Introduction

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Objects, in the course of their production and their cycles of circulation and use develop layered histories and form part of complex networks of relationships, entangling people and things. Object biography, introduced almost four decades ago in the works of Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Igor Kopytoff (1986), as an innovative concept for addressing human-object interactions, has since become a well-established and widely applied analytical tool across social sciences and archaeology in particular (e.g. Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999 and all papers in *WorldArch* 31; Fontijn 2002; Holtorf 2002; Meskell 2004; Joy 2009; Trimmis *et al.* 2023; Marini and Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2024). Re-contextualised within the new-materialist and post-humanist discourse, understandings of materiality have been widely problematised (e.g. Gosden 2005; Tilley 2007; Hicks 2010; Harris and Cipolla 2017; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018).

Human-object interactions have been at the heart of various theoretical constructs from network theory (Latour 2005; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Knappett 2011) and entanglement (Hodder 2011, 2012, 2014) to correspondence (Ingold 2015, 2017) assemblage (Fowler 2013; Harris 2014; Lucas 2017; Jervis 2018), or the recently proposed assemblage of practice (Antczak and Beaudry 2019). The power and familiarity of the biographical metaphor, and its inherent narrative structure, despite often cited critiques, have rendered the biographical approach long-lived, and allowed it to retain its relevance while being accordingly re-framed (for a recent overview see Bauer 2019) and complemented by the concept of object itinerary, which has emerged as an ontologically updated successor (Hahn and Weiss 2013; Joyce and Gillespie 2015).

Acknowledging this discourse, the present volume, brings together 17 papers originally delivered in session 498 at the 2023 European Association of Archaeologists Annual Meeting, held at Queen's University, Belfast, 30 August–2 September 2023, and pursues current applications of biographical approaches, with a focus on how objects transform into subjects of archaeological, museological, and art-historical research. The presented case studies cover a wide temporal and geographical span, from prehistory to modernity, and from Greco-Roman antiquity to northern Europe, and the Indus Valley. They offer a plurality of archaeological, archival, museological, and heritage perspectives into the ever-progressing lives of artefacts, monuments, and museum collections. The aim is to explore the processes through which objects, in their literal and figurative movement across time and space, become re-defined, re-interpreted, and re-evaluated, as they enter and leave different contexts of circulation, systems of value, and settings of academic research. Authors look at matters of provenance, collections histories, shifting meanings of artefacts in post-colonial settings, and the role of museums in shaping narratives. The volume endeavours to weave together the narratives of objects, as they continue to acquire relational connections that are ever-changing and multi-directional.

An object biographical perspective, expanded and refined by recent advances in the discourse on materiality and the ontology of things, is deemed suited to this end, as it offers opportunities to deliver bottom-up approaches through the lens of individual takes on the wider theme. Emphasis on itineraries is given due to the capacity of the latter construct to amend the linear character of the biographical metaphor and to incorporate in a more integral way concerns with various aspects of mobility, central in the current theoretical consensus. Whether displayed in museum exhibitions, forming part of institutional collections or put away in depots and storerooms, objects in this volume are conceptualised as dynamic, lacking clearly definable beginnings and endings. Contributions discuss the past and alongside the present entanglements of things, in relation to ever-shifting socio-political, economic, and academic realities. The intention is to demonstrate that the meanings attributed to things, and the networks of interactions between humans and objects do not become static once the objects themselves are classified as artefacts worthy of study. Objects in public displays, as well as objects deposited in shelves, crates, are all but inert, continuously being in a process of becoming, directly and indirectly impacting and being impacted by current frames of reference.

The history of collections itself has fostered a distinct field of research, revealing how collecting practices have been shaped by nationalism, colonialism, and evolving academic paradigms (Amkreutz 2020; Sterling 2020). From the encyclopedic ambitions of eighteenth-century cabinets of curiosities to the systematic cataloguing efforts of nineteenth-century museums, collecting has never been a neutral act of preservation. Rather, it is an active process of selection, interpretation, and meaning-making (for example, Preziosi and Farago 2004; Gahtan and Troelenberg 2019; Bracken and Rurpin 2021).

The provenance research movement has illuminated how objects bear the imprints of displacement (from antiquity to modern times, cf. Feigenbaum and Reist 2013; Lyons 2016; Carpino 2018; Bundrick 2019; Furlotti 2019; Milosch and Pearce 2019). Contemporary museums increasingly confront questions of repatriation, community engagement, and decolonisation, recognising that collections are not merely repositories of the past but active participants in current cultural and political negotiations. These challenges, pertaining to heritage conservation, ethical considerations, and museographic practices, have also benefited from theoretical frameworks related to the biography of objects, specifically adapted to the particular characteristics of the collections (Dudley 2012; Hill 2012). By tracing how objects have moved across collecting contexts—from private hands to institutional holdings, from field sites to storage facilities—we gain insight into the broader social and intellectual forces that have shaped our understanding of material culture.

