

Objects of the Past in the Past

Investigating the significance of
earlier artefacts in later contexts

Edited by

Matthew G. Knight, Dot Boughton
and Rachel E. Wilkinson

Access Archaeology





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Cover image: The Hammer of St Martin (image courtesy of Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht / Ruben de Heer)

Back cover image: Impression of a medieval silver signet ring, incorporating a Roman carnelian intaglio, from the Evesham Abbey Gardens hoard (Cuming 1876: 116)

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Chapter 1

Objects of the Past in the Past

Matthew G. Knight, Dot Boughton and Rachel E. Wilkinson

Introduction: The Hammer of St Martin

In the St Catharine's Convent Museum (Museum Catharijneconvent) in Utrecht, Netherlands, there is a polished stone axehead set within a silver-plated wooden haft, known as the Hammer of St Martin (Figure 1.1). This object is said to have been used by St Martin of Tours to strike down the devil and destroy idols. This is encapsulated in a Latin inscription on the silver plating, which can be translated to: 'Idols were knocked down by the axe of St Martin. Do not believe that they, who so easily fall down, are gods' (de Kruijf 2014). This inscription draws on accounts of the saint by Sulpicius Severus from AD 420 (Severus 1894). However, this object represents more than a saintly relic. The stone axehead dates to the Late Bronze Age in the Netherlands (c. 1000–800 BC), whilst the haft into which it is set is stylistic of the 13th or 14th century AD (i.e. the medieval period) suggesting an approximate date for the final mounting of the axehead. Chronologically, then, the production of the axehead and its haft are separated by over 2000 years!

Furthermore, this composite artefact has been in circulation and/or curated for several hundred years having first been recorded in the inventory list of Utrecht's Dome Church in 1504 (de Kruijf 2014: 181). The listing suggests that, prior to its accession into the Dome Church, the 'hammer' had been carried by a traveller who offered laymen the opportunity to venerate relics (de Kruijf 2014: 181). Details of the



Figure 1.1: The Hammer of St Martin (image courtesy of Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht / Ruben de Heer)

Hammer's whereabouts after 1504 become scarce, though Museum Catharijneconvent (2018) records that it may have been preserved in the old presbytery of St Gertrudis church in 1876; it seems likely that it was kept in a religious institution in the intervening centuries. By 1928, it was in the (now former) museum attached to St Catharine's cathedral.

This artefact thus has a rich and complex history, involving the rediscovery of an already ancient object (the Bronze Age axehead); the hafting and reappropriation of this object in a medieval context, including the attribution of religious significance derived from a hagiography; and the curation and preservation into the present day. With such a long intricate history of different uses, attributed meanings and other aspects to disentangle, how should archaeologists and historians approach an object like this?

The rather remarkable case of the Hammer of St Martin highlights a significant phenomenon that was a regular occurrence throughout (pre-)history and across the world: that is the rediscovery and retention of already old artefacts in later periods. Recently, increasing recognition of anachronistic artefacts and a better understanding of object biographies has resulted in a growing number of case studies spanning the Bronze Age to the later medieval period (e.g. Caple 2010; Crawford 2007; Eckardt and Williams 2003; Ferris 2012: 77–93; Hingley 2009; Sherlock 2016; Swift 2012; Woodward 2002). Such studies have explored a range of theoretical approaches to the data, including the roles of these objects in relation to memory; their reuse and functionality; and the relationships between the artefacts, their owners and the contexts in which they were deposited. Ultimately, the question underpinning these studies, and indeed the present volume, is: *how did people in the past perceive their pasts?*

This question is by no means a new or original preoccupation. Understanding the 'past in the past' as a concept has been the focus of innumerable archaeological studies over recent decades and is perhaps best known as the title of a seminal collection of papers on the reuse of ancient monuments in a special edition of *World Archaeology* (Bradley and Williams 1998). However, whilst there have been several papers, volumes and essays dealing with this topic in relation to landscapes and monuments (e.g. Bradley 2002; Bradley and Williams 1998; Chadwick and Gibson 2013; Hingley 1996; Semple 2013; Yoffee 2007), there has yet to be a collation of work in relation to artefacts of the past in the past specifically. Nor is there a framework for approaching anachronistic objects when they are encountered (though see Caple 2010: 307–310). Period-specific studies (e.g. Eckardt and Williams 2003; Dowd 2018; Hingley 2009; Ferris 2012: 77–93) have tackled important aspects of older artefacts in later contexts, but there is limited understanding of how reactions to past objects across different time periods might be comparable or aid the interpretation of future objects discovered through archaeological investigation. Moreover, terminology remains fraught, with objects of the past often classified using a myriad of terms, posing interpretive problems (see below). Our increased recognition of anachronistic objects from a variety of contexts and their contribution to understanding aspects of preceding societies' perspectives on the past means that such an overview is required before attempting insights. Often archaeologists are approaching individual, isolated case studies making interpretation challenging, but cross-period frameworks of investigations can foster and enhance identification of objects of the past in the past and lead to fruitful, broader academic discussions.

