

What about the things themselves?

A number of scholars have proclaimed the return of things in social and cultural research. In addition to making archaeological approaches to the recent and present past more popular and viable than ever before, the return of things has already allowed us to produce other histories, and to explore alternative and neglected human pasts and presents. However, despite the enthusiasm for what things *allow*, and the claims of their return, they themselves do not seem included in the empathy and care for the marginal and othered otherwise persistently voiced in these studies. Things continue to be regarded primarily as a useful means to reach something humanly else. This reverberates with a common position in archaeology and material culture studies where things are of interest to us only insofar they involve people; relationships of significance are always between humans and things (Harman 2010). This session invites papers exploring what a return to things *themselves* may imply; in other words, how things exist, act and inflict on each other, also outside the human realm. By attempting yet another (re)turn to things contributors to this session are challenged to scrutinize the possibility of a new ecology of practices (Stengers); one that does not require the abolition of things' otherness or unfamiliarity in order to render them humanly useful and which also accepts the possibility that things themselves may be the source of their own signification.

Harman, G. 2010. *Towards speculative realism: Essays and lectures*. Ropley: Zero Books.

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Introduction: What about the things themselves?

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The social construction of heritage - for what?

How are we going to understand and define 'heritage' and archaeology in a rapidly changing global environment? The 'linguistic turn' in humanities and social sciences has had a huge impact on both archaeology and heritage studies since ca 1980. Self proclaimed "Critical Heritage Studies" proposes

"an active move away from site –and artefact-based definitions of heritage...". A critique is raised against this anti-essentialist view that heritage is socially constructed, never discovered.

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"Das Ding an sich" – Animal identities and merging with the animate – extra-ordinary phenomena or experience-based expressions?

Archaeological material from various times and places, and anthropological reports, are ample with examples of attributions of identity to animals and objects, and of merging of identities between humans and animals. These phenomena are seen as something alien and different from our modern understanding of ourselves, animals, plants, and objects as discrete ontological classes. – Archaeology tends to describe, explain, and explore such phenomena in relation to each particular cultural context, focusing either on functional properties (processualism) or on symbolic meanings (post-processualism). These anthropocentric foci, on either "uses" or "meanings" "for people", have been accentuated to a point where aspects of "das Ding an sich" (Kant 1783), namely properties, qualities, and characteristics of "things" (animals, plants, objects and humans) in themselves, and their agency and interaction, seem actively repressed. – However, these theoretical positions (processualism and post-processualism, along with essentialism versus social constructivism) ought now to be outdated and transcended. New theoretical positions, such as Symmetrical Archaeology (Olsen 2010; Witmore 2007) post-humanism in theory of science (Pickering (1997), the Developmental Systems Theory in biology (Oyama, Griffiths & Gray 2001) and the inter-disciplinary biosocial Obviation Perspective (Ingold 2001), all suggest that the divisions between nature/culture, object/subject, function/symbol, body/mind, sciences/humanities, etc. are in themselves constructions and not qualities of the world "as it is". Humans, animals, plants, and things (natural and cultural objects) are all "actants" and "interactants" in intricate complex ways. – I will focus on the phenomena of "identity attributed to animals" and "merging of identities between humans and animals". I will question the assumption that these phenomena indicate that people from other times and places were very different from us and can exclusively be understood within their own frame of reference (cultural context). In contrast, I argue that these are cross-cultural and trans-historical phenomena based on rather stable perceptions of and experiences with animals. Risking being accused of a return to essentialism, I will go beyond both "uses" and "meanings", and base my argument on characteristic properties of animals and humans identified by psychological and ethological research. I will illustrate this proposal with examples from various epochs: Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Bronze Age, Classical Greece, Roman Empire, Migration Period, Viking Period, and from modern times.

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Smoking, singing, and moving stones

One important aspect in Sámi worldview has been the interaction between humans and spirits, animals, and from a western viewpoint lifeless things. The last mentioned included also the sacrificial stones called *sieidi* (in North Sámi). These were seen as a part of the social realm. *Sieidi* stones were active agents with ability to move, make sounds, and have emotions. They did not only act in relation to humans but had a life of their own. The interactions of *sieidi* were multifaceted. They included contacts with animals, landscape elements and with other *sieidi* stones. Animals sought protection and food from *sieidi* stones, landscape elements covered and revealed *sieidi* stones, and the *sieidi* stones could communicate with each other in the landscape. This again could have an effect on the ritual behavior of humans.

