



Possession: to own and be owned

The Fifth Postdoctoral Archaeological Group Workshop

Tuesday, November 27, 2012

Organizers

Nanouschka M. Burström, Fredrik Fahlander and Alison Klevnäs

Discussant

Chris Gosden, University of Oxford

Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies
Stockholm University

Wallenberglaboratoriet, Lilla Frescativägen 7, Stockholm

Seminar room on entrance floor

Workshop Program

9.00 Introduction by the organizers

9.15 Fredrik Fahlander: The Skin I Live In. The body as canvas.

9.45 Julia Habetzeder: Appropriate Luxurious Possessions.

10.15 *Coffee Break*

10.30 Alison Klevnäs: Give and Take. Grave-goods and grave-robbery in the early middle ages.

11.00 Nanouschka Myrberg Burström: Interrelated Possessions. Viking-Age depositions as collections.

11.30 Gordana Ciric: Roman Coins in the Possession of Medieval People. Examples from medieval cemeteries in the territory of Serbia.

12.00 – 13.30 *Lunch Break*. Table booked in the Faculty Club.

13.30 Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson: To Own and Be Owned. The warriors of Birka's garrison.

14.00 Torun Zachrisson: To Own Land and to Be Owned By It.

14.30 *Coffee Break*

14.45 Per Nilsson: Rock Art, Agency and Ownership.

15.15 Magnus Ljunge: Painted Caves of Power? Some reflections on the ownership of confined spaces.

15.45 Chris Gosden: Discussant's Commentary and Reflections .

c. 16.15 – c. 17.00 General Discussion

18.00 Table booked in Restaurant Pelikan, Blekingegatan 40, T station Skanstull.

Workshop Participants

Dr Nanouschka Myrberg Burström, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies (Division of Archaeology), Stockholm University

PhD Candidate Gordana Ciric, Institute of Archaeology, Goethe University, Frankfurt a.M.

Dr Fredrik Fahlander, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies (Division of Archaeology), Stockholm University

Professor Chris Gosden, Chair of European Archaeology, University of Oxford

Dr Julia Habetzeder, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies (Division of Classical Studies), Stockholm University

Dr Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, National Museum of Antiquities, Stockholm

Dr Alison Klevnäs, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies (Division of Archaeology), Stockholm University

PhD Candidate Magnus Ljunge, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies (Division of Archaeology), Stockholm University

PhD Candidate Per Nilsson, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies (Division of Archaeology), Stockholm University

Dr Torun Zachrisson, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies (Division of Archaeology), Stockholm University

Workshop Theme Abstract

Ownership – of portable objects, built structures, territories, the past, museum exhibits, even new theoretical perspectives – is a concept that recurs throughout archaeological texts. It is a key way of describing how people limit and direct use of the material world. Yet the ideas behind it are almost never explicitly defined. Ownership is treated as self-explanatory, for example in categories such as ‘personal belongings’ in the interpretation of grave-goods. There is elision between conceptions of ownership, ways of associating objects with individuals and groups, which vary fundamentally in how they are established and maintained, and in the rights and responsibilities they bestow. When the concepts have been explicitly theorized, this has mainly been in terms of alienable and inalienable possessions, or in specific historical contexts such as social stratification or the rise of capitalism. But what does it mean to ‘own’ and to be owned? Is it possible to theorize this relationship in archaeology, and to investigate it in and through material culture?

Currently there are calls for archaeology to refocus on ‘things as things’. Recent work, especially from ethnography, shows how observing the everyday production and use of objects, their tactile qualities and material possibilities, can give new understandings of the ways they come into being as possessions and as artefactual extensions of the body. Here the material, sensual, emotional, and social are put back together, with objects mediating every aspect of human life. How can such intricate links between humans and materials be explored in the archaeological record?