The aim of this introduction and this volume overall is thus to begin to address some of these issues by, for the first time, bringing together case studies of older objects in later contexts ranging from the Bronze Age through to the 18th century AD primarily in Britain but also in Ireland and north-west Europe more widely. Here we will explore fundamental questions surrounding anachronistic objects, as well as summarising key interpretations about their changing associations and meanings. It is inevitable that interpretation of these objects is context- and period-specific, but, as we will show, there are similarities in the treatment of anachronistic objects across time that suggest different societies may have utilised old objects in similar ways and for similar agendas. We should naturally be wary of applying wholesale

interpretations uncritically and it is important that a balance is sought between applying ideas from the framework developed in this introduction and the nuances of each individual case study. A first step is nonetheless reviewing the key trends. The review of relevant literature presented here is not, and was never intended to be, exhaustive, and the main focus is on case studies from Britain and north-west Europe. However, this brief overview and associated discussion emphasises the potential this topic has for future research and expansion. This is further enhanced by the nine papers comprised within this volume.

How did earlier objects make their way into later archaeological contexts?

When an anachronistic object is encountered in a later context, a fundamental question needs to be answered: how did it get there? Assuming that the archaeological context is secure, there are two answers to this question. Either:

1. objects continued in sustained circulation over long periods of time, be that in active use or as retained curated artefacts; or
2. objects represent instances of ‘archaeology’ discovered in the past.

Taking the first proposition, it seems obvious to state that some objects would continue in circulation beyond their expected span. Evans and Millett argue that because some artefacts will inevitably have longer use-lives than expected, distinguishing between ‘so-called heirlooms and rubbish-survivals’ is unnecessary (1992: 225). This, however, ignores any potential significance that objects may acquire through their extended use-lives (e.g. as heirlooms or tokens of belief systems). This has been frequently recognised archaeologically through the appreciation and construction of object biographies and the complexities of the contexts in which objects are found (e.g. Gilchrist 2013; Lillios 1999; Woodward 2002). Objects may thus be retained, curated and valued for their symbolic, rather than their functional, properties. Alternatively, objects in extended circulation may be adapted, recycled or reused in new ways over time to fit within contemporary practices; for example the long life-histories of Iron Age metalwork (Chittock this volume; Garrow and Gosden 2012: 130ff.), the reuse of Roman bracelets as Anglo-Saxon rings (Swift 2012), or the conversion of Bronze Age bracelets into razors (Jennings 2014). The use, or reuse, of already old objects should not be taken to automatically indicate a knowledge of an object’s history though; objects in continued circulation can acquire new meanings and be transformed and redefined in new contexts, which is not necessarily dependent on understanding an object’s past.

An alternative explanation for the presence of older objects in later contexts is that they were rediscovered as residual or archaeological material at a later date. Past studies of residuality have tended to focus on formation processes (Schiffer 1976) or how residual material may be quantified (Evans and Millett 1992; Lucas 2008). The amount of residual material encountered will rely on two aspects: activity in the past and activity in the present. Thus, Evans and Millett (1992) demonstrated that the amount of Roman residual material encountered in medieval and post-medieval layers in Bath was related to the amount of Roman material on site originally, as well as medieval and post-medieval construction activities bringing Roman material to the surface.

In this volume, however, we are more concerned with interactions with the past and how people may have used and engaged with residual material. In discussing archaeological discoveries of the past in the past, we might consider here the practices of revisiting earlier tombs or grave-robbing, both of which may have been undertaken for specific social reasons.¹ Williams (1998: 97) draws attention to Anglo-Saxon graves that cut into older sites and monuments and suggests that interactions with ancient material culture that was encountered was part of a way of constructing relationships between

¹ The authors are grateful to Howard Williams for raising this point.

the past and the present. Similarly, Eckardt and Williams (2003: 144) highlight the potential importance of opening and reopening early medieval graves to recover bones and relics that may have been part of a social method for reconfiguring histories and memories.

Of course, there would undoubtedly have been many reactions to already old material, which requires us to comprehend two further questions:

- were residual objects recognised as old? and
- were they considered to be significant?

Approaching these issues becomes increasingly convoluted because, except in very rare cases, such as the Hammer of St Martin, these objects are recovered in the present from archaeological contexts, meaning that any rediscovered objects must have been redeposited again. Palaeolithic stone axes found at the Roman site at Ivy Chimneys, Witham, Essex, for instance, implies that these millennia-old artefacts were excavated and redeposited by Roman communities, only to be excavated again by archaeologists in the 20th century AD (Turner and Wymer 1987). In situations such as this, it is likely that older objects were recognised by Roman communities as something alien to the known repertoire of material culture (cf. Eckardt and Williams 2003: 141–142).

In assessing older objects in later contexts, we must thus establish their initial period or date of production to determine exactly how old they may have been and whether it is more feasible that these objects represent archaeological discoveries in the past or objects in extended circulation. This is easier to identify with Iron Age repairs on Iron Age metalwork or prehistoric axeheads on Roman sites but becomes more difficult with objects that could plausibly have had an extended circulation, such as third- and fourth-century Romano-British material deposited in fifth- and sixth-century Anglo-Saxon graves. In this latter situation, the surrounding context becomes particularly important. Many early Anglo-Saxon graves and cemeteries were constructed near Romano-British cemeteries and settlements, thus increasing the chance of encountering residual material; rediscovery is thus perhaps more likely than the extended circulation of objects (Eckardt and Williams 2003; Williams 1998). It goes without saying that this can only be approached on a case-by-case basis and requires careful source criticism (see for instance Bradley 1986; Leeming this volume; Lewis this volume), but the assessment of how exactly older objects ended up in later contexts is crucial for then considering the appropriate terminology for these artefacts.

