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David Fontijn

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**Biography of Objects. Aspekte eines kulturhistorischen
Konzepts**

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DIETRICH BOSCHUNG / PATRICK-ALEXANDER KREUZ / TOBIAS KIENLIN (eds), *Biography of Objects. Aspekte eines kulturhistorischen Konzepts*. Morphomata 31. Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Paderborn 2015. € 24.90. ISBN 978-3-7705-5953-4192. 192 pages.

The aim of the volume *Biography of Objects* is to sketch different views on the concept of ‘object biographies’ for the study of material culture in the Humanities. To this end, a workshop was organised in Cologne, giving scholars from several disciplines the opportunity to present their view on the significance of the biography metaphor in their field of research. Its proceedings are published in this volume of the well-known Morphomata Series. The majority of the texts are written by archaeologists, but there are also contributions by an anthropologist, an art historian and a literary scholar. In spite of the English book title, all chapters except one are in German.

The contributions display a wide array of opinions. I will start by briefly discussing the contents of the individual chapters and their contribution to the broader discussion on the usefulness (or lack thereof) of the concept of ‘biography’ for the study of material culture. At the end, some general comments will be made.

In his chapter “Dinge sind Fragmente und Assemblagen” (pp. 11–35), H. P. Hahn provides a strong and inspiring critique of the use of the biography metaphor in material culture studies. He argues that its use may be seen as linked to a new discourse in the Humanities, in which biology is again, like in the 19th century, dominating our ways of thinking. He makes the point that material culture is interesting in its own right, as it challenges what he calls the ‘logo-centric world view’ (this and all further translations into English by DF, indicated with ‘inverted commas’). He argues that the biography metaphor puts us on the wrong track, if we want to understand how material culture shapes us. Biographies imply that objects have a ‘birth’ and ‘death’, but for objects, he argues that these concepts are of little help. How are we to make sense of the recycling of objects? Or of the observation that many objects acquire new ‘lives’ once their former one is considered finished? His second objection relates to fragmentation. Hahn argues that considering objects as having a life has a further complication: a fragment of a human being still has its DNA, but what about fragments of an object? If one is dismantling a car, he asks himself, which parts can you remove from it without it losing its ‘car’-identity? At what point in the process has it ceased being a ‘car’? His third point in criticising the biography metaphor in relation to material culture is the unclear distinction between thing and assemblage. If individual things together form an assemblage, one could ask whether the ‘life’ of the assemblage is similar to the ‘life’ of the individual things that make it up. Hahn’s alternative for an object biography is to consider what happens with objects as an ‘itinerary’. This concept of an itinerary (another metaphor for material culture!) is something he elaborated before in more detail elsewhere together with H. Weiss (H. P. HAHN / H. WEISS, Introduction: Biographies, travels and itineraries of things. In: H. P. Hahn / H. Weiss

(eds), *Mobility, Meaning and Transformation of Things: Shifting Contexts of Material Culture through Time and Space* [Oxford 2013] 1–14). It avoids notions of objects being ‘alive’ (birth-death), and allows for the fact that things can lack any function or meaning for a longer period of time (they ‘rest’, so to speak). Methodologically, it also enables one to describe individual histories of things before looking for patterns in their treatment. As such, it seems useful for empirical research of archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians. In my view, some of the case studies presented in this book (Kienlin / Kreuz and Wittekind) indeed fit well with this ‘itinerary’ concept.

In his contribution “Das Konzept der Objektbiographie im Lichte einer Hermeneutik materieller Kultur” (pp. 35–67), M. Jung also warns against the use of the biography metaphor in the study of material culture, mainly because the notion of a ‘life’ of things implicitly leads to seeing objects as agents in their own right. Jung emphasises that objects do not ‘act’ – rather they *afford* use. Referring to, among others, the seminal work of J. J. GIBSON (*The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* [Boston et al. 1979]) Jung sees a ‘material culture hermeneutics’ as a viable alternative for the use of the object biography concept. What he suggests is not so much a theory but a method. He proposes to distinguish between ‘object affordances’ (*sensu* J. J. GIBSON 1979) – i. e. the possibilities and limitations an object has for all sorts of use, regardless of context – and the way an object is actually used (i. e. a selection out of all these possibilities).