Archaeological fieldwork at *sieidi* sites in Finnish Lapland and ethnographical descriptions together have shed light to the ways in which the communication between *sieidi* and humans, and *sieidi* and other 'things' took place. The role of a *sieidi* stone was important in ritual practices. It affected and was affected by the way humans acted. The relation between a *sieidi* and a human has been described as reciprocal. The example of *sieidi* stones challenges the way how relations between humans and things have been seen. It brings intersubjectivity into the communication between humans and things.

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Time, Space and Styles: Decorated vessels from the Migration period

A paradox among many archaeologists is our ambivalent attitude towards our main source; the preserved artefacts. The material remains have many scarcities to understand the prehistoric society, but they are often our only source. We often borrow our narrative from sciences and other directions with other kind of sources. The application of their questions does not always match our purposes and materials.

One versatile material is the regional styles of decorations and forms of ceramic vessels in Sweden during the Migration period. The chorological distribution indicates different traditions in table manners and rituals as well as separate spatial networks. Spatial and chronological changes are

also a signs of transformations of networks and perhaps even political processes. The implication of styles, distribution and their presumed narratives as we, are a challenge for us.

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Sticky things. Getting into Early Iron Age caulking resins and tarry entanglements!

A preoccupation with things has always been at the very core of Scandinavian Iron Age archaeology. Typological analyses of pottery, swords and prestigious objects have not only enabled fine-meshed chronologies, but also given an insight into other areas such as trading networks, political and economic systems, as well as interpretations of power and ideology, gender and religion. However, whereas these objects have at least been chosen to stand for or symbolize something else, a large myriad of things have been left out of the interpretations.

Although being among the most common finds in Norwegian Early Iron Age graves, caulking resins have attracted very little attention within archaeological research and the material is usually presented under “miscellaneous” in archaeological literature. Caulking resins are inconspicuous black lumps of tar which served as a sealant between the wall and the base of now deteriorated lath-walled receptacles utilized as cremation vessels or part of the grave furnishing in inhumation graves.

Despite its mundane appearance, tar took on a large number of different and important roles in everyday life. Based on chemical analyses and archaeological interpretations I will explore the inherent and unique characteristics of tar that enabled its interaction with other things as well as people.

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Things in action: a pragmatistic approach to interacting with things

After the poststructuralist ‘textual detour’ (*pace* Olsen), many archaeologists have returned to studying the things themselves. There are, however, many profound philosophical presuppositions to consider when one examines the relationship between people and things. What is the nature of the relationship between perception and reality? Are things necessarily transcendental and unreachable in the Kantian sense? Assuming a hidden realm of things-in-themselves leads to an unresolvable problem about the object of our knowledge.

In this paper, I will present a pragmatistic approach to the relationship between mind and matter. Criticizing the traditional rationalist and empiricist approaches still very influential in archaeology, I will propose an alternative that is not based on a strict division between a knowing subject and a static object of knowledge. Instead, I propose that it is impossible to separate mind and matter or perception and reality.

Time plays an important role in understanding the relationship between thought and action. Being in the world and being able to act in the world is therefore interplay between particular material actualities produced in the past and the present, and general mentally construed possibilities strongly rooted in the future. The evolutionary mind has an ability to anticipate and adjust action based on its imagined consequences.

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In the presence of things: a co-presentation

This paper considers a mundane thing discovered on an archaeological site, and asks how it asserts its own unique presence even in the midst of a host of applied meanings and theories about the past. Although it cannot talk, the thing will be there as a participant in the discussion. Aspects of its use and function will be demonstrated in action: meanwhile (in the spirit of symmetry) the thing itself will demonstrate a range of embodied movements associated with its use. Some members of the audience will have the opportunity to handle the thing and impose their own interpretation upon it, but (as the principle of symmetry insists) the thing will simultaneously get the chance to shape the theoretical and practical stances of the audience, honing the very movements of living muscle and perhaps even the neural structure of the brain to its own design. I am hoping that, by the end of this human/thing co-presentation, the thing itself might point a way forward for us in attempting to solve some otherwise intractable problems of archaeological theory.

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