What's in a name?

The range of terms applied to older objects in later contexts is varied and includes:

- heirlooms (Costello and Williams this volume; Gilchrist 2013; Lillios 1999; Woodward 2002);
- ancestor artefacts and venerable artefacts (Caple 2010);
- out-of-time objects (Davies this volume; Knight forthcoming; this volume; see also Hingley 2009 for objects 'out of their time');
- antiques (Chittock this volume; Geake 1997: 111; Gilchrist 2008; Lewis this volume; Sherlock 2016);
- relics (Henig 2008; Woodward 2002); and
- mementos (Jennings 2014; Overholtzer and Stoner 2011).

These terms require careful and critical consideration when used due to the loaded connotations some terms may have. To refer to an 'heirloom' object, for instance, inherently implies a possible genealogical link materialised through an object passed down within a kinship. 'Relic' meanwhile has a dual definition, referring both generally to an object of age, and in a religious sphere to an object associated with a saint. Similarly, the dualistic nature of the term 'antique' is highlighted by the title

of Mark Lewis' paper (this volume), implying both the age of an object and the value that might be bestowed upon it. The importance of defining and distinguishing terms is particularly highlighted by Woodward (2002) in applying both 'heirloom' and 'relic' to certain beaker ceramics and amber beads in Early Bronze Age Britain.

Caple similarly defines distinguishing features, grouping all older artefacts under the term 'ancestor artefacts' and separating 'heirlooms' ('objects with a known history') from 'venerable artefacts' ('artefacts from a more distant past') (2010: 307). This reiterates the importance of understanding the process by which an older object has made its way into a later context. This nomenclature remains problematic, however, as it assumes all objects of the past which have an extended circulation functioned as heirlooms. Furthermore, the label 'ancestor artefact' diminishes any significance the term 'ancestor' may have.²

It is not the intention here to dictate what such older objects should be called—and indeed we have not stipulated particular terminology for our contributors to follow—though we would argue that terms be more carefully defined and applied, especially when such terminology has dual meanings or functional implications. That this issue requires careful consideration is highlighted by the fact that multiple contributors independently raised this issue when tackling their case studies (see particularly Chittock this volume; Costello and Williams this volume).

Interpreting objects of the past

History of the knowledge of the past is suffused with paradox. While some individuals enquired rigorously into the origins of object and monuments, most of their contemporaries preferred to see these same objects as the product of the magical powers of mysterious beings, or of strange natural phenomena.

Schnapp 1997: 34

When objects pre-dating their context are encountered in the archaeological record, a variety of interpretations have been posited. Table 1.1 presents some of the most common explanations.

It should of course be clear that the categories are not exclusive of each other. An anachronistic object utilised as an amulet is likely to also achieve a status as an heirloom (cf. Gilchrist 2008: 139–144; 2013). Likewise, reappropriating an object means it usually gains a dual meaning. Older objects were likely

Table 1.1: A summary of interpretations applied to objects of the past

Interpretation	Description	Example references
Objects of memory and heirlooms	Objects that evoke or embody links with a known past, sometimes linked to a lineage or kinship	Crawford 2007; Gilchrist 2013; Lillios 1999; Woodward 2002
Objects for securing identity	Objects for establishing or propagating cultural identities	Eckardt and Williams 2003; Effros 2003; MacGregor 1998
Magical objects and amulets	Objects assigned magical or supernatural powers	Cheape 2008; Gilchrist 2008; Leeming 2015
Objects of mythology	Objects used to create or legitimise a mythical past	Haug 2001; Knight and Cowie forthcoming
Reappropriated, reused and recycled objects	Objects acquired, manipulated and/or utilised for their materialistic and functional qualities	Jennings 2014; Swift 2012; White 1988

² For a critique of the (over-)use of the term 'ancestor', see Whitley 2002.

used for a combination of reasons and the same types of objects need not have been used for the same purpose in each contemporary society. White (1988; 1990) highlights that Roman objects in Anglo-Saxon graves did not indicate a continuation of Romano-British populations living in Anglo-Saxon England as has been historically considered, but instead Roman objects were reappropriated, reused and re-contextualised alongside Anglo-Saxon beliefs and ideas. Thus, Roman brooches were recognised as brooches and reused as such, whilst Roman coins, which served limited economic function in Anglo-Saxon society, were pierced and kept as pendants, or kept intact as amulets (Geake 1997: 111; White 1988: 23–25, 101). Furthermore, as Schnapp's quote implies, multiple interpretations may be applicable for the same object (see also Eckardt and Williams 2003) or indeed the same object may mean different things to different people. This is exemplified nicely by a Middle Bronze Age palstave from Devon found in the 19th century AD which was worn as an amulet as a cure for skin afflictions (Way 1869: 345),³ though antiquarians would have recognised the same object as something ancient to be stored in archaeological collections. Literature on folklore is littered with similar examples (Cheape 2008; Dowd 2018; Goodrum 2002). Here we will summarise interpretations applied to these objects through a variety of case studies from a range of different periods to emphasise the diversity of ways older objects can be understood.

