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## **MINGLING WITH THINGS**

It is in the mingling with things that the objects of archaeological interest are constructed. This makes archaeology a social practice and a mode of interpretive cultural production. In his thought-provoking paper, Michael Shanks discusses some of the fundamental aspects and implications of an interpretive archaeology. In the following I outline some of the reflections and associations that evolved during my reading.

Michael Shanks makes a truly mingling proposal in his rethinking of the opposition between people and things. Where the ontological line between these two categories should, or indeed should not, be drawn is an intricate and principally ethical matter. It is obvious, however, as Shanks demonstrates, that there are important parallels between people and things. An analogy of central interest in an interpretive archaeology is that also artifacts have life-cycles.

### **BEYOND ORIGINAL CONTEXT**

“Of what time is an archaeological find?” is the seemingly simple question put forward by Michael Shanks. The date attributed to an artifact normally refers to the time of its making. This is considered to be the original context. The meaning of ancient monuments and artifacts, however, is obviously not restricted to the time when they came into being (cf. Burström 1989; Olsen 1990: 199-202). The mere existence of archaeology is sound proof of this. But also long before the establishment of an archaeological discipline, ancient objects attracted attention and were ascribed meaning. So to answer the question of the date of an archaeological find it is necessary, as Shanks demonstrates, to reflect be-

yond the original context and include the find's full life-cycle. An object belongs to all times during which it has carried and been given meaning.

As a matter of fact, the interest in the cultural construction of archaeological objects – ancient monuments, artifacts, and landscapes – with changing use and meaning over time is beginning to form a major field of research (see e.g. Bender 1993, 1998; Bradley 1993; Burström 1993, 1996a, 1996b; Chippindale 1983; Holtorf 1996, 1997; Roymans 1995; Strömberg 1995). This kind of studies of material life histories has been termed “cultural biographies” (Kristiansen 1998:117; cf. Kopytoff 1986; Roymans 1995). In these studies the archaeological object and the people it unites are followed in long-term historical perspective.

Hitherto, most cultural biographies in archaeology have been concerned with monuments that are well visible in the landscape. Since these have attracted attention and have been interpreted for centuries, and in many cases for thousands of years, their life-cycle is often relatively well recorded. The study of life histories of ancient monuments reveals a distinct difference between archaeology and traditional folklore concerning attitudes towards time (Burström n.d.). While dating and chronology are essential in archaeology, they are of minor importance in folklore tradition. There it is not generally the date that matters, but the place and meaning of an object such as an ancient monument. In a traditional folklore context the question of from what time an object is, would not be relevant. Thus the focusing on time and chronology is not a matter of course, but a result of archaeological discourse.

By acknowledging the multitude of meanings in a long-term perspective, essentialism is avoided: there is no single, eternal meaning hidden in things; meaning is always constructed in a social context. In considering the many contexts in which ancient objects have

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been interpreted, archaeology crosses the borders of what are traditionally considered as other disciplines. I find this relieving and promising: the search for meaning becomes a joint venture in a broad humanistic project.

### MATERIAL RESISTANCE?

In approaching the many contexts in which archaeological objects have been ascribed meaning, one might expect to find an almost infinite mass of heterogeneous interpretations. But although there surely is a broad repertoire of interpretations "out there", it is striking how many of them follow common themes. In traditional folklore, for example, the ideas that stone axes are "thunderbolts" and that large monuments have been built by ancient giants seem to be almost global. The restriction in interpretive variation also applies to the archaeological discipline. Although variation in interpretive approaches in contemporary archaeology is no doubt greater than ever before, it can hardly be described as "infinite". This raises some questions concerning the character of archaeological interpretation.

What constrains the meaning of an object, the interpretations that we are able to formulate? Is it our imaginative capacity that restricts the range of our interpretations, or is it somehow the objects themselves? Can an object, by some kind of "material resistance", object to certain interpretations? This is not a plea for objectivism, but a proposal to seriously consider the capability of an active artifact.

While it is certainly true that an artifact is not just one thing, it still is not *anything*. Michael Shanks demonstrates convincingly that the Corinthian perfume jar rather than just being a pot *becomes* a pot due to his productive relationship with it. He also declares that he can make many things of it depending on interest and purpose. He cannot, however, make it an axehead. Why is that? The simple answer is of course that it just would not make sense. But again, why is that? For the individual artifact, the answer may be found in its particular life history. This imposes, through the aura, limits on the archaeological interpretation. But what restrains on a more general level the things that can be said about archaeological objects? It is obvious that artifacts are capable of evoking interpretive associations, but can they also defend themselves against certain interpretations?

I find the matter of material resistance crucial since it may form the basis of truly mutual communication.

How do we mobilize a sensitive ear to artifacts to prevent us from just exploiting them in projections of our favourite theses? How do we pose questions to get unexpected answers?

### REDISCOVERING THE ROMANTIC

The life of an artifact is accompanied by physical changes and processes. Michael Shanks emphasizes that in order to have a living past we should cherish decay and ruin. These conditions are seen as important and inevitable components of the life-cycle, and should not be denied. An understanding of life presupposes death. The decay of an artifact is seen as a token of the human condition: death and decay await us all, people and objects alike.

Shanks' rediscovery of the romantic in decay and ruin evokes a couple of associations. One is the genre of *vanitas* still-lives which was very important in seventeenth-century Dutch painting (cf. Bergström 1956, chapter IV). In most still-lives of the seventeenth century there is some symbol for the vanity and perishability of life. In the *vanitas* still-lives, however, death and perishability are the central motif. The eye is immediately caught by the symbol of death: the death's head. This gives meaning to other elements in the composition, such as the rose, the wine goblet and the book: beauty, the pleasures of the table, and even literary learning belong to the perishable life; soon our bones will be all that remains. The paintings were designed to make the observer contemplate the brevity of life, the frailty of man, and the vanity of all worldly things. Also seemingly simple arrangements of everyday objects convey the message from Ecclesiastes (1:2): *Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas* – "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity".

Another association leads to Hitler's architect Albert Speer (1905-1981) and his "Theory of Ruin Value". The basis of this theory was Hitler's wish that the architectural works of the Third Reich should speak to future generations in the same way as the buildings of the Roman Empire.

Speer's first major commission was the replacement in 1934 of the temporary stands on Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg with a permanent masonry structure. To clear ground for the new building an old tram depot had to be removed. Speer passed by its remains after it had been blown up and found it easy to visualize what a dreadful sight their further decay would make. This experience led Speer to some ideas which he proposed

to Hitler under the pretentious heading "A Theory of Ruin Value". The general idea was to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or thousands of years, would more or less resemble Roman models. To illustrate this idea, Speer had a romantic drawing prepared. It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen and the walls crumbling here and there, but with the outlines still clearly recognizable. Hitler accepted Speer's ideas as logical and illuminating, and gave orders that in the future the important buildings of his Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principles of this "law of ruins" (Speer 1970: 55-56).

The life-cycle of the Zeppelin Field continues, however, and the field is incorporated in contexts clearly unimaginable at the time of its construction. Thus it served in the early summer of 1998 as the place for the European premiere of the Rolling Stones' world tour.

The *vanitas* still-lives and Speer's theory of ruin value are examples of previous interest in death and decay as components of a life-cycle common to people and objects. Collected from outside the discourse of interpretive archaeology, the examples seem to confirm the human need observed by Shanks to reflect upon decay and ruin. Owing to the character of its material record, archaeology is especially well suited to contribute to such a contemplation. So it is possible that the future of archaeology partly lies in ruin. Time will tell.

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