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How materials shaped the human world

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**INTER-SECTION
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**SPECIAL ISSUE:
HOW MATERIALS SHAPED
THE HUMAN WORLD**

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COLOFON



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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

HOW MATERIALS SHAPED THE HUMAN WORLD

MARIE KOLBENSTETTER, MAIKEL KUIJPERS AND OLA LYGRE

The human past has been shaped by materials, and our future will be too. Without a thorough understanding of the material powers that make us, we are not well equipped to create a more sustainable future. An archaeological perspective is crucial to this understanding as we explore the long-term with a special focus on human-material relationships, offering society a perspective on human-material dependencies, and how they arise and change. Archaeologists have no problem recognising the importance of materials in the past. Entire epochs are named after them: Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age. But something changes, supposedly when ‘history’ begins. There is no Concrete Age that follows the Iron Age, despite the fact the Roman Empire could not have been built without concrete.

This special volume of Inter-Section challenges this dematerialised view of history. The presented papers explore how materials have, and continue to, shape and guide the human experience, as they have been our companions since time immemorial. Materials are the building blocks of our society, but we have hardly begun to acknowledge the extent to which this statement rings true. What happens when we do? How will we see ourselves when we take a less anthropocentric look at humanity, and give a little more due to the materials that make us? They shape our surroundings in the form of objects, tools, and buildings, but they also shape us. Humans are fundamentally embedded in, and emerge from, a material environment. In other words, there are material dimensions to how we think and behave. This means that through writing material histories we are writing human history.

There are many different theoretical perspectives that focus on human-material relationships. From Marx to material engagement theory, from entanglement to thing theory, from craft theory to material agency. For clarity's sake, we lump all approaches under the heading of “New Materialisms” (Witmore 2014, 203), despite the fact that some scholars prefer their own terms, such as “neo-materialist” (LeCain 2017) or ‘material agency’ (Boivin 2004). With ‘New Materialism’ we refer to a group of new theoretical approaches developed during the last few decades. The overarching theme of these approaches is that the role of the materials in material-human relationships is reconsidered, with many of these frameworks arguing that that material has agency of its own, (in)dependent of human action on the material.

This special issue was born out of a 2021 course titled *How materials shaped the Human World* at the Faculty

of Archaeology of Leiden University. This course was designed as a collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts (Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten – KABK), to familiarise both archaeology and design students with the new perspectives on human-material relationships offered by the theories of the ‘New Materialisms’. The course centered on a few key materials, such as concrete, clay and wood, which are featured in this special issue.

Concrete - *opus caementicium* - was a crucial material for the Romans, who used it to shape and connect their empire. In the modern age, it has allowed us to shape our world in unparalleled ways, becoming one of the main materials of the modern human habitat. And why should we not speak of the Clay Age rather than the Stone Age? As mundane and unpretentious as clay may be, this material has been foundational to prehistoric societies in the shape of pots and mud bricks. Moldable and forgiving, clay is a universally favoured material, and one of the most frequent archaeological finds. Finally, while evidence is often absent or poorly preserved, wood has played a central role from the early human past to the present. Wood is characterised by its diversity, as different types of wood offer a distinct set of traits, allowing it to fulfil many different roles, from planks to books to spears. In the form of mass-timber it is even making a come-back as a sustainable building material.

The contributions to this special issue can be conceived as thought experiments, aiming to explore how theories of new materialisms are inherently embedded in how archaeologists approach assemblages. As such, contributors were encouraged to reevaluate archaeological, historical or material phenomena by putting materials - not people - front and centre of the narrative. The resulting articles highlight the agency of the materials in shaping the social and cultural dynamics that surround them, as well as the networks that include them. This reframing of archaeology as a study of *things and materials*, rather than a study of the human past, allows us to extend archaeological thinking to recent and contemporary contexts. Further, it encourages us to rethink our relationship with the materials which shape our existence, as evidenced in the afterword by designer Nina Škerjanc.

In the first contribution to this volume, Michael McCabe III takes a phenomenological approach to the production process of *ceramica argentata*, an Etruscan ceramic type, which combines the qualities and affordances of clay and metal. Through material engagement theory, he explores the effects of the various affordances of these materials on the maker's mind at the different stages of

the operational sequence. By recentring the materiality of the *ceramica argentata*, at every step of the production sequence, he provides a different perspective on this well-studied object category, and reveals the sense-scapes produced by the handling of the material.

In the second contribution to this special issue, Mikaela Radford integrates new materialism perspectives into the more processual operational sequence approach, taking the 18th century wooden Maori canoe, or *waka*, as a case study. By documenting the same operational sequence from both anthropocentric and material-centric perspectives, she manages to integrate Maori worldview into the processing of wood as a resource, highlighting the interrelationship between the affordances of wood and traditional indigenous knowledge.

In the third contribution to this special issue, Sven van Maris explores the material agency of concrete by examining 200,000 Albanian bunkers. By focusing on the material aspect of these bunkers, rather than the political context that led to their creation, Sven van Maris highlights the agency of concrete in activating and maintaining the social memory of the Hoxa dictatorship. This contribution exemplifies the use of archaeological new materialist thinking to recent historical and current phenomena, exposing the long-lasting effects of concrete's material agency.

In the fourth contribution, Imme van der Leij takes on a similar approach in her discussion of the sociocultural role of concrete's permanence in the case of the Shayad/Azadi Tower in Tehran. Through examining the affordance of concrete in the design strategies of the monument, and in the lived experiences it produces, Imme van der Leij produces a holistic narrative of the materiality of concrete and its durable impact on state-building in Iran.

In the final article of this special issue, designer Nina Škerjanc discusses how both new materialism and new technologies informs and shapes modern design. Offering a reflection from a designer perspective on working with clay in modern times, Nina Škerjanc's contribution documents the various impacts of industrialization on the cognitive processes of the maker, and on the clay's material agency. In her afterword, she highlights the value of a designer's perspective to the study of (past) crafts. The inherent relationship between maker and material is emphasised, which sits at the heart of new materialism perspectives.

Our aim with this special issue is to show the extent to which people are entangled with materials. Realising how caught up we are with materials helps us to better understand who we are, and what we have in common with all humans, and other living beings on planet Earth.

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