonishing, with “international” trade around the east Mediterranean exemplified in the remarkable cargo of the Ulu Burun shipwreck (Pulak 1998). These networks of materials and materialities can also be seen in the luxury items circulating as part of diplomatic and cultural exchange in the latter part of the Late Bronze Age, c.1400–1200 BCE (Feldman 2006).

Still, these patterns are not often theorized in terms of “materiality.” Theoretical debates concerning the temporality and spatiality of materiality have still not been much worked through with detailed archaeological case studies. But a few notable exceptions apart (e.g., Meskell & Joyce 2003; Mills & Walker 2008), much of the

debate remains theoretical at present. We might attribute this to the difficulty of talking about materiality in front of specific objects or assemblages – a point made by Elkins with reference to art history (Elkins 2008). Perhaps the issue, as indeed noted by Elkins, is one of methodology. How to go about studying materiality? Archaeology, however, is not short of methodologies, and there are some distinctive approaches already in existence that could be and indeed are being harnessed for a fuller understanding of materiality. As there are some interesting regional differences, though, in these methods, this we will turn to under the next heading.

International Perspectives

When archaeologists do get beyond theoretical considerations of materiality, the methodologies employed see some interesting variations internationally, principally between North America and Europe. In North America, the “behavioral archaeology” developed by Michael Schiffer and colleagues (e.g., recently, Skibo & Schiffer 2008; Hollenback & Schiffer 2010) has given rise to approaches to ancient materiality that examine people-thing interactions from production all the way through to discard. This has not had a lot of purchase in Europe (including the UK), where the *chaîne opératoire*, much used particularly by French lithic specialists, is more prevalent as a means for understanding production sequences alone (cf. Schlanger 1994; Conneller 2008). Instead, another tradition has picked up the consumption and discard end of artifact life histories, focused around issues of structured deposition and fragmentation (Chapman 2000). To understand processes of deposition in the past archaeologists have turned to the present, studying contemporary processes of abandonment (Gonzales-Ruibal 2008; Olsen 2010). In its experiential outlook this differs from the more rigorous attempts at replication in experimental archaeology’s efforts to provide insights into past production choices. While the former may seem more post-processual and the latter processual, we should not make too much of

such a distinction. For example, while Rathje’s US rubbish project might seem processual in its experimental design, Rathje has recently collaborated with Shanks (Shanks et al. 2004); one might also point out the reference to Schiffer’s methods in recent work on materiality by Hodder (Hodder 2011). Thus although there are some important differences in approaches to materiality on either side of the Atlantic, these should not be overstated. We should also note that European perspectives on materiality are not confined to the UK and France, with strands of thought established in Scandinavia (e.g., Olsen 2010, see above; also Fahlander 2008; Normark 2010), and emergent in Germany (e.g., Hahn 2005).

Future Directions

While archaeological approaches to materiality are already interdisciplinary, they could benefit still further from a wider range of dialogue. While archaeologists are aware of contemporary approaches in anthropology, sociology and geography, interesting lines of thought are also emerging in history, art history and other related disciplines. Tapping into approaches from many domains of inquiry is an essential direction for the future of materiality studies, as materiality itself has so many dimensions, with complex relations among materials, and between materials and people, and with properties such as vitality and plurality that are as yet poorly understood. Furthermore, archaeology is well placed, with its distinctive set of methodologies for studying people-thing relations, to contribute to the detailed study of materialities through diverse case studies from many periods and places. However, this methodological move has been slow in coming in materiality studies, perhaps, as Elkins states (see above), because of the difficulty of grasping materiality when faced with specific artifacts. This is arguably one of the most important directions for the future – the development of methodologies for the study of materiality that can match and complement the exciting theoretical moves that are currently underway.

Cross-References

- [Behavioral Archaeology](#)
- [Material Culture and Education in Archaeology](#)
- [Rathje, William Laurens](#)

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Basic Biographical Information

Galina Ivanovna Matveeva (1933–2008) (Fig. 1) was a Professor and Chair of Russian History at the Samara State University, candidate of historical sciences (Scientific degree Ph.D.), founder



Matveeva, Galina I., Fig. 1 Galina Ivanovna Matveeva

of archaeological scientific school in Samara State University, President of the Samara Archaeological Society, and the author of more than 120 scientific works and manuals.

Galina Matveeva was born on July 27, 1933, in the city Ashe, Chelyabinsk region, Russia, to the family of a history teacher. From 1951 to 1956, she was a student of the Historical-Philological Faculty of the Perm (Molotov) State University. Her scientific leader at that time was O.N. Bader – a great scientist, talented teacher, and agreeable person. In the university, Galina Matveeva learned the skills of field work and gained fundamental theoretical knowledge of archaeology. The years 1956–1961 were the time of work in Troitsk, the city in Chelyabinsk region, as the director of a regional museum of folklore. During these years, Matveeva carried out extensive archaeological investigations, researching burial mounds, which have been destroyed since through construction, and