Can more explicitly symmetrical, non-representative, or relational perspectives be brought to bear on the concepts of possession and ownership? To possess can be close to being possessed. This aspect comes to the fore when possessions are animate. Animals and dependent humans – slaves, wives, children, employees, the poor – exist in a tense and much debated no-man’s-land between owned objects and liabilities demanding care. Possessions can both enable and require their owners to behave in certain ways, or to fulfil societal roles. The loss of a precious object may be a matter of personal grief, akin to the loss of a person. Possessions can place significant obligations on their owners, as in the cases of museum collections or historic buildings. Disputed possessions - land, material resources, wealth in all its myriad forms – are a source of deadly conflict throughout the human present and past. What has archaeology – a discipline with material things at its core – to say about how they own us?

The workshop will consist of short presentations which explore the complexities of ownership in different contexts – from prehistory to modern heritage management. What rights does ownership convey and what demands does it make? Can possessions be given away, sold, altered, maintained, inherited, bred, destroyed, killed? How do different kinds of possessions accrue to individuals and groups, how are they retained, and how are claims disputed and resolved? In what ways are the materiality, form and design of objects involved in these processes? How is ownership maintained, in practical terms, in small scale societies? How can we see different forms of ownership in the archaeological record?

Workshop Abstracts

In order of presentation

Fredrik Fahlander

The Skin I Live In. The body as canvas .

In contemporary Western societies are bodily modifications like tattoos and scarification primarily decorative and added to enhance individual identity. In pre- and protohistory, however, such practices are less often voluntary as much as it was about marking captives of war, criminals, slaves, etc. – a classic case of dehumanization that emphasizes the question who really owns your skin? No matter the reason why a body became adorned or marked, the ‘owner’ needs to submit to the affects of the imagery. As such bodily adornments can be objectified and considered an addition to the body proper, they can also radically change the experience of the body, and thus affect the individual in different ways.

Traditionally, imagery of the past is often interpreted in terms of symbols and representations. From a relational and non-representational standpoint, however, is the pictorial not a passive reflection of the world but rather the entangled in it. The material facet of imagery is important here. For instance, the materiality of rock art carry a promise of immobility and an eternal life to an image while other materials may be more perishable but instead allow for greater detail. From such a perspective, is it interesting to discuss what kinds of patterns and imagery that was regarded suitable for the body and what was not? By contrasting the body to other types of projection areas for imagery, it is possible to explore the various kinds of material relationships in which different bodies are entangled.

Julia Habetzeder

Appropriate Luxurious Possessions.

"Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive,
and brought the arts into rustic Latium."
Horace, Epistles, 2.1.156

This quote is often used to illustrate how enthusiastically the Romans embraced the visual culture which they encountered in Greece and the Hellenistic East. After their successful military exploits in the East, many Roman generals returned home with plundered works of art. Subsequently, within the Roman cultural context, Greek visual culture swiftly became a token of refined taste. After the encounter with the Hellenistic visual cultures, Roman elites set about to lavishly decorate both public and domestic areas with spectacular Greek-style works of art. Current research on these matters does, however, seldom note that not all aspects of Greek art were embraced as willingly by the Romans. This matter will be of central importance in the following paper, which explores the relationship between such artworks and their owners.

Roman visual culture was to a large extent governed by propriety: a decorative depiction should always be appropriate, i.e. it should follow decorum. A wealthy Roman nobleman would refrain from displaying artworks which could be deemed inappropriate by social consensus. Hence, there was a connection between the artworks possessed, and the owner who chose to put the items on display.

This relationship can be exemplified in the Roman depictions of a certain motif: Pyrrhic dancers. Depictions of such dancers are known on seven marble items found in Italy. These depictions do, most likely, refer back to one particular Greek original: a large marble base which was set up on the Athenian Acropolis. Considering that there was a Classical original placed in such a prominent setting, one would expect the motif to be easily appropriated into Roman visual culture. But compared to other motifs appropriated in a similar manner, the number of Roman depictions of Pyrrhic dancers is very low. This, I would suggest, is because male dancing was considered an effeminate practice in the Roman cultural context. Therefore it would be inappropriate for a Roman nobleman to purchase and display depictions of male dancers: the owner of such a work of art could be seen to indulge in the unmanly practice of dancing for pleasure.

Alison Klevnäs

Give and Take. Grave-goods and grave-robbery in the early middle ages.