Objects of memory and heirlooms

The quality of many materials and objects to endure throughout and beyond a typical human lifespan means that objects might embody or evoke certain memories (Haug 2001; Kwint 1999; Rowlands 1993). Moreover, objects do not merely represent memories, but can be used to construct, or de-construct, ideas about the past, present and future (Gilchrist 2013; Jones 2003; 2007; Olivier 2011; Thomas 1996: 80). The known (or unknown) biography of an object, its materiality, and the cultural context in which it is situated can all affect how an object might be utilised as a mnemonic (Crawford 2007; Gilchrist 2013; Haug 2001; Renfrew 2004). In thinking about objects of the past in the past it is therefore important to recognise that their links with a remembered past and abilities to evoke memories would have played an important social role.

For instance, a Bronze Age shield deposited in a boundary ditch of a Middle–Late Bronze Age enclosure in Somerset may have been up to 200 years old when deposited in a ditch and stabbed three times before being buried (Coles *et al.* 1999: 37; Knight forthcoming; Needham *et al.* 2012). Elsewhere one of us (MGK) has posited that this object may represent an object linked with a kinship or set of orally propagated ideas that were no longer relevant and thus the destruction and deposition of the shield was a physical forgetting of an object which embodied ideas and memories (Knight forthcoming; cf. Küchler 1987).

When dealing with older objects in Anglo-Saxon graves, one can be reasonably certain we are dealing with a period in which concepts of recent and distant pasts were engaged with and were actively remembered, as evidenced through interactions with older monuments and material culture (Semple 2013; Williams 1998; 2006). Nonetheless, multiple interpretations emerge. Sherlock (2016) suggests that Iron Age and Roman objects were included in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries as a way to legitimise the formation of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the 7th century AD, whilst other assessments have proposed that such objects were reappropriated for their functionality (White 1988) or indeed their *lack* of a known past (Eckardt and Williams 2003). Eckardt and Williams (2003: 164–165) suggest that these objects were likely rediscovered and may have been culturally alien in the Anglo-Saxon present; consequently, they were utilised as tools to construct and transform the identity and memory of the deceased. Clearly there are multiple ways in which objects of the past may have been utilised for different purposes depending on whether or not those objects are considered to embody memories. Whilst some objects evoked

³ Fascinatingly, the original account of this object describes 'the efficacy of the object being held in great esteem, so much so, that it was sent for by sufferers from distant places in the West' (Way 1869: 345).

remembered pasts and thus were utilised for wider agendas, others probably embodied no specific memories; this may relate to whether objects were retained in circulation or were rediscovered. It is naturally difficult to determine whether an object may have had a remembered past or operated as a mnemonic device.

One of the most common interpretations when an already old object is encountered in a later context is as an 'heirloom' object (Caple 2010; Gilchrist 2013; Hingley 2009; Lillios 1999; Woodward 2002; see also various papers in this volume, particularly those by Chittock, and Costello and Williams). Although the terminology can be problematic, when applied critically as a term ascribing function 'heirloom' is undoubtedly useful. This is especially true because these objects have the power to evoke and sustain memories, and by their very physicality connect people with their known pasts (Lillios 1999; Rowlands 1993). Based on ethnographic study, Katina Lillios (1999: 241) defines heirlooms as portable objects, inherited by kin and maintained in circulation for several generations. Archaeologically, such objects might be recognised by their materiality (e.g. if an object is made of an atypical raw material) or their age in relation to their context (Lillios 1999: 252). Roberta Gilchrist (2013), in particular, draws on the materiality of objects as a key element of what might have given late medieval objects heirloom status, as well as the biography of an object that may have inalienably linked the object to a person, event or place. The biographical aspect adds an interesting element, because whilst one might expect grand or unusual objects to become heirlooms, seemingly mundane objects might also become heirlooms under the right circumstances (Gilchrist 2013).

Similar suggestions have been argued for objects from graves and contexts in the prehistoric and early historic periods (Chittock this volume; Eckardt and Williams 2003; McLaren 2016; Woodward 2002). Wear and repair on Romano-British brooches and buckles found in Anglo-Saxon graves suggest extended use, which has been linked to a possible heirloom status (Eckardt 2004: 44; White 1988: 59–61); the same has been posited for worn and fragmented jet and amber beads and pottery sherds deposited in Early Bronze Age graves (Frieman 2012: 344; McLaren 2016; Woodward 2000: 58–60; 2002). Detailed study of object biographies, such as evidence of use, wear, fragmentation and modification, provides support in each case for the potential curation and importance of objects. Heirloom objects in graves are often then interpreted as a materialisation of the identity or identities of the interred individual(s) and the physical manifestation of relationships, as well as a method for claiming the past (Brück and Fontijn 2013: 206–207). Invariably, one must be careful with inferring all curated objects are heirlooms, a point particularly stressed by Eckardt and Williams (2003) who argued that it was the *unknown* rather than the known history and biography of some rediscovered objects that may have encouraged their deposition within a grave context. As we shall see though, the memories objects might embody are intrinsic to many of the other interpretations that can be applied to objects of the past in the past.

Objects for securing identity

The past is frequently utilised to create, secure and transform senses of individual and collective identities. Objects of the past and the histories they evoke have frequently been interpreted through this sphere (see for instance Eckardt and Williams 2003; Costello and Williams this volume). Although these objects might be utilised in the construction of memory of an individual, it does not necessarily rely on a remembered history of the object. Here, we will focus briefly on the use of rediscovered objects to construct, establish and reinforce identities in the present. These objects are often from a distant past, though their recognised ages are significant. This is particularly evident in more recent periods where artefacts have been collected for museums and personal collections.