Within this framework that combines biographical approaches on materiality and collections histories, the papers comprising the present volume, set out to reconstruct and analyse the dynamic lives and intricate itineraries of cultural and archaeological artefacts beyond their initial creation or their point of archaeological discovery. They highlight how these objects were diachronically shaped and continue to be re-contextualised by human, institutional, and societal factors to this day. Contributions reflect a shared concern: understanding objects by framing their materiality within evolving social worlds. In terms of subject matter and adopted perspective, they fall into four interrelated groups. The first group examines Greek antiquities in institutional settings (Chapters 1–4), while the second traces individual artifact biographies within broader collection histories and assemblage life-cycles (Chapters 5–9). The third group analyzes how contemporary political, academic, and heritage factors shape the journeys of collections, monuments, and artifacts (Chapters 10–13) while final group explores present-day relationships between collections or artifacts and their audiences or communities (Chapters 14–17).

The first group (Chapter 1–4), as mentioned above, focuses primarily on Greek antiquities exhibited and/or held in Greek museums. Kostas Paschalidis' article (Chapter 1) examines an epistyle fragment from the famous Treasury of Atreus in Mycenae. The fragment, first identified by Sir William Gell in a ruined church near the village of Mycenae, was later retrieved by Greek archaeologist Panagiotis Stamatakis who brought it to Athens, in the National Archaeological Museum. Its collection in the mid-eighteenth century by the local priest and the commemoration of the names of his family members on it shows that ancient monuments were appropriated by Christian Greeks of the region, who gave them new cultural significance. The study co-authored by Evangelia Tsangaraki, Stella Papadopoulou, Lambrini Papadopoulou, and Nikolaos Kantiranis (Chapter 2) focuses on a finely crafted hammer-axe, which was donated to the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki by Mr Stamatis Tsakos, who found it near a prehistoric site (Nea Raedestos' Toumba) in central Macedonia. While its exceptional preservation and craftsmanship stood out, the origin of this surface find remains unclear. The paper tracks axe's cultural biography—from its production and use to its eventual discovery—turning an undocumented object into a meaningful subject of archaeological research. Athanasia Kyriakou's contribution (Chapter 3) seeks to cast light on a prominent find from the archaeological site of Aigai, the first capital of the Macedonian Kingdom. It is the statue of a peplophoros found in a sanctuary, related to Eukleia, goddess of good repute, and Eurydice, mother of King Philip II. The sculpture, dedicated in the mid-fourth century BCE, was ritually deposited in a pit four centuries later. Through this case study, the author critiques current museum practices, arguing that scholars must communicate objects' fuller cultural biographies rather than reducing them to simplified interpretive labels. Annareta Touloumtzidou and Christos Katsifas' paper (Chapter 4) follows an unprovenanced small bronze object from the private collection of Georgios Papailiakis, donated to the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki. Through archaeological research and chemical analysis the object has been identified as part of a bronze situla from Olynthus, kept at Harvard Art Museums. The authors trace its connections to David Moore Robinson, excavator of Olynthus, Michael Ritsos, art dealer with international activity, and Georgios Papailiakis, private collector and illicit trafficker of antiquities in early twentieth century Macedonia. The four studies demonstrate that archaeological artefacts are not static ancient relics but dynamic cultural agents that continue to accumulate meaning and significance, requiring scholars to move beyond traditional descriptive approaches toward understanding their complete life histories and ongoing cultural narratives.

The next series of studies (Chapters 5–9) brings the reader from individual artifact biographies to broader collections history and assemblage life-cycles. Cecile Colonna (Chapter 5) investigates the niche phenomenon of 'burnt vases'—ceramic fragments altered by fire in elite funeral pyres in ancient Greek and Etruscan cities. In the nineteenth century, these objects, which acquired a distinctive grey colour, were valued by scholars for their insights into ancient funerary practices, and became highly sought after by collectors. Eventually, the preference for complete vases in both private and public collections led to these fragmentary pieces being hidden away in storerooms. The paper examines how the artistic, religious, archaeological, and aesthetic values of these objects shifted over time, affecting their visibility from antiquity through the modern era. Delving further into the pathways bringing ancient Greek vessels from nineteenth-century excavations to private and ultimately museum collections, Kleopatra Kathariou's contribution (Chapter 6) takes a closer look at products of the late sixth-century Attic workshop of the Euphiletos Painter, and their itineraries following their discovery in rich Etruscan