This paper explores an outbreak of grave disturbance which spread across northern Europe in the 7th century. The dominant burial rite of this period, across Merovingian Germany and Gaul and reaching Anglo-Saxon Kent in the north, was furnished inhumation in field cemeteries, often with graves arranged in rough rows. The dead were buried clothed, many with grave-goods including weapons, jewellery, knives, vessels, and food. There is considerable local and regional variation in cemetery layouts, grave forms, grave markers, artefact types – and presumably in the rituals which shaped the burials. However, one common element shared across this huge geographic area is the appearance in the late 6th or early 7th century of a practice of reopening graves and removing grave-goods. Most, if not all, contemporary burial grounds were affected, some disturbed in their entirety and some with only a small number of graves reopened. Traditionally glossed as grave robbery, this early reopening has been recognised since the 19th century, and is usually regarded as the destruction of valuable data and thus as a source of disappointment for excavators. Here I take the opposite view, arguing that understanding the timing, process, and aims of the grave reopening can shed new light on the furnished burial ritual itself.

A great variety of explanations for early medieval grave disturbance have been put forward over the years, including reopening as part of burial rites, as destruction of grave monuments, raiding by rival tribes, Christianisation ritual, theft of objects for exchange, recovery of valued possessions, and recovery of raw materials, either iron or precious metals. However, none of these explanations finds full support in the archaeological evidence. My analysis shows that grave-goods were definitely removed from the disturbed graves, and that this removal of artefacts was probably the main aim of the reopening. Straightforward theft for personal enrichment or exchange cannot, however, have been the goal. Many apparently covetable possessions, including ones made from precious metals and with elaborate workmanship, were left behind in disturbed graves. Specific grave-good types were taken: swords, but not knives, spears, or shields; brooches of any metal, but not pendants, bracteates, nor the various forms of girdlehanger worn by women. The desired grave-goods were removed even when they were unusable, so decayed that they fell into pieces as they were lifted.

My interpretation is therefore that the point of the robbing was not to obtain possessions for the robbers to use, but to remove them from the dead. But why only certain artefacts? I argue that the objects which were left behind were personal items, too closely associated with the dead individual to be taken. So knives, for example, which would be carried and used every day, had to be buried with their owners. They could not be inherited and used by heirs, and nor could they be taken by grave robbers. Swords, on the other hand, were consistently taken from disturbed graves. Throughout ancient literature, swords are portrayed as bearing a personhood of their own, which enabled them to be given, stolen, and inherited. These were objects which could be transferred between the living. On the evidence of grave-robbery, they could also be transferred from the dead to the living. Brooches, and the world of women more generally, feature much less in the literature. Here I argue that brooches have been underestimated as objects of gift-giving and inheritance.

Nanouschka Myrberg Burström

Interrelated Possessions. Viking-Age depositions as collections.

Departing from my ongoing project 'Hoarding the Dead' which partly focuses on Viking-Age middle-brooch deposits and partly on coin-only stratified hoards, I will confront the precious-metal depositions with present theoretical perspectives concerning symmetry and relations between humans and objects, as well as with the rich scholarship on collecting and collections. Depositions of precious-metal object-coin combinations were made during (roughly) the whole Viking Age and are one of the archaeological sources that define the period in Scandinavia, a true 'sign of the time'. The depositions demonstrate a great variety when looked upon as one category, but at a closer look some themes may be distinguished through similar composition of the included material. One theme is characterised by including a female middle brooch as its most central piece, accompanied by certain, selected, items which appears as 'fixed sets' (cf. Myrberg 2009 a, b). Other themes centre around male penannular brooches, or are played out as amassed and mutilated pieces.

The depositions (of any type) were not gathered randomly, but result from careful selection and composition. Only certain (types of) objects may be included and related to each other. It may well be argued that the precious-metal depositions were intended to represent their owners, as human beings or as personas/roles. Many of the objects appear to have long biographies, as the brooches and pendants are often older than the included coins. Thus they embody not only the owner but were also vital parts of the relations within families and societies. The collections were stored but often kept 'alive' for long periods of time through additions and refilling, thus maintaining their relation with the living humans. Possessed by them, or itself possessing them? Apart from the meaning that may be ascribed individual components, precious-metal depositions are also collections of interrelated objects, which acquire additional meaning from their structuring principles and from their forming an entity (cf. Belk et al 1988; Pearce 1995). As such, the deposits may be studied with the same theoretical outsets as collections from other temporal contexts.