Like M. Jung, T. Kienlin and P.-A. Kreuz are also critical on the use of the concept of ‘biography’ in the research of material culture. In their chapter “(Objekt-)Biographien und Rekontextualisierung” (pp. 67–87) they argue, like Jung, that the implicit notion of the object as an agent in itself sets us on the wrong interpretative track. In their opinion, an ‘emic’ view from non-western ethnographies is uncritically applied and generalised. At the core of their text stands an archaeological case study for which they nevertheless continue to use the term ‘biography’. They argue that this concept, in spite of its theoretical complications, may help us to unravel the complex and contingent history of interpretations of objects when they go from hand to hand and from context to context. Their case study centres on a large bronze vessel, found in an extraordinary grave in Lefkandi, that served as a container for cremated remains. They demonstrate, however, that the piece, originally made in Cyprus, must have been quite old when it was buried on the Greek island. At its place of origin, it was probably made to be used in drinking bouts of leaders (‘patron-feasts’), and possibly was part of a set of vessels. After a lengthy – mostly unknown – history it ended up in a quite different social context far away: the much less hierarchically organised society of Early Iron Age Greece. The authors suggest that the vessel lost much of its original meaning here, and was used in what they call an ‘empowering-feast’ for a so-called ‘Big Man’; a feast that supposedly served to support his unstable social position.

In an engaging contribution (“In Geschichten verstrickt ... Menschen, Dinge, Identitäten”, pp. 87–123), K. P. Hofmann is nuanced and less negative concerning the use of the ‘biography metaphor’ for interpreting material culture than most other authors of this volume. In her view, metaphors simply stimulate creativity. Using things to tell about the past, so she argues, is a technique common to humans. Referring to the work of G. LAKOFF and M. JOHNSON (*Metaphors We Live by* [Chicago 1980]), there are “metaphors we live by” and “metaphors we die by”. She presents an interesting overview of the different ways in which the histories of things and objects can be shown. An ‘object biography’ is just one of them, H. P. Hahn and H. Weiss’ ‘itineraries’ are another (Fig. 4). She also is one of the few authors in this volume to acknowledge that there are several theories of object biographies, e. g. the one by I. KOPYTOFF (*The cultural biography of things: commoditisation as process*. In: A. Appadurai [ed.], *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* [Cambridge 1986] 64–92), the one by J. HOSKINS (*Biographical Objects:*

How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives [New York, London 1998]) or the one by Joy (this volume). She herself suggests that the work of W. SCHAPP (In *Geschichten verstrickt. Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* [Frankfurt a. M. 2012 (1953)]) might be an interesting addition to the present discussion. Schapp may perhaps be seen as an early advocate of network thinking when he argues that people are embedded or situated, not in one, but in many histories at the same time. Things – “*Wozudinge*” – are part of this web of histories. “*Wozudinge*” have an age, a certain size, and are material – all of which elements matter for their history. Schapp's theory definitively needs to be brought to life with more concrete (archaeological) examples, but K. P. Hofmann's subsequent plea for the writing of “ITstories” instead of “HISstories” is intriguing and brings us beyond the word-game related to the ‘biography’ discourse.

In a contribution entitled “Things in process: Biographies of British Iron Age pits” (pp. 125–143), J. Joy discusses the biography concept for material culture in relation to H. P. Hahn and H. Weiss' alternative of ‘object itinerary’. Like C. KNAPPETT (Imprints as punctuations of material itineraries. In: H. P. Hahn / H. Weiss (eds), *Mobility, Meaning and Transformation of Things: Shifting Contexts of Material Culture through Time and Space* [Oxford 2013] 36–49), he sees the object's durability as one of its key elements. Objects do not have to travel in order to interact with people (which fits in well with H. P. Hahn / H. Weiss' concept of an object ‘itinerary’). Emphasising the relational aspects of material culture, he argues that it is much more important that objects can interact with people while they “remain seemingly inert and inactive” (p. 132). Linking up with the original point of I. Kopytoff's notion of object biography, he remarks that views on an ‘expected life path’ may have mattered to people, but the ‘path’ an object really took (or rather its ‘itinerary’?) is what really is of relevance. J. Joy emphasises how things are active and constantly in a process of becoming something. This emphasis on process is what sets J. Joy's contribution out from most others in this book. It should be noted that ‘process’ does not imply that things have to move. Objects can be active simply by their materiality. J. Joy illustrates his ideas by the case study of Iron Age grain pits in Britain. J. Joy's example is interesting as he uses the individual ‘itineraries’ of pits to gain an idea on patterns in the treatment of such pits. This is an approach that is indeed close to I. Kopytoff's original idea on the cultural biography of things as something being linked with cultural views of ‘idealised’ life paths (cf. KOPYTOFF 1986, 86; cf. C. GOSDEN / Y. MARSHALL, *The cultural biography of objects. World Arch.* 31, 1999, 169–178, on ‘generalised’ cultural biographies; cf. the general discussion on ‘cultural biographies’ vs. ‘object itineraries’ in D. R. FONTIJN, *Cultural biographies and itineraries of things – second thoughts. In: H. P. Hahn / H. Weiss [eds], Mobility, Meaning and Transformation of Things: Shifting Contexts of Material Culture through Time and Space* [Oxford 2013] 183–195). Basing himself on the evidence of many excavated grain pits, he is able to provide an overview of what people generally did with such pits – and with it on their ‘relationality’ – or how “society and people were constituted through these processes” (p. 136). Interestingly, many of these pits started as a sealed container for grain but some ended up filled with ‘ritual deposits’ – implying they were important to people for religious purposes.