Early medieval material culture discovered during the mid-late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century industrialisation period in France became intrinsically linked with establishing a nationalist

identity (Effros 2003). This coincided with the establishment of organisations and museums that were preoccupied with collecting the archaeological past and incorporating it into a ‘nationalistic ideology’ (Effros 2003: 258ff.): an effect of the French Revolution. Artefacts thus became a method for constructing the identity of France and a sense of national heritage, just as the Romans collected objects of the past to ensure their political power in the present and secure their cultural identity (Greenhalgh 1989: 241ff.; Haug 2001; Lewis this volume). This emphasis on a collective national identity was part of a wider trend that occurred in other parts of Europe at the same time.

However, early medieval artefacts collected in France did not solely serve to establish a collective identity. American collectors acquired these objects for their aesthetics and the status they might convey; therefore, the nationalistic and historical significance of the medieval artefacts was diminished or lost. Instead, these objects conveyed the status and identity of their owners (Effros 2003). Clearly, knowledge of the specific histories and biographies of objects of the past is not necessary for them to be utilised for agendas relating to identity; rather simply knowing that an object is of age can be important.

One might consider here Bronze Age objects found in Iron Age contexts, which may have been collected for their age and used to construct and transform identities of the individuals or communities that collected them (Davies this volume; Hingley 2009: 150). The collection and deposition of objects in prehistoric multi-period hoards in specific locations may have been part of asserting the identities of those undertaking the practice and living in the landscapes (Boughton this volume; Hingley 2009: 150). The incorporation of the past alongside the present offered a means for a group to reconfigure its identity (Knight forthcoming). Likewise, the re-inscription of fourth- and fifth-century standing stones in Wales with Christian iconography in the 7th and 8th centuries transformed the stones into more appropriate cultural emblems (Longden 2003). By doing this, communities reshaped their collective memory, which helped strengthen their overall sense of identity and connection with a place (Longden 2003; see also Olivier 2004).

Finally, although here we have largely divorced the discussion in this section from the concept of memory, it is important to recognise that in many cases identity was intrinsically linked with the memory of the period of the past from which the object derived. Indeed, as Jones (2007: 50) suggested: ‘through the practice of remembrance using artefacts people are produced and identities are formed’.

Magical objects and amulets

In her seminal article on magic in later medieval burials, Roberta Gilchrist (2008: 139ff.) noted ‘antique’ items as one of her four categories of magical objects found in graves. Their magical potency derives from their age and is inferred from the general association of Roman and early medieval objects with religious contexts, such as cemeteries and tombs. Likewise, Palaeolithic and Neolithic stone axeheads excavated from Roman contexts, often on temple sites, has led authors to suggest these ancient objects were perceived as magical and powerful when encountered in the Roman period (Adkins and Adkins 1985; Eckardt 2004: 44; Merrifield 1987: 9ff.; Turner and Wymer 1987). Their supernatural efficacy prompted their collection, curation and deposition (Ferris 2012: 86). This remained true throughout the historical periods, when fossils and prehistoric relics were accumulated and transformed into new objects as talismans or amulets (Cheape 2008: 109, 114f.; Dowd 2018).

Readers will no doubt be familiar with the supposed magical properties surrounding prehistoric stone axeheads and arrowheads, which have survived in folklore from at least the Roman period (Edmonds 2012: 147–148; Goodrum 2002; 2008). Ancient writers regarded stone axeheads as thunderbolts (or *cerauniae*) and collected them for their magical properties (Merrifield 1987: 10), a notion that continued in a variety of ways through to at least the 19th century in many parts of the world (Dowd 2018; Evans

1897: 56–64; Goodrum 2002). For example, Merrifield suggests that a Neolithic axehead recovered during excavations of an Anglo-Saxon building at Westminster in London was ‘installed as a protective talisman’ (1987: 12–13); writing in the 19th century, Evans (1897: 57) notes that in Sweden stone axes still served as protection against lightning strikes. Similarly Dowd highlights numerous stone and metal objects linked with fairy folklore in Ireland incorporated into or placed within buildings ‘protecting the house from lightning, but also acting more generally as a charm to attract good fortune, repel ill health and misfortune, or avert fairy mischief and evil’ (2018: 462).

The perceived magical nature of many ancient objects led to their incorporation as amulets in the post-medieval period, which sparked the collection and curation of them in museum collections. Late Bronze Age amber beads in the collection of National Museums Scotland were considered cures for blindness and eye afflictions (Figure 1.2), whilst prehistoric spindle whorls were believed to help treat snake bites earning them the name ‘adder stones’ (Cheape 2008: 115; Ross and Sheridan 2013: 28–29). A Neolithic jadeite axe found in the 19th century was pierced at each end and mounted in silver and tied over the loins of a Scottish officer seeking protection against kidney disease (Sheridan *et al.* 2011: 418–419, fig.8); this object now resides in the British Museum (Acc. No. 1884,0601.1). The mounting of prehistoric objects in precious metals to be worn indicates the extended reappropriation and supernatural properties associated with ancient objects (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.2: Two Late Bronze Age amber beads used as charms against blindness by the Macdonalds of Glencoe, Scotland, in the 19th century (NMS Acc. Nos H.NO 4-5). © National Museums Scotland.

