

Object Biography



Thinking With Things

Social Life of Things

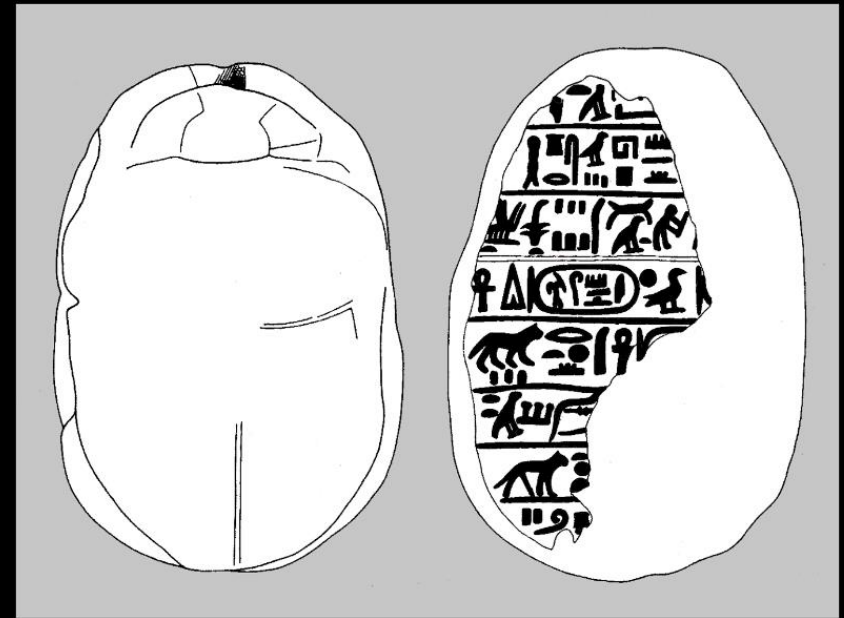
- Objects are integral to human action
- Human & object histories inform each other:
 - Objects gain meaning through social practices, which are constantly being shaped & changed through the life-use of the objects
- We need to think about how meanings & value are ascribed, acquired, accumulated & transformed

Object Biography

- “the accretion of connections, sentiments, values, & significance that even humble objects can experience over time” (Joyce 2015, 21)
- Animation of objects as socialised, with life histories has agential possibilities
 - Entangled relationships between people & things

Kopytoff 1986: Biography of Objects

- Kopytoff 1986: recognized objects as having social life & thus having a biography
- An object might accumulate multiple identities & associations, each reflecting distinct phases in its use & ownership
 - Objects made & manipulated by people gain meaning through social praxis
 - Continually shaped, transformed, & renegotiated throughout their life-use, in a recursive relationship with people



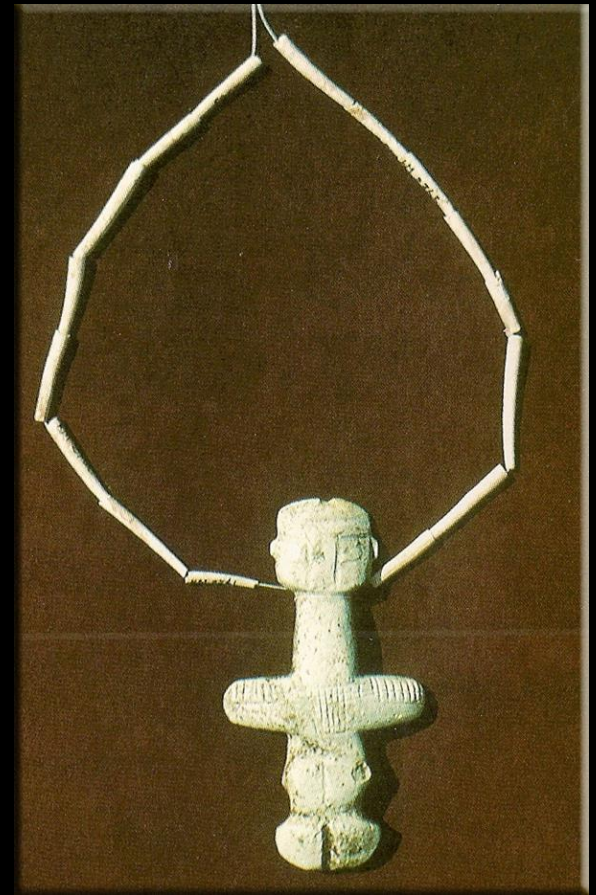
Amenhotep III lion hunt scarab, Cyprus

Object Biography

- Biography of an object: complete trajectory from production, through consumption to discard:
 - **Birth:** Origins & manufacture of the object (by whom?)
 - **Life stories:** What has been its “career” & what is the “ideal career” for such things?
 - **Associations:** Recognized events in its life? & how are these marked?
 - **Accumulative identities:** Changes in use/function/meaning?
 - **Death:** what happens when it is no longer useful? Broken?
Deposition: entering the archaeological record?