Art historian S. Wittekind (“*Versuch einer kunsthistorischen Objektbiographie*”, pp. 143–172) provides an interesting case study of a Willibrord relic that is kept in an artefact (the so-called “*Willibrorddarche*”) in the St. Martin church in Emmerich (Kreis Kleve, DE). Wittekind demonstrates that the ‘relic’ itself – and the artwork it was kept in – was only the first of the reasons why the objects was deemed important. In the course of time, the ‘Willibrord Ark’ shifted meaning several times and was repaired, changed and further elaborated. It became, for example, associated with the foundation of the town, an object celebrating the power of the Mass, a symbol of the Counter-reformation or (more recently) an object of Medieval Art. For a discussion on ‘biographies’ this is an interesting example as in the Middle Age, there was a generally-felt belief that

saints lived on in relics like this – so this is an artefact which in that period may really have been considered as being ‘alive’. Another reason why this is a fascinating example is its extremely long history. For most of the time, the object was not ‘on the move’ at all, but was kept in the St. Martin church (cf. Hahn’s notion of an itinerary, where objects can also ‘rest’ for a longer time). It interacted with people – to cite J. Joy – through its durability and materiality. Here, perhaps, a certain notion of personification (or the fact that it was seen as inalienably linked to the history of the town) later became even more important. This ‘Willibrord Ark’ was one of the few objects of St. Martin that remained preserved during the religion wars, even though relics or ostentatious ‘Arks’ did not have any religious meaning to the Protestant church and other precious objects got lost. Wittekind’s case study, therefore, is an example which demonstrates how objects and people constitute each other (J. Joy’s ‘relationality’), not only through materiality but also through the sense of history or personality which the object is considered to be imbued with. Here we are back at the roots of Marcel Mauss’ original theory on objects that can be as persons and for that reason are inalienable (M. MAUSS, *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* [London 1990]; cf. A. B. WEINER, *Inalienable Possessions. The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* [Berkeley et al. 1992]). And with the notion of ‘life’, we are back at the metaphor of ‘biography’.

In a final chapter, M. Niehaus (“Geschichtsdinge / Parcours”, pp. 173–189) discusses “It-Narratives” from the point of view of Literature studies. He makes the point that a biography is a genre in Literature, something that is rarely referred to in material culture studies. As such, he goes on, a Literature Biography may be inadequate as a metaphor for material culture, as it is not ‘life itself’ but a form of representation (p. 173). In his contribution, he sets out to show what usually happens when ‘things’ are the hero in narratives. His arguments are not about material culture in itself, but about how things can be the ‘hero’ or ‘witnesses’ in stories. Contrary to ideas that objects have agency in themselves by their materiality (cf. J. Joy), M. Niehaus makes clear that in It-Narratives, things follow a “*Parcours*” that often follows important events in History, by which the object becomes a “*Geschichtsding*”. History can become visible in the traces it leaves on the object. The thing itself, however, does not act.