Protective and healing properties of older objects as amulets extends back into at least the early medieval period. Gilchrist emphasises the ages of heirlooms as bestowing a ‘spiritual power that made the equivalent of amulets or relics, sacred objects with quasi-magical properties of healing and protection’ (2013: 172). The apotropaic value of older objects has also been considered for Roman objects deposited in Anglo-Saxon graves, especially where care or modification can be demonstrated (Eckardt and Williams 2003; Geake 1997: 99f.; White 1988: 101). Finally, the material qualities, age and otherness of heirlooms, fossils and jet and amber ornaments in Early Bronze Age burials may have meant they possessed supernatural qualities for the communities that deposited them (Brück and Jones 2018; Leeming 2015; McLaren 2016; Sheridan and Davis 2002; Woodward 2002). Of course, one may understandably be wary of assigning magical or amuletic functions to anachronistic objects in prehistory, or indeed in any historical society for which we do not fully understand the belief systems in place. However, when set within the wider phenomenon throughout time, it becomes clear that these objects repeatedly became entangled with superstitions and supernatural beliefs of the society in which they were found.

Objects of mythology

Objects of the past often play a role in creating and propagating mythologies. Usually such objects are attributed mythologies to cement or legitimise concepts of the past or to present the past in the present to secure an ideology (Haug 2001). Furthermore, myths frequently relate to objects of a past that is no longer remembered; consequently, several authors have distinguished between genealogical or ‘remembered’ pasts and more distant mythical pasts, which could be manipulated for a variety of purposes (Caple 2010; Ferris 2012: 83ff.; Haug 2001). This has been particularly evidenced through the Roman interest in antique objects and fossils and the past in general (Eckardt 2004: 42; Ferris 2012: 87; Haug 2001; Henig 2008; Lewis this volume). As Ferris notes of the Roman fascination with fossils:

These fossils were interpreted and presented as being ‘of the past’ but not of the real past; they allowed viewers to reconcile the ancient myths with contemporary life and to grapple with the concept of a physical, pre-political chronology

Ferris 2012: 87

A particularly famous instance of the collection of mythical objects is Emperor Augustus’ collection of ‘giants’ bones, which were collected as part of Augustus’ interest with the past and used to generate mythologies (Haug 2001: 118; Lewis this volume). Although these large bones obviously would not have belonged to giants, these fossils, as well as many other objects, were essential to the mythical past Augustus wanted to propagate.



Figure 1.3: A prehistoric flint arrowhead mounted in a gold pendant to be worn as an amulet (NMS Acc. No. H.NO 75). © National Museums Scotland.

This remains true through time. A paper scroll found in the socket of a Bronze Age spearhead attributes the artefact to the Chisholme clan from the Scottish Borders and states that the spearhead was carried into the Battle of Flodden in AD 1513, some two thousand years after its probable production (Knight and Cowie forthcoming). An investigation into the background of the Chisholme family found that this note was written during the 18th or 19th century around the time that the Chisholme family lineage was in decline; therefore, the scroll inside the spearhead may have been an attempt to physically preserve a genealogical mythology (Knight and Cowie forthcoming).

Antique objects may even be associated with mythologies at a national level. In nineteenth-century France, Effros suggests that the discovery of Merovingian monuments and artefacts led to a romanticising of this particular period and objects of antiquity became essential for propagating various mythologies (Effros 2003: 255ff.).

In many of these instances, the symbolic nature of the object becomes the driving factor for its curation, rather than the age and original purpose of the object. The spearhead supposedly taken into Flodden, for instance, has more mythical value as a family object taken into a significant battle than it does as an ancient object. Its age and sense of otherness may have once influenced the decision to attach a mythology to it, but it is now significant for the mythology in its own right. Of course, there are many ways in which myths might be created and propagated and obviously this does not apply purely to older objects, though their role in this practice should not be overlooked.

Reappropriated, reused and recycled objects

In a sense, any interaction with an already old object is a reappropriation of some kind. This catch-all term is applied here to include objects which have been utilised for their functional or material aspects, rather than any specific efficacy they might convey. Ultimately it allows for a more cautious interpretation of older objects as it would be wrong to assume that all objects of age were regarded as magical or served as links with the past. In some cases, the material properties or the functionality of objects becomes more important than the age of material, as is evidenced by the reuse of Roman building material (Greenhalgh 1989: 155ff.), the recycling of Roman bracelets into rings (Swift 2012), or the use of Roman coins as weights in the Anglo-Saxon period (Eckardt and Williams 2003: 153).

Reused objects should first be separated into two categories:

1. objects reused for their original function; and
2. objects transformed through reuse.