Biography of Object

- Personhood: composed from multiple identities:
 - Recognises some aspects of life history, discarding others
- Likewise objects potentially have many aspects to their biography
 - Layering of meanings?
 - Culturally informed knowledges...



Chalcolithic pendant,
Kissonerga

Acquiring Histories

- Movement of objects between cultures:
- “what is significant about the adoption of alien objects ... is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way in which they are culturally redefined & put to use” (Kopytoff 1986, 67)
 - Acquiring new meanings, uses, values...



Amethyst seal, Mycenae

Biographical Objects

- Hoskins: how people's biographies (personhood) are caught up in objects
- Objects are used to create & mediate meaning in people's lives
 - "how things tell the stories of people's lives"



Betel bag, Indonesia

Biographical Objects

- Personal narrative constructs a “self” or an identity of public consumption
- People & things they valued are deeply entwined that they cannot easily be disentangled & separated:
 - Objects as metaphors for personal experience
 - Vehicles to define personal identity
 - A prop for story-telling
 - Narrative of the self through vehicle of the object
 - Preserve & demarcate a sense of the past

Biographical Object

- Lies somewhere between a gift & a commodity:
 - **Very personal possession**
- Relationship established between someone & a biographical object imbues it with it a specific identity:
 - Localised, particular, individual
- Endowed with personal characteristics of owner



Areopagus cremation urn

Biographical Object

- Personally meaningful possession
 - Distinct from heirlooms & inalienable possessions
- Does this help us with our discussion of family possessions that we value for personal relationships but have no intrinsic value?
 - Your first book
 - Letters
 - A lock of hair
 - A child's picture
 - Your father's slide rule?



Biographical Object

- A biographical object, lives with us, will grow old & may become tattered & worn with its owner
- “Biographical objects share our lives with us, & if they gradually deteriorate & fade with the years, we recognize our own aging in the mirror of these personal possessions” (1998, 8)

