

Itineraries of the Material: Shifting Contexts of Value and Things in Time and Space

Veranstalter: Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Research training group 'Value and Equivalence'

Datum, Ort: 06.10.2011-08.10.2011, Frankfurt am Main

Bericht von: Hadas Weiss, Research training group 'Value and Equivalence', Goethe University Frankfurt am Main

This conference, which took place on October 6-8 at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, was organized by the research training group 'Value and Equivalence'. The group consists of anthropologists and archaeologists who conduct independent research projects related to value. This was the group's first major international conference and its goal was to invite anthropologists and archaeologists to provide new insights across the disciplinary divides on issues of shared concern. The focus on materiality and objects' movement through time and space was therefore a natural one, as it provided common ground for discussing issues that emerge out of the work conducted by the group. The topic was defined as broadly and inclusively as possible, while retaining a focus on social relationships, cultural histories, and systems of evaluation, through the perspective of material culture.

The keynote speech by CHRIS GOSDEN (Oxford) set the tone for the discussions that followed. He introduced two possibilities of analyzing the relations between objects and social relations; namely through the condensed materiality of a single object, and through the extended materiality of a field system. He highlighted the capacity of materiality to both reflect social relations and to create them in various ways. This duality was to reemerge in all of the papers and discussions in the conference.

The conference was divided into three interconnected dimensions of materiality, separated into panels. Each panel consisted of three to five presentations within a given framework, and each was followed by a brief discussion with the presenter. When the

presentations were concluded, a respondent pointed to the common questions and concerns that had emerged from the presentations in the panel, after which plenary discussions with all of the presenters of that panel were held. It gave an opportunity to discuss both each paper for its own points of interests, and to think together about the larger theoretical themes that all of the papers could help elicit.

The first panel was devoted to the movement across time and space. It featured a paper by JOSEPH MARAN (Heidelberg) on the appropriation of amber objects in Mycenaean Greece. He pointed out the cosmological ideas attached to amber objects and what they indicate about the circumstances of their appearance in different social contexts. Then PETER OAKLEY (London) spoke about institutional attempts to define and construct the values of gold objects. The next paper was by NILS P. HEEßEL (Heidelberg), on the shifting value of clay tablets in ancient Mesopotamia. He described how the way of dealing with tablets, whether they were collected in libraries, looted as booty, or thrown away when useless, imports insight into their changing value. Members of the research training group, ANAMARIA DEPNER (Frankfurt am Main) and GORDANA CIRIC (Frankfurt am Main), spoke about personal objects' final journey, and about the concept of object biography in archaeological research as it pertains to Roman coins found in medieval necropolises in the Central Balkan, respectively. DAVID FONTIJN (Leiden) was the respondent for this panel, and he drew out the forms and meanings of objects' movement through space and time as they appeared in all of the speakers' papers. His response set the stage for an interesting plenary discussion in which the presenters were encouraged to generalize from their own research projects as to the interpretive possibilities of objects in their continuity or fragmentation.

The second panel was devoted to movement across social divides. It featured a paper by ALFREDO GONZÁLEZ-RUIBAL (Madrid) on time and materiality among the Mao of Ethiopia as demonstrated in the social function of *beehive* huts. He classified them among a group of objects that have been

crucial in stopping movement and anchoring Mao society in the past. The next paper was by KRISZTINA FEHÉRVÁRY (Michigan), who described cosmological transformations through home décor, specifically between the socialist modern style, and neoliberal organicism. MARIO SCHMIDT (Frankfurt am Main), a member of the research training group, gave a paper on the Wampum in 17th century colonial North America as a medium of exchange and a representation of value. MANFRED EGGERT (Tübingen) was the respondent for this paper. He expressed concern about the research methods appropriate for the conclusions reached by the presenters, and he prompted them to also address the concept of „material culture“, its definition and merits. The presenters did so in the plenary discussion, where they also engaged with the audience in a conversation about the social significance of materiality as emerging from their research projects.

