

Icarus June

Entanglements

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Object Biography Theory

Within the field of archeology, there are many theories that attempt to make sense of the past and interpret how cultures that no longer exist functioned in their day to day life. Tracking the movement of objects, practices, and people can be difficult when some civilizations left behind nothing but the material objects they used and little to no readable writings. This has led to the development of several theories over the years in an attempt to better analyze and understand past civilizations as more of the past is excavated and more questions arise. Many of these theories look at the movement of objects and the ways cultures influence each other, but often stay stagnant in where and why an object was made or traded and limiting it to a singular use. One theory that presents a more broad concept of the importance and movement of objects is the object biography theory, which argues that objects do not stay stagnant in use and meaning throughout their entire lifespan before ending up in the ground. Therefore, it is important to consider not just one span of time for the existence of the object, but rather the possibility of its entire lifespan and iterations it could have gone through during that time. This theory is more easily applied to objects that can be transported, and not other archeological finds such as wall paintings, statues, and buildings. Despite this flaw, this theory is still plenty useful when considering the entire lifespan of an object, which can help to better understand it and the

civilizations around it, and using it to analyze objects of the past can help create a bigger picture for the smaller items found at dig sites.

The Eastern Mediterranean hosts an abundance of archaeological dig sites from the Bronze Age, each one revealing more about the people who lived in the area a very long time ago. Objects from these sites are many and varied, with some objects discovered having been created or invented in other locations within and beyond the Mediterranean. Examining how the objects came to be in a certain place is always a difficult process, but with objects of varying cultures, analyzing the biography of the object and all possible points of contact with civilization and meaning can help create a clearer picture. This analysis should include things such as the significance of the object based on where it is and where it came from, when it was first produced and where compared to where it was found as these two things can often be different, and any people or events a specific object can be related to. This includes things such as [blank] carved with the names of Egyptian pharaohs found in Greek colonies, items made with metals sourced elsewhere in the Mediterranean, and depictions of animals from other regions that are startlingly accurate to be found in their excavation location. Using the biography of the objects can help trace where they're from and what they were used for, as well as how significant these things were to the people who owned them.

Imports from other areas around the Mediterranean are not uncommon finds at dig sites, regardless of where the site is located. Determining the likely origin of an object can depend on comparing it to other found objects, using things such as techniques in creation and in decoration to best determine where an object likely was sourced from. Even then, it must be kept in mind that materials were also moving through the Mediterranean, and metals or clay from one region can be found to make objects in another. Evaluating the location that the material of an object

was sourced from is part of its biography and helps gather information about the source of the object. Considering the reasons that a piece of pottery is made from materials sourced from a different part of the Mediterranean but in the style of where it was found can offer some speculations into the value of the material that the object was made from, especially if it could have easily been made from local materials. Making an object with materials sourced elsewhere could imply that the material from that area was perceived as better in some way, such as being more durable or easier to shape and work with. Not analyzing where a material came from diminishes the connection between cultures and can disregard the implications and conclusions that can be drawn from materials from another location being used to make pottery in the home style of a completely different location.

Additionally, objects made in the style of foreign cultures but with the materials of the region the dig site is in can show a different type of biography of an item. This speaks to the inspiration or perhaps the teaching of the one who crafted it, inspired by other cultures but making objects with materials at hand. The biography of those objects must heavily consider the people who made them, and question how they came to have knowledge of these foreign styles of creation. This often leads to displaying how the cultures of the Mediterranean were connected, showing the inspiration that people took from the world around them and clearly showing that trade routes between these cultures were established and used frequently enough for the styles of other cultures to appear in object deposits made of local materials.

Applying these considerations and using this theory is helpful when looking at various archaeological dig sites. Excavations done in Tell Halif, a dig site in Israel, turned up various types of Egyptian ceramics. (Seger, 1990) This demonstrates that there was contact between settlements of this area and Egypt, and pottery was moved from place to place. Considering the

movement of these objects by examining their origins displays the connections that Egypt had with Tell Halif, and tracking the biography of these ceramics keeping in mind the style of pottery, decoration, and type of ceramic used can help narrow down the time of contact between these cultures by considering when various types of ceramics were popular and roughly when these exports would have been taking place. While possible to trade over land between Israel and Egypt, it is also possible by sea, so neither option should be firmly eliminated but rather considered in equal measure. The contact between the two areas can be made clear by objects of distinct Egyptian style being dug up at Tell Halif, and using the biography of those objects can establish the fact that they communicated and traded.

The connection of cultures can also be seen by examining singular objects and picking apart the details and paintings on them and considering where those techniques could have come from. On shards of a particular jar discovered at Sidon, there are dolphins and fish painted using local paints and materials, but the actual carved design was reminiscent of Minoan and Creten techniques. (Doumet-Serhal, 2004) The images of the fish and dolphins are far from accurate to the actual image of one of the animals, likely created from memory or from other depictions seen by the artist. The details of the animals have ways of creation that echo the creation techniques in Crete, though with their own spin on the methodology. The way that waves were depicted on the jar in Sidon was with cuts into the ceramic, rather than being painted on like with Minoan examples. A similar way of creation with this was also discovered in Egypt, speaking to the spread of methodology of creation. However, the Egyptian vase was made with Minoan methodology, but created from materials in southern Palestine. The connection between these multiple locations is clear when examining the items found and putting together where each technique and material used came from. The lack of realistic representation of the dolphins and

fish paired with the differing ways of creating imagery makes it possible that someone from Sidon saw vases from Crete, and decided to recreate it as best they could. This mimicry of style is a type of cultural contact, as the clear similarities between the styles despite their differing locations leads into the fact that these two cultures connected with each other, as well as other places such as Egypt, where similar items and depictions were found using styles and materials from various different locations.