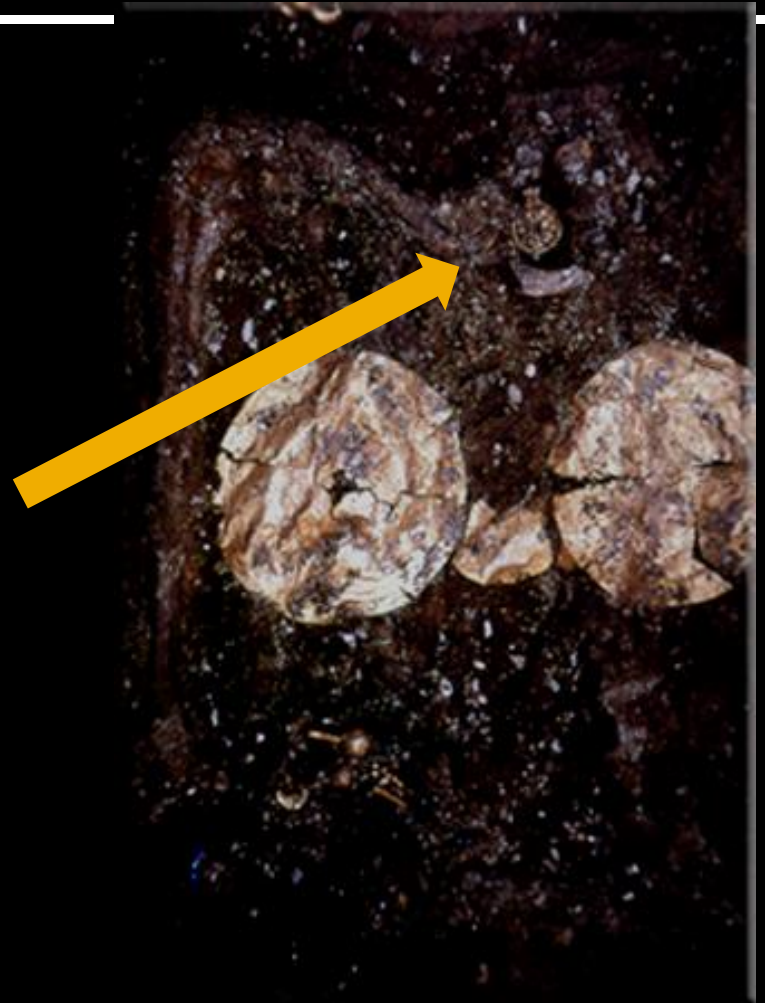


Object Itinerary

- Response to object biography & the assumption that the animation of objects is an “explicitly anthropomorphic construct” (Joyce 2015, 21)
 - Tendency to anthropomorphise objects by fitting them into a human lifecycle
 - Views objects from the perspective of people rather than things
- Objects might “have biographies but this is too human centred a description of their existence” (Thrift 2010, 640)

Why Object Itinerary?

- Questions whether archaeologists can engage with biography?
 - Impossible for archaeologists to know the full “life history” of an object: its associations, uses, movements, meanings



Lefkandi burial

Object Itinerary

- Itinerary: traces the lines along which things **live**” (Joyce 2015, 22)
 - A means of organising space into a series of relations between places
 - The stories that organise placements through the displacements & movements they describe



Ivory FAF from Archanes

Object Itinerary

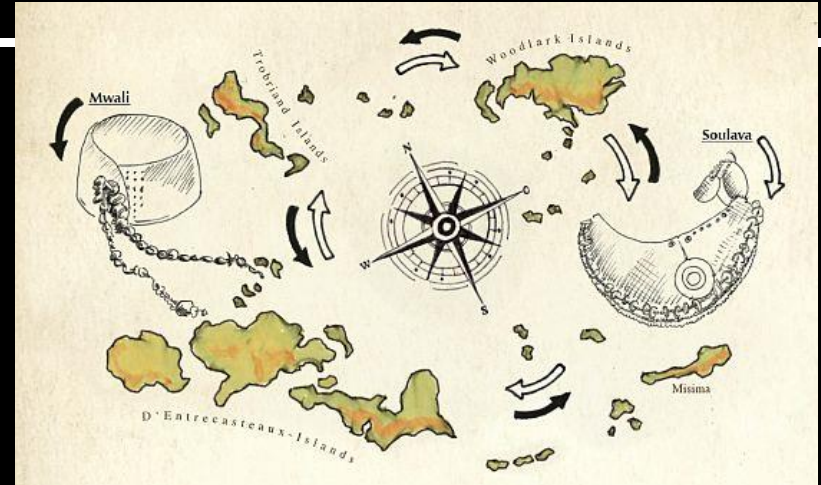
- Spatial story which **avoids** the anthropomorphising of object biographies
- Considers temporal movement as a narrative device without forcing object into anthropomorphic life mould
- Conceptualises things as moving into relationships across time & space
 - Assemblages/agencement
- Does not lose the unique character of things by shoe-horning into human life cycle



Necklace, Ayios Iakovos

Things in Motion

- Explores movement as a fundamental capacity of things
 - “Traces the strings of places where objects come to rest or are active., the routes through which they circulate, & the means by which they are moved” (Joyce & Gillespie 2015, 3)



Things in Motion

- Our understanding may be fragmented & full of gaps
- Itinerary is continually ongoing...
- Spatial & temporal approach looking at the **flow of things**
- Captures the **dynamics** of the excavated object, as it emerges from the earth & enters new social contexts



Object Itinerary vs Object Biography

- Object biography is problematic & restrictive:
 - Treats objects as quasi-persons
 - Metaphor of birth, lives, death, transformation into an afterlife...
- Object itineraries accounts for things in all states * stages of their existence:
 - Shaped, modified, fragmented, accumulated, dispersed, reproduced, discarded, rediscovered....
 - Recognises multiple connections: Spatial, material, temporal
 - Part of DeLanda's "historical process...part of a cosmological, geological, or social history" (2012, 39)

Summary

- Biography of object emphasises the social life of objects
 - Narratives of particular events & a life-history
- Biographical/history objects: very personal possessions imbued with part of ourselves, embedded in our personal life story
- Object itinerary: looks at the spatial & temporal flow of objects – more useful for archaeologists?
- Rejects the anthropomorphism of object biography
- Gives us a tool for exploring the break between past existence & modern reception of an object