As the above already indicates, opinions vary widely in this book. Both H. P. Hahn and M. Jung – and to some extent M. Niehaus as well – argue that the ‘biography’ concept is not really helpful if we want to understand people’s dealings with material culture. Most others are more moderate in their criticism and keep on using the term, though in different ways. Not so much is said in this book on the question why scholars have started to use the biography metaphor for material culture studies. At root, there might have been the wish to overcome an approach to material culture in which it was seen as entirely inactive and unrelated to the constitution of social life, or merely reflecting it. The term ‘biography’ surely does some justice to the often-felt idea that material culture can be seen as ‘active’, as being ‘like a person’ (cf. MAUSS 1990). But the question might be raised, exemplified by several contributions in this book, whether the concept of a ‘biography’ is the right term for it. Although the notion of an object as being ‘alive’ might at some stage have been appropriate for the ‘Willibrord Ark’ and the relic it concealed described by S. Wittekind, this does not seem to be the case for most other case studies. As both M. Jung and K. P. Hofmann suggest, there may be alternative ways of acknowledging what material culture can do with people (or vice versa) – focusing on object-affordances (Jung), the contextual relations between things, people and places (Kienlin / Kreuz, Hofmann, Joy) and the processes and practices in which things are used (Joy). Some chapters include strong case studies that illustrate this, but others stick with more theoretical discussions.

The variety of opinions in this book is surely one of its assets. The book very well illustrates the problem one encounters when adopting metaphors, but also how difficult it is to avoid them.

Hahn criticises one metaphor and replaces it with another ('itinerary'). Even after a critical discussion of the biography concept, a word like 'lifecycle' is still used in Joy's chapter (p. 135). K. P. Hofmann speaks about things that are "*in Geschichten verstrickt*" ('enmeshed in stories') etc. We might perhaps also say that scholars studying material culture are 'enmeshed in metaphors', and I side with her to question whether this is a problem at all as long as it makes scholars creative and looking for new ways to make sense of material culture from the past. Many contributions in this book show that the biography concept – whether they consider it a useful one or not – has at least helped them to carry out interesting and thought-provoking research.

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NIEDERSÄCHSISCHES INSTITUT FÜR HISTORISCHE KÜSTENFORSCHUNG (ed.), Marschenratskolloquium 2012. Flint von Helgoland – Die Nutzung einer einzigartigen Rohstoffquelle an der Nordseeküste / Marshland Council Colloquium 2012. Flint from Heligoland – the Exploitation of a Unique Source of Raw-Material on the North Sea Coast, 26.–28. April 2012. Siedlungs- und Küstenforschung im südlichen Nordseegebiet 37. Verlag Marie Leidorf, Rahden / Westf. 2014. € 49.80. ISBN 978-3-86757-855-4. 202 pages with 138 figures and 16 tables.

Lithic raw material sourcing, procurement, distribution and utilisation studies have traditionally been published as single journal articles or book chapters. This poses a challenge to research, particularly when the distribution of a raw material crosses international borders, with studies published in regional or national journals in different languages that are not always easily accessible to people living in other countries. The challenge increases when a single raw material has been utilised throughout different periods of time, crossing multiple period specialisations; how does a specialist in the Final Palaeolithic understand the specific contexts of the utilisation of the same raw material type in the Bronze Age?

To my knowledge, these challenges have been circumvented almost for the first time with this book on the sourcing and diachronic distribution and utilisation of flint from the island of Heligoland in the southern North Sea basin (cf. the book on flint from southwestern Germany by M. J. KAISER, *Werkzeug, Feuerzeug, Edelstein: Die Silices des südöstlichen Oberrheingebietes und ihre Nutzung von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* [Stuttgart 2013]). This volume is the product of a working group that has been developed over the last decade to "systematically record finds and develop sourcing methods" for flint from Heligoland (H. Jöns, preface). The leaders of this network, Sönke Hartz, Martin Segsneider, and Jaap Beuker, need to be highly commended on this extraordinary effort that will last as a foundational model for Heligoland flint research for years to come. It not only stands as a model for Heligoland flint research, but for all lithic raw material sourcing, distribution, and utilisation studies.

This book is the outcome of a workshop held in Wilhemshaven, Germany, from April 26–28, 2012, called "Flint from Heligoland – the exploitation of a unique source of raw material on the North Sea coast". Funding by the "Marshland Council for the Promotion of Research in the North Sea Coastal Area" enabled 25 researchers from heritage offices, museums, research institutes, and universities in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden to come together to "discuss various research approaches and to agree on future research" (H. Jöns, preface).