Belk, R.W., Wallendorf, M., Sherry, J., Holbrook, M., & Roberts, S. 1988. Collectors and Collecting. *Advances in Consumer Research* Vol.15 (1988) (548-53).

Myrberg, N. 2009a. The Hoarded Dead: Late Iron Age silver hoards as graves. In Back Danielsson, I-M., Gustin, I., Larsson, A., Myrberg, N. & Thedéen, S. (Eds), *Döda Personers Sällskap. Gravmaterialens identiteter och kulturella uttryck*. Stockholm: Stockholm University (131-45).

Myrberg, N. 2009b. The social identity of coin hoards – and other examples of theory and practice in the space between numismatics and archaeology. In von Kaenel, H.M. & Kemmers, F. (Eds) *Coins in Context 1. New perspectives for the interpretation of coin finds*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern Verlag (157-71).

Pearce, S.M. 1995. *On Collecting. An investigation into collecting in the European tradition*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gordana Ciric

Roman Coins in the Possession of Medieval People.

Examples from medieval cemeteries in the territory of Serbia.

Coins are always labeled with a double notion of ownership. If we observe coinage from the top down perspective, then the state or some other issuing authority is their ultimate owner. On the other side, by looking from the bottom up perspective, the coinage appears as possession of many individuals. Usually, the correlation between the two is interdependent and mutually conditional. To own coins makes sense for both sides only if the authority is guaranteeing for the value that coin represents and if the people are accepting this fact and using the coins. However, what happens when coins from an old and no longer operating coinage system become possessions of people who use another type of coins? When the authority in whose name the coins were minted is long gone from the political landscape? How is then the ownership of such items conceptualized? I will explore this issue on the examples of reused Roman coins (2nd – 4th centuries) in the medieval graves (10th – 15th centuries) in the territory of present-day Serbia.

Throughout several excavations of medieval necropolises Roman coins have been found among the grave goods. Their deposition contexts vary from a simple placing of the coin in the burial pit or in the hand of the deceased to contexts where we have indications that the Roman coins have been personal belongings, such as the pierced Roman coins reused as pendants. By focusing on the later examples, I will try to examine how these coins were incorporated together with other usual medieval material culture into possession of people using these cemeteries. Most probably, Roman coins were found in the ruins of Roman towns, forts or necropolises, and their initial acquisition would have been significantly different from gaining objects of usual medieval material culture, which would be mainly by producing it and to lesser extent by purchasing goods. Thus, in these circumstances of various attaining methods of things, questions of property rights over old Roman coins seems to be more than an intriguing topic.

Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson

To Own and Be Owned. The warriors of Birka's garrison.

10th century Birka saw the emergence of a group of professional warriors. Stationed at this town-like settlement they were closely linked to its activities. Their garrison, situated in close proximity of the fort, and slightly above the town and harbour, comprised both working place and battle scene. The complex structures display many aspects of the warrior's work and worldview. From this particular setting I aim to present examples of three different levels of ownership or possession.

1. Objects personifying individuals

A deposition of objects has been found by one of the main posts in the warrior's hall. Among other things it contained a large number of destructed comb-cases. Each comb-case represents a warrior and could possibly even be regarded as a personification of the individual. By offering them to the gods – in particular Oden – they safeguard the hall and its inhabitants.

2. Keeping a locked case – indications of ownership or possession.

Along the walls of the hall, weaponry and personal belongings were kept within locked cases. These cases contained weaponry and personal belongings. The garrison have also been a production site for padlocks and keys, customised with the symbol of the Birka warriors.

3. Under the symbol of the diving falcon - to be in service

The warriors of Birka's garrison show a higher level of organisation and professionalism than their contemporaries. Their use of standardised weaponry, symbols and the fact that they were stationed by a town and not in the constant following of a king or chieftain implores questions on service and loyalties. Binding their strength to the site – their loyalties fastened in the group and the context of the Garrison. In worldly service they may also have sworn allegiance to the god of war. To own and be owned in many ways signified the lives of these warriors.