cemeteries, and Vulci in particular. Their intricate histories of ownership trail back to prominent figures, like Lucien Bonaparte and the marquis Giovanni Pietro Campana, and the Campanari, Candelori, and Feoli families, changing hands and contexts of circulation through auctions, exhibitions, and especially commissioned catalogues to reach their current status in museum and university collections around the world. Vases are also central to the paper by Amy C. Smith and Katerina Volioti (Chapter 7). The authors examine discarded Athenian black-figured pottery from the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, focusing on mass-produced 'festival ware' containers that now fill museum storerooms as unprovenanced fragments. The authors draw parallels between ancient practices of deposition, modern refuse management, and the stacking of pots and fragments in museum storage. Styliana Galiniki (Chapter 8) tracks the history of two Attic sarcophagi from the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, showing how they evolved from Roman burial monuments to active participants in modern culture. Excavated in 1929, these objects transitioned from static displays to cultural touchstones, engaged in community activities, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Christina DiFabio (Chapter 9) presents a compelling example of biographical object study that goes beyond traditional archaeological analysis. The author takes a holistic approach to a tomb assemblage from Notion—an ancient Greek city in Turkey—originally excavated by Théodore Macridy in 1907. Her study takes a multi-layered perspective, by tracing the objects' 'life story' from ancient use through Ottoman-era excavation to modern museum display. Taken together, these papers reveal how artefacts accumulate layers of meaning, often challenging traditional museum practices and inviting inclusive, context-aware interpretations.

The following four contributions (Chapters 10–13) address more closely the impact of contemporary political, academic and heritage parameters on the itineraries of collections, monuments and artefacts. Emily Anderson (Chapter 10) focuses on the Greco-Roman plaster casts at the Peabody Institute, showing how these replicas acquire distinct lives through their local and social interactions, particularly with immigrants in Baltimore. She shifts attention from institutional patrons to the lived experiences that animated these casts. Andrea Schmölder-Veit (Chapter 11) traces the trajectory of a Parthenon model, initially created as a pedagogical tool for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as part of the Willard Architectural Collection. She demonstrates how this model became a performative and mutable object over 130 years, its alterations reflecting changes in the presentation of classical architecture and the understanding of the Parthenon itself, advocating for its recognition as a historical artefact in its own right. Susanna Sarti (Chapter 12) examines the crucial role of Carlo Bonichi in the Campana Museum's acquisitions, focusing on the remains of the so-called 'Temple of Cumae'. She reveals the transnational networks of patronage and commerce, showing how objects were managed and promoted despite sales challenges, underscoring the complexity of the nineteenth-century antiquities market. Chandra Swati and Patil Koumudi (Chapter 13) study the Indus Valley Civilization seals at the Indian Museum in Kolkata. They explore their re-contextualisation from the colonial to the postcolonial era, demonstrating how artefacts have been redefined according to changing institutional identities, reflecting ideological transitions from colonialism to decolonisation. All four case-studies converge to demonstrate that objects, whether replicas, models, archaeological discoveries, or historical artefacts, are not static. They possess complex meanings, constantly renegotiated by the people, institutions, and socio-political contexts through which they travel.

Closing the volume, the last contributions (Chapters 14–17) place emphasis on the interplay between collections or single artefacts and audiences or communities in the here and now. Mark Hall (Chapter 14) tracks the cultural biography of the Stone of Scone, an object with performative ties to the royal inauguration in Scotland and coronation in England. The object's movements, layers of meaning, and mythologised origins offer a compelling case study on the attribution of agency to material culture and its social implications. Kerstin Lind's paper (Chapter 15) looks at a set of eleventh/twelfth-century figural tapestries from Överhogdal, Sweden. The paper illustrates how the physical mobility of the objects, as part of different exhibitions, collections, and projects, was intertwined with and had an impact on local communities and institutions, as well as the circulation of knowledge surrounding the artefacts. A different perspective into collections histories is offered by Anna Lekka (Chapter 16), who examines how the shift from the status of antiquities in the Ottoman Empire, to the first legislative framework for the protection of antiquities of the Greek state determined the formation of private collections in Greece. Utilising legal documentation, archival information, and testimonies of collectors, the author brings a fresh insight into the entanglement of antiquity collection with conceptualisations of national consciousness and identity politics. Lastly, Katharina Zinn's contribution (Chapter 17) presents a novel and alternative approach to objects in regional museum collections lacking contextual documentation. Her paper explores how unprovenanced Egyptian artefacts from the storerooms of the Welsh Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil, acquired new fictional lives and were imbued with new meanings in creative and artistic ways through engagement with local audiences. All four papers illustrate interconnectedness of the many lives of artefacts and collections with perceptions of heritage and identities, and place emphasis on the processes of construction of real or imagined narratives associated with them.

This collection of essays charts how artefacts, monuments, and museum collections intersect with human lives, socio-political, institutional, and cultural frames of reference across time and space. While each paper addresses distinct topics, methodologies, and geographical settings, together they reveal objects as dynamic entities that continue to accumulate meaning and relational connections long after entering museums, research contexts, or storage facilities.

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