The third panel was devoted to movement across spheres of meaning. It featured a paper by ROBERTA GILCHRIST (Reading) on the materiality of medieval heirlooms. She brought evidence that connected them with life course rituals, given at baptism, male initiation rites, and marriage. While many of these objects were curated in family homes, others were transferred to the charge on the death of the owner, where they served simultaneously as an extension of this owner, and of the divine. A member of the Value and Equivalence research training group, SELMA ABDELHAMID (Frankfurt am Main), spoke about the forms in which Roman transport amphoras have been reused, arguing against the grain of research which equates their value with a single journey or transaction. Then CARL KNAPPETT (Toronto) presented a paper dealing with seal imprints and their punctuation of temporality. JEAN-PIERRE WARNIER (Paris) spoke about the functions and meanings of royal containers in modern Cameroon. He compared their traditional and formal use with the present day, arguing that nowadays the movement of substances, persons and goods between the ancestors and the king, the subjects and the market, obey a pattern subsumed in Cameroon's political economy at a time of liberal market and one-party

regime. Finally, ANNELOU VAN GIJN (Leiden) and KARSTEN WENTINK (Leiden) presented a joint paper on what the laboratory study of prehistoric flint tools can teach us about their uses and social meanings. They argued convincingly that functional analysis – using high power microscopy to study traces of wear and tear – has provided unique insight into the lives of things. PHILIPP STOCKHAMMER (Heidelberg) was the respondent for this panel, and he classified the common themes for this conference – materiality, movement, and meaning or value – analyzing how each of the papers contributes to our understanding thereof. It was a good prompt for the final plenary discussion, in which the speakers and the audience addressed these questions on a higher plane of abstraction than the individual research projects.

The conviction at the basis of this conference was that the most rewarding strategy of learning about cultural history is via a close examination of material objects. The conference reinforced this hypothesis, and pointed at a range of interesting paths from materiality to society that each member of the research training group could follow in his or her own research agenda. It also granted a more nuanced view on one of the research training group's overall themes, which is the notion of value. Specifically, the presentations and discussions made clear that research on value is most revealing when it considers transitions and transformation, the moments when the value of a thing is negotiated or when it becomes generally acknowledged. The choice of the term „itinerary“ of objects as the title of the conference was meant to stress the fragmented nature of such transformation. The conference satisfied this need for flexibility in approach, while also making available a multitude of possibilities of how things can achieve new status, how people assign new meanings, and why particular modes of usage emerge from such a process.

Konferenzübersicht:

Keynote Lecture

Chris Gosden (Oxford), *Extended and Condensed Relations: Artefacts and Landscapes*

Panel A: Movements across Time and Space

Joseph Maran (Heidelberg), Bright as the Sun: The Appropriation of Amber Objects in Mycenaean Greece

Anamaria Depner (Frankfurt am Main), Worthless Things? The Itinerary of Personal Objects' Final Journey

Peter Oakley (London), Containing Gold: institutional attempts to define and constrict the values of gold objects

Gordana Ciric (Frankfurt am Main), Secondary Use of Roman Coins? Possibilities and Limitations of the Concept of Object Biography in Archaeological Research

Nils Heeßel (Heidelberg), Collected, Looted and Discarded: The Shifting Value of Clay Tablets in Ancient Mesopotamia

Respondent: David Fontijn (Leiden)

Panel B: Across Social Divides

Alfredo González-Ruibal (Madrid), Time and Materiality among the Mao in Ethiopia

Krisztina Fehérváry (Michigan), Socialist Modern to Neoliberal Organicism: Cosmological Transformations through Home Décor

Mario Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main), Wampum as Medium of Exchange and Representative of Value

Respondent: Manfred Eggert (Tübingen)

Panel C: Movement across Spheres of Meaning

Roberta Gilchrist (Reading), The Materiality of Heirlooms: Connecting the Lives of Medieval People and Things

Selma Abdelhamid (Frankfurt am Main), The Multiple Lives of Roman Transport Amphoras: Evidence against the Throw-Away-Mentality

Carl Knappett (Toronto), Imprints as Punctuations of Material Itineraries

Jean-Pierre Warnier (Paris), The Sacred King, Royal Containers, Alienable Material Contents and Value in Modern Cameroon

Annelou van Gijn, Karsten Wentink (Leiden), Small Objects – Big Stories: Studying the Cul-

tural Biographies of Prehistoric Flint Tools

Respondent: Philipp Stockhammer (Heidelberg)

Tagungsbericht *Itineraries of the Material: Shifting Contexts of Value and Things in Time and Space*. 06.10.2011-08.10.2011, Frankfurt am Main, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 03.12.2011.