

**Review of: Knight, M. G., Boughton, D. & Wilkinson, R. E. (eds) (2019). Objects of the past in the past. Investigating the significance of earlier artefacts in later contexts. Oxford: Archaeopress. Softcover, 196 pages with 77 figs and 11 tables. ISBN 978-1789692-48-8, resp. 978-1789692-49-5 (eBook).**

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Knight et al.'s volume on the past in the past centralises objects that were already old in the past and have puzzled and inspired many archaeologists. In this impressive volume the editors have brought together ten chapters covering a period from the bronze age to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These are the proceedings of a session titled "*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.

The editors set off with a well-known artifact within the Netherlands, the St. Martin's hammer. Through the description of its object-biography, the central theme and question of the volume is presented. How did past societies make sense of their past, and what role did objects play therein? The editors show that the former has had substantial attention, but there is more to say on the role of objects. The introduction sets out several possible, non-exclusive interpretive frameworks and stresses the importance of considering the appropriate terminology for different functions of objects of the past in the past. The authors' goal in incorporating such a broad scope of periods and diverse objects seems to establish the ways humans tend to behave in regards of objects from the past. A total social fact, if you like. This is an exciting avenue as it also reflects on our own fascination with the past. Perhaps overly romantic, bringing past behaviours closer to our own tendencies.

To avoid confusion and avoid interfering with the debate on the correct terminology of objects of the past in the past, this review uses the term "*anachronistic objects*" to refer to objects of the past in the past.

The volume's chapters are arranged chronologically, starting with three chapters on multi-period hoards in prehistory, followed by contributions on anachronistic objects in the Iron Age, Roman era, early medieval period, the Middle Ages and Modern times. All articles are based on case studies from the British Isles or Ireland.

## The range of papers

In chapter 2, Knight sets out with an assessment of eleven case studies of Bronze Age multi-period hoards in which older metal objects are associated with later objects in northern England, Wales and Scotland. Previously, most of these had been considered "*doubtful*" when assessing the temporal depth of these hoards. However, by studying the available evidence, Knight re-evaluates his case studies with a "*certain*", "*probable*" or "*possible*", and demonstrates that even though multi-period hoards do not occur frequently, they are widely distributed across Britain and occur in a variety of ways that fit within the known Bronze Age hoarding practices. He stresses the need to critically appraise the treatment and redeposition of old objects in younger contexts to understand their significance: multi-period hoards have the potential to illustrate temporal depth in the archaeological record. Throughout the article, Knight emphasises that the term "*out of time*" objects is more neutral than "*heirlooms*", as heirlooms have a specific meaning that cannot always be discerned from archaeology.

In chapter 3 Boughton explores several multi-period hoards dating to the earliest Iron Age from the Wessex region, amongst which the Salisbury Hoard, Wardour Hoard and Danebury Hoard, and attempts to construe the possible reasoning behind their depositions. Boughton critiques the interpretation of these hoards as means for safe-keeping and suggests several other possible interpretations and stresses the need to consider different motives behind the individual depositions. The collection and redeposition of these objects indicate that places were revisited and engaged with over long temporal spans. The composition and deposition of multi-period assemblages strongly suggests that people were aware of their communities' past through earlier artefact assemblages, which needed to be returned to the ground, possibly accompanied by rituals and gatherings. Throughout the chapter, it becomes clear that Boughton has most affinity with axes from the Early Iron Age, as she focuses on the meaning and interpretation of these artefacts.

Chapter 4 is the last article on multi-period hoards in prehistory in the volume. In it, Davies compares later Bronze Age multi-period hoards with those from the Iron Age. By comparing both phenomena Davies demonstrates that anachronistic objects in different phases need to be interpreted in their own right: anachronistic objects occur more often in Iron Age hoards which reflects a difference

in social attitudes towards these objects. With examples from the ethnographic record, Davies ingeniously links ancient objects to foreign exotica: they fulfil similar roles in many societies, as they are only producible outside of the current cultural context and are often ascribed to the divine or supernatural. Elaborating on this theme and considering the difference in treatment of anachronistic objects in the later Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, Davies suggests that the relative absence of these objects in the former period may indicate a fear of these supernatural objects, whereas the interest in collecting together extremely varied assemblages of earlier metalwork during the latter period indicates that otherworldly powers were actively sought out during the Iron Age.