Identifying instances of the first category is inevitably difficult for several reasons. Firstly, this begins from the standpoint that we, as archaeologists, accurately understand the original and the later reuse of the object. Secondly, we need to be aware that later societies suitably recognise the form and function of an older object so that it might be understood and incorporated into their contemporary socio-cultural repertoire. This is easy enough for objects that continued in circulation over an extended period but is more difficult when objects are rediscovered in much later eras. Chittock's discussion of the curation and repair of Iron Age equipment obviously represents artefacts that continued to function within the socio-cultural sphere of the period (Chittock this volume). Likewise, Romano-British brooches and other equipment conformed to the known material culture of early medieval Britain and thus when encountered may have been reappropriated and reused as originally intended (White 1988: 23–25, 161–162; 1990). Even when dealing with a more distant past, certain object forms are suitably recognisable throughout time that they may continue to be utilised for their intended function, such as Bronze

Age blades re-hafted and reused as weapons in the 18th century (Bell this volume). In each case, the recognised form, rather than the age of the object, may have been the important factor for its use.

Alternatively, objects may be reused for some other purpose and thus might be manipulated, modified or recycled and their overall function is transformed. For the purposes of this category, we want to primarily focus on the practical functionality of the reused and recycled objects, rather than the symbolic meaning that might be assigned or accrued through the transformative process.

Ellen Swift's (2012) study of the conversion of Roman bracelets into rings is particularly informative in this aspect. She notes 179 examples from across England and Wales with many dating to the late Roman period. Some bracelets may have been cut down and transformed into new ornaments as a result of diminishing supply and access to new material in the 4th century AD (Swift 2012: 190–192). Furthermore, many objects were probably produced from scrapping and melting down other objects (Swift 2012: 186–190; see also Dungworth 1997: 906–907). Swift suggests that the original form, meaning and function of the bracelet may have been recalled by some users, but over time these meanings were lost, transformed or became no longer relevant. The same has been argued for razors in the later Bronze Age in Switzerland, which were cut and reshaped from decorated arm and leg rings (Jennings 2014). In this latter example, Jennings suggested that due to an *increase* in metal supply, the recycling and reuse of older metal objects diminished, but when objects were modified it was part of individualised practices rather than wider socio-cultural approaches to material culture.

The reappropriation and reuse of older or ancient objects is thus commonly linked to the incorporation of these artefacts into contemporary practices. This incorporation does not necessarily have to be strictly practical though. A particularly striking example is a deliberately bent Early Bronze Age halberd that may have been associated with a Viking grave at Bride Street, Dublin, that also included bent and damaged Viking weapons (Harrison 2010). As this example represents the only deliberately deformed halberd from Ireland, Harrison suggests that it may have been damaged in the Viking period as part of the practice of manipulating Viking weapons in the burial rite (2010: 145–148). This artefact was thus rediscovered and reappropriated some 3000 years after its production and physically modified and transformed to fit within Viking-Age ideologies.

In some cases, no modifications are made to the older objects themselves, but they are incorporated into new objects with new ideas attached. The Hammer of St Martin is a good example where the Bronze Age axehead was not actually altered, but rather set within a new haft. The same is true of the Neolithic objects set in silver in the post-medieval periods and Roman intaglios set within medieval seals. Roman gems and intaglios in particular were reused in a range of different material culture in the early second millennium AD, including rings, brooches, pendants, and Christian objects such as crosses, reliquaries and book covers (Greenhalgh 1989: 230–231; Henig 2008). In the 12th century, they were increasingly reappropriated and incorporated into seals, having been selected for their 'size, variety, colour and properties of material' (Henig 2008: 25). Although their age may have conveyed a link with the past, and indeed objects such as gemstones were traded widely on the antiques market, the stones were selected for their aesthetics and transformed from objects of the past into objects of the present by setting them with contemporary material culture and ideologies (Greenhalgh 1989: 230–231; Henig 2008).

Within the cases presented so far one might also infer attachments between the objects and people relating to the known or accrued biographies of the objects. The very deposition of many of these objects, however, indicates that they were incorporated into contemporary practices (e.g. prehistoric stone axeheads at Roman temples), but it was also appropriate to remove these objects from circulation. In some situations, the objects may have been reappropriated, reused and over time lost any accrued meaning (cf. Swift 2012: 194). Moreover, we must be aware that in some cases, the age of some material

culture was simply not important. Greenhalgh (1989: 155ff.) notes for instance the reuse of Roman marble in the construction of new buildings in the Middle Ages, as well as the easily recyclable nature of mosaic glass – the material qualities and their appropriateness for reuse thus outweighed any potential significance they may have had as indicators of the past in their unaltered forms.

Summary

There is no one way to interpret objects of the past in the past. The five interpretations presented here are quite clearly not exclusive of each other, and the associated case studies emphasise how different approaches may overlap. However, by disentangling some of the key interpretations, it becomes possible to observe how societies across time have had similar reactions to objects of their pasts, which was influenced by the biographies of the objects in question, as well as the perceived age of the objects, their materiality, and the socio-cultural context in which they were encountered, be that as rediscovered objects or as objects with an extended circulation. That we should not be restrictive in our interpretations of objects of the past in the past is emphasised by several authors (e.g. Andrews this volume; Eckardt and Williams 2003; Swift 2012), and this in part will be dictated by our wider understanding of how societies in the past conceptualised their pasts as derived from written sources and interactions with the inhabited landscape. Ultimately, by studying this phenomenon across time and understanding the variety of ways that different societies approached already old objects, we can begin to approach this topic from a fresh perspective.