Excavations at the palace of Yarim-Lim at Tell Atchana turned up a stone statue with various influences on the style of creation. (Woolley, 1955) While the creation of the eyes and eye sockets are in distinct Mesopotamian style, the artifact itself in the rest of its build is Egyptian. The contrast of the two styles in one statue is another example of cultural contact. The biography of the object is contrasted with the two, made and put in the ground at Yarim-Lim's palace but made of two combined styles. One must consider the training of the person who made it, and their life story. Being influenced by other cultures means that contact between the two places is certain, and constant enough for someone to have gathered a good amount of information about how the art style of the other place worked. Some of the other statues found in the same dig didn't have the same Egyptian influence, so the question of who the man being portrayed is another thing to consider when looking at the object's biography. The same location has statues of lions that have been recovered, with styles similar to ones in northern Syria. Dozens of artifacts varying from these statues to metal pieces to pottery have been recovered at this site, many coming from various locations throughout the Mediterranean, showing an abundance of cultural contact between these civilizations. These discoveries at the palace of Yarim-Lim are abundant and offer lots of insight into the contact of culture. The styles vary, from Syrian terracotta and Mesopotamian votive figurines. Each item is important to see what goods

were exchanged, and looking at the individual items and determining where they came from and how they traded hands and gained popularity helps with the consideration of how different styles were accepted and changed between different cultures.

Excavations at Kourion have turned up many different types of pottery. Most notably, black slip ware pottery, which was considered to be foreign to the area it was excavated in. (Daniel, 1938) Shards of these black slip ware pottery pieces carry their own biography, one of them bearing the impression of a cylinder seal. The pottery being stamped with a seal likely speaks to it being signed by the artist or valued by its creator, and the discovery of it in an area that it was not originally created in. Considering the stamped seal and its implications help to consider where it could have come from and who had created it, making it easier to track its movement and significance to those it was owned by. Stamping pottery could be interpreted as an artist signing their work, likely meaning that the artist was making lots of this kind of pottery or just a select few pieces that were prized for being made by said creator. The same site has pottery painted with a Mycenaean red shade, and engravings in a Minoan style of writing.

The site of Pano Mantilaris located in southern Cyprus turned up a false neck for a large stirrup jar, which was determined to be of Minoan origin and an import into the place where it was discovered. (Hadjisavvas, 2017) The neck has various imperfections in it, possibly meaning that it was not a perfect creation or that it had been repurposed in some way by the one who purchased it. It is unlike any of the Cypriot discoveries around it, distinct in coming from a different part of the Mediterranean. This shows contact between the two places, and more connections come from the discovery of strainer jugs that first appear in Cyprus before further being discovered in Philistia. The Cyprian examples appear to be older, implying that they were bought or made by the people living in Philistia once they learned of them and discovered their

usage. It was likely they were brought across the sea as luxury goods of some kind, which shows the status of these items and how they were valued in the different cultures. It is also proposed that these types of strainer jugs were later introduced to Palestine by Philistia, implying that the civilization found them so useful that they decided to spread the knowledge of them to other cultures so that they could be further used and adapted.

Another type of objects to examine is those that were found on shipwrecks within the Mediterranean. These items are ones that were clearly in transit from one place to another, and sometimes were near their final destination when the ship went down. One example is of bronze ingots from Cyprus that were common exports during the Late Bronze Age period. These bronze ingots would sometimes be shaped like animals; the ones recovered from a shipwreck near the coast of Syria were shaped like ox hides. While being found near Syria, the ingots had distinct methods used in Cyprus, and paired with similar ones found on land, it's possible to infer the common fact of them being exported from one place to another. The value of these items is likely to be high, as images of them were found on some cylinder seals recovered from Cyprus. (Glenn, 2021) The fact that these items were displayed on seals speaks to the value that they held, and the exports of them to other cultures means that Cyprus viewed them as valuable enough to trade and use to get other items of value.

Another shipwreck was located and excavated near Hishuley Carmel in Israel. The finds varied in type, but one notable one was stone anchors. (Galili, 2013) Some of the anchors appeared similar to those made in Syria, though it is just as likely they could have been inspired by the Syrian models of anchors and used on ships from other cultures due to their efficiency and ease of creation. Metal ingots were also recovered, and marked with different kinds of marks. Studies into the markings determine there to be primary and secondary marks, each made at

different locations and showing the movement of these ingots across the Mediterranean. The primary marks would have been created by whoever initially made the ingot as a mark of creation, or a signature of some kind. Later marks would show how far these ingots traveled and the various hands they passed through. These marks are excellent to use to look at the biography of the ingots, as they are tangible proof of the ingot moving through several hands, with the addition of them being found at sea proving how far they could have traveled during their lifespan before the shipwreck.

The object biography theory of archaeology is just one of several theories used by archaeologists to examine finds at dig sites and attempt to understand the mindset and culture of long past cultures. No theory is without its flaws, and this is no exception, considering the lack of ability to use it to examine static things such as temples, wall paintings, and statues. Still, it is a useful theory to consider when analyzing objects found at dig sites, using it to keep in mind that objects are very rarely made use of once and exclusively for their original person. Obvious different uses of items and contrasts in locations of similar items allow archaeologists to understand people of the past a little bit better and draw connections between cultures and people. Understanding the past and the people that populated it can be a challenge, but by making use of archaeological theories it can become easier to understand the way items moved through the ancient world and the many uses that they could have possibly cycled through before ending up in the ground and later excavated. Taking note of the biography of the items excavated at these sites and looking for the ways it could have moved through hands and locations before ending up in the ground can help with understanding the cultures that the objects existed in.

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