Helen Chittock's chapter 5 critiques the restrictive interpretation of older objects in middle late Iron Age objects as heirlooms, arguing that heirlooms are associated with family-focused inheritance which need not have been the mode of possession in past societies. Backed-up by the study of anachronistic objects in Iron Age contexts in Yorkshire, Chittock proposes to use the term antiques, focusing on the matter of age as the source of the value of these objects (p.81). She observes that objects were repaired in ways that draw attention to the repairs which falls in line with the idea that objects were valued for their age (p.89). It is a valid point, although how one is to distinguish between heirlooms and antiques remains elusive. Chittock overcomes this by stating that the objects in her study can probably be best interpreted as complex combinations of heirlooms, mementos, relics and antiques.

In chapter 6, Lewis sets out with the premise that with care and broad study, we may discern common traits in human curiosity, ideas and behaviours relating to the 'antique' (p.99). Lewis's historical sources give glimpses of Roman attitudes towards the past. It seems collecting, displaying and pondering objects from the past is a human universal (p.101). Lewis' emphasis on the utility of old objects (p.104) springs out in contrast to the other chapters, a term that would have benefitted from clarification specific to its use here. As we discover on page 111, Artefact utility can range from the profane mundane to the religiously sacred. A further point made in this chapter is the differing individual capability of human beings to recognise and curate objects from the past (p.110). In his capacity as museum curator, Lewis connects the past curation of objects with the now, stating that an emphasis on the use of the object is the easiest way to interest visitors. To

determine the use of an object, its context remains key (p.111).

Next is Costello and Williams' chapter 7 on re-thinking heirlooms from early medieval graves. In the past Roman objects found in the UK's early medieval graves interpreted as heirlooms, but also in purely functional terms: as replacement of more expensive early medieval alternatives. Williams has emphasised the mnemonic qualities of these objects in earlier work (p.115). The current chapter builds on that, looking at the contextual information of graves and questioning the idea that only Roman objects were perceived as 'old' (p.117). The chapter forms an interesting illustration of the possibilities of contextualising heirlooms/antiques in burials. The combination of factors like wear, typological date, placement of brooches and age of the deceased leads Costello and Williams to represent the extended biographies of certain objects in the grave as mnemonic tools (p.126). Old objects in burials are seen to connect the past with the present and make mnemonic references to past people, happenings and places. Similar concerns are raised to Chittock's article (chapter 5), questioning the assessment of heirlooms; how to differentiate between objects given down through the generations as opposed to rediscovered 'old' objects (p.117). Costello and Williams propose antiques as objects from prehistory or Roman times whereas heirlooms are classified as older Anglo-Saxon items, possibly kept in circulation, retaining a known biography to the owners. This chapter is one of the few not concentrating on hoards, adding valuable alternative contextual perspectives on the past in the past. The extensive discussion of the burial data in this chapter is a welcome addition, though we feel the interpretation could have been more elaborate.

In chapter 8, Murray Andrews supplies an insight into medieval attitudes towards the old. Archaeological finds of (coin) hoards, Roman signet rings in graves and the re-use of Roman gems and cameos in elaborately decorated Christian objects are supplemented with a rich array of textual sources. Accordingly, treasure hunts were organised by several medieval royals, supplementing the accidental discovery of ancient objects (p.132). Next to the functional re-use of melting down these old objects, Murray Andrews (p.138) points out the talismanic role for these objects. This highlights the magical aura of such objects, a function that should not be neglected. Old objects in the middle ages could be perceived in many ways: prosaic (e.g. functional tools, lumps of bullion), connotative (e.g. markers of social status and taste), or

symbolic (e.g. religious images, and amulets and talismans) (p.138). He ends with a call for contextual analysis of these finds, hoping to get to know more about how medieval people regarded these ancient objects and what they did with them.

Leeming's contribution in chapter 9 focuses on two mysterious fossils. The first part of his paper is devoted to attributing the fossils to a probable provenance, as their location of origin was not recorded. Having settled on a probable provenance of Greenwich, specifically the Tudor palace of Placentia, Leeming proceeds to identify the possible geographic origin of the fossils as local quarry (p.145). He emphasises the need to see fossils not as natural background noise but as something that could have gotten there by human agency. They have been interpreted as relics of the biblical flood, or the work of giants. The concept of deep time (p. 148) is of special interest here.