The papers in this volume

The variety of ways that objects of the past in the past might be tackled has been emphasised already. When we put out the call for papers for a session entitled: ‘The Past in the Past: Investigating the Significance of the Deposition of Earlier Objects in Later Contexts’ at the 2017 Theoretical Archaeological Group conference in Cardiff, our main aim was to bring together scholars covering a range of different time periods so that we might assess the phenomenon of finding and interpreting older objects in later contexts holistically and challenge the different ways of thinking about this topic. We were pleased to attract speakers ranging from museum professionals to commercial archaeologists, covering the Bronze Age to the end of the medieval period, and many of those that spoke were able to contribute to the present volume. In seeking to expand our remit and the variety of case studies, we also invited authors working on this topic who did not speak at TAG. The resulting volume thus comprises nine papers now chronologically spanning the Bronze Age to the 18th century, all with a focus on British and Irish case studies.

The volume opens with three papers on multi-period hoards in prehistory. Knight’s contribution presents 11 Bronze Age case studies where older metal objects have been found associated with typologically later objects in northern England, Scotland and Wales and suggests that some of the places in which these objects were found may have been significant to prehistoric societies. Furthermore, by exercising source criticism and allowing flexibility in commonly held typo-chronologies, multi-period hoards have the potential to illustrate temporal depth in the archaeological record, with some objects having been in circulation for a long period of time and accruing significant object biographies.

The subsequent paper by Boughton furthers some of the ideas put forward by Knight but in the context of Earliest Iron Age multi-period hoards in the Wessex region. Beginning with the Salisbury hoard, Boughton’s paper focuses on the biographies of objects found in these hoards and their significance to the communities that were interacting with them. The collection and deposition of these objects indicates places that were revisited and engaged with over long temporal spans. Boughton concludes that actions involving already ancient objects served as a method for interacting with the past in the present, with a view to securing and reinforcing communal identities for the future.

Davies' paper follows neatly, comparing the mixed-period hoards of Iron Age southern Britain with those of the Bronze Age. Although they might initially seem similar in character, a comparison of the artefacts that comprise these hoards indicates that they reflect a difference in social attitudes towards already ancient objects. Drawing on ethnography and other historical contexts, Davies suggests that the greater number of 'out-of-time' objects in Iron Age hoards, as well as their cultural origins and associated materiality, indicates that Iron Age societies viewed these objects as otherworldly and outside their known cultural repertoire, which warranted their collection and circulation when encountered.

Chittock's paper focuses on the extended lives of objects, where old objects may continue in circulation beyond the lifespan of an individual. Chittock presents a detailed case study of Middle-Late Iron Age objects in East Yorkshire, focusing on the intricate biographies that sword scabbards, chariot fittings and other equipment convey through the evidence of their use, wear and repair. In particular, Chittock raises questions about how such objects should be categorised and proposes that whilst traditionally these artefacts have been classed as 'heirlooms', 'relics' and 'mementoes', the term 'antique' should also be considered for objects that indicate value from their age.

Antiques also form the focus of Mark Lewis' paper through an assessment of already old material found in antiquity at the Roman fort of Caerleon. Through an array of different case study objects, each anachronistic to the contexts in which they were found, Lewis illustrates the Roman appreciation for the utility of already old objects through their reuse, as well as the collection of curios, which may suggest more religiously-driven practices. By analysing the site assemblage as a whole, Lewis aptly demonstrates the multiple interpretations available when already old objects are encountered.

Similarly, Costello and Williams stress the need for careful appreciation of heirloom objects in early medieval graves and how these objects relate to burial assemblages overall. By undertaking an analysis of heirloom brooches from graves at Mill Hill and Saltwood Tunnel, both Kent, the authors show that the inclusion of heirloom objects evoked connections with the past, as well as other aspects of life in the present, and helped establish the identity of the deceased. The role of these objects in early medieval practices of remembrance should not be understated.

Andrews' paper on already old or ancient coins and antique gems accumulated in medieval coin hoards explores the variety of functions these objects may have had in medieval society. By bringing together a range of examples from across Europe and throughout a period of 400 years, this paper emphasises the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to objects of the past in the past, ranging from functionality reappropriation of coinage to the incorporation of gems into religious and supernatural belief systems. These objects fit within and alongside the cultural understanding of the later medieval period.

The final two chapters by Leeming and Bell teach us the importance of thorough source criticism when encountering objects of the past in the past. Leeming's exploration of two fossils in the British Museum collections probably from the Tudor palace at Greenwich is particularly thorough in delving through the possible interpretations one might apply to older objects in later contexts, especially those for which the context is not secure. His paper serves as a reminder that we should be especially meticulous in our analyses of such objects and wary of jumping to any unmerited conclusions.

Likewise, following a reassessment of the use-wear seen on Bronze Age weapons in Ireland, David Bell suggests that much of it indicates modern, rather than ancient, damage, contrary to recent interpretations of the same material. Modifications made to Bronze Age weapons, as well as various historical records, demonstrate that these objects were reused by Irish insurgents during the 17th and

18th centuries, most notably in the Irish Rebellion 1798. The reappropriation of objects in this case study also emphasises that already old objects sometimes possess a functionality in contemporary context that is not derived from their age.

These nine papers challenge us to engage with what these objects of the past in the past meant to the people encountering them, while also illustrating the temporal breadth of the phenomenon. The original TAG session was intended to stimulate how we think about the past in the past as expressed through engagements with already old artefacts; we hope that this resulting volume fulfils that same goal.

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