In what is the most surprising and most richly illustrated chapter in the volume, Bell demonstrates that the large amount of use wear relating to combat on Bronze Age swords and rapiers from Ireland actually stems from after their recovery in late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. Backed by a study of use-wear on 200 Bronze Age blades from Ireland, the common orthodoxy of a bellicose pre-historic warrior elite is re-evaluated: it is based on a misinterpretation of the available evidence as former use-wear analyses of the same weapons failed to distinguish between pre-depositional and post-recovery damage. This chapter makes an intriguing argument for the need to nuance interpretations of use-wear, and expresses the need to differentiate between pre-deposition, peri-deposition, post-deposition and post-recovery damage.

### Impression

Throughout the volume, and especially in the introduction, the use of the right terms and definitions of the varying functions of anachronistic objects is emphasized. Many authors criticise the use of improper terms by previous scholars, asserting the importance of explaining the specific functions anachronistic objects may have had. However, between chapters a diverse use of terminology occurs, which leaves room for future discussions and development on this topic.

What is emphasised in nearly every contribution is that context is key, and value is always situational. In different chapters, the context of the objects is emphasised but also the context of the people interpreting the anachronistic object. It is

not surprising that in many of the papers in this volume authors have emphasised the importance of leaving room for multiple interpretations of the meaning of anachronistic objects in the past, both throughout time as within certain periods. In doing so, they recognise that past worlds as diverse as today's.

The first half of the book emphasises multi-period hoards in prehistory. Reading them in order provides an insight into developments over time, which is a strength. However, it leaves less room for other types of contexts and periods and might unjustly scare off readers with interests in other time periods or contexts such as graves and settlements.

Throughout the book, the connection between interpretation and data is well argued and illustrated. This is a strong point, as those worlds are too often kept apart in archaeology. For many of the articles it is clear, that they were based on a conference presentation with a limited amount of time for discussion, which is sometimes reflected in the skewed balance between (elaborate) description and shorter discussion paragraphs. The book has thus not exhausted its potential for discussion. It does well in inviting debate on a deeper level in almost every article but the opportunity for an overarching discussion is missed. An example is the recurring theme of the malleability of heritage, the practice of people projecting their current worldviews onto the past: Fossils were interpreted as relics of biblical floods in Tudor times England (LEEMING, p.146), and Roman Denarii were interpreted as "*St. John's pennies*" in mid-fifteenth century Poland (MURRAY ANDREWS, p.135). This indicates that as far as we know, people have always tried to make sense of the past and trace the story they identify with. Can we really say that we are doing anything different? Archaeology of the early middle ages for example started out with the search of a shared identity within nation states (a.o. EFFROS, 2012). More recently, gender roles in the past have become the subject of research as modern-day debates about gender continue to develop. The reviewers' own research focuses on the agency of rural peoples, a narrative against the emphasis on elites as a driving force of history. Thus, even though research agendas are more professionalised than those of 15<sup>th</sup> century Poland and England, our queries and theoretical approaches to the past are still strongly influenced by the developments around us (HÄRKE, 2018, 27-30). Another discussion that is not explored in an overarching way is the potential magic of anachronistic objects. Both Davies

and Andrews have accentuated the magic properties that may have been ascribed to anachronistic objects in the past, both referring to ethnographic studies showcasing this concept. Andrews hints for example at the healing powers ascribed to ancient coins. The idea that objects “from another world” hold special powers is well established in anthropology (for example HELMS, 1988), but not fully explored here. We are reminded of a necklace in the museum of Carnac that consists of beads ranging from the Neolithic to the early middle ages. Up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this necklace circulated in the local community, was even for rent, to aid against ailments. Even though this volume hints at the magic potential of anachronistic objects, it does not provide a discussion or deep insight on the subject. We found that the incorporation of examples from the ethnographic record whilst studying past societies caters for more in depth and elaborate interpretations, highlighting the relevance of looking outside of one’s own discipline for the development of ideas. These are two examples of topics that are only partially explored in the volume. In short, the volume makes for an interesting read, but is let down by the absence of a wrap-up article.

Overall, we recommend this book to peers from varying archaeological and heritage backgrounds. It forms a solid introduction to the topic of interpreting anachronistic objects, illustrated by a broad array of case studies, and urges the reader to (re-) consider the meaning and relevance of anachronistic objects in the past.

## References

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