Torun Zachrisson

To Own Land and To Be Owned By It.

To own or to be owned during the Late Iron Age (550-1100 AD) is to a high extent a matter of gender. The Late Viking-Age runestones picture the world of landed property and its inheritance as a male world. Amongst them the Nora rock slab (U130) from Danderyd parish in Uppland, Middle Sweden is more explicit than others: *'Biorn, Finnvið's son, had this rock-slab cut in memory of Olæif, his brother. He was betrayed at Finnheiðr. May God help his spirit'*, as an almost ordinary Viking Age runic inscription, but continues: *'Er þessi byR þæiRa oðal ok ættærfi, Finnviðar suna a Ælgiastaðum'* 'This estate is the allodial land and family inheritance of Finnviðr's sons at Ælgiastaðir'.

The words *oðal ok ættærfi* 'allodial farm and family inheritance' are bewildering since they seem almost synonymous. I will discuss the function of this expression, which has to do with claims and the institution that supported this. And I will try to give an understanding of why the material of the runestones as well as their position in the landscape can be used to outline the overall framework that they are placed within, namely the rural landscape of the farms, the world of the landed property.

Per Nilsson

Rock Art, Agency and Ownership

Archaeological excavations at rock art sites have shown that people were not just passively watching the motifs on the rocks, but engaging with them in a number of different ways. Besides the act of adding yet another picture there are also examples where new details have been attached to already existing motifs, as well as examples where new motifs were imposed on top of older ones. Other examples are when stone rows were attached to the rocks and when fires were lit on top of the rock art panels.

If the rock art figures could provoke such actions, it is relevant to raise the question if the agency of the rock art figures could be discussed in terms of an ownership. If it is true that objects and symbols have agency and that they are able to provoke actions by humans, is it possible to understand this relation between objects/symbols and humans in terms of an ownership? Or put in another way: who owns the agency of the rock art figures? The figures themselves or their beholders?

Magnus Ljunge

Painted Caves of Power?

Some reflections on the ownership of confined spaces.

In the coastal regions of northern Norway one encounters numerous caves blasted in to the steep mountain walls, framing the dramatic fjord landscape. At present date, painted rock art has been found and documented in 11 of these caves. The rock art is associated with hunter-gather societies, and roughly dated to the same period of time as the south Scandinavian Bronze Age. The images show a remarkable similarity, they almost entirely consist of simple anthropomorphic figures and are placed in the transition areas between light and darkness.

A starting point is taken in the material conditions of caves with rock art, which could be seen as restricted and restrictive places both physically and mentally. Knowledge of these places would have been an important asset when social practices were created and maintained in pre-history. Possessing knowledge of the location and meaning of these caves, could be regarded as an ownership of important social information. But it is also possible to turn the argument around, claiming that the special materiality of the cave itself acted as an powerful agent in the relationship between man and environment. A topic for discussion, in line with some of the theoretical outlines of the workshop, is if the creation of rock art in Norwegian caves could be regarded as an expression of both social and material relations, characterized by different aspects of ownership? The ownership of knowledge on one hand, and on the other hand the affect caused by the cave and its specific material condition, perhaps best describes as a material ownership of both cognition and body. My paper aims to discuss this in relation to theoretical and methodological aspects influenced by the concept of aesthesis and perceptual experience.

Workshop Readings

A few works were selected for common reference. They will not be discussed *per se* during the workshop but may be used to create common ground for discussion. There is of course a vast literature that might be relevant, but the works below were selected as comprehensive, innovative and stimulating for the workshop purposes.

If you wish to contribute to this list one title of central importance to the theme and to your presentation, please e-mail the workshop organizers before November 15th, and we may distribute an updated list before our meeting. We could also organize a list during or after the workshop, to share relevant references between us.

Allerton, C. 2007. The Secret Life of Sarongs: Manggarai Textiles as Super-Skins. *Journal of Material Culture* 12 (22-46).

Gosden, C. 2005. What Do Objects Want? *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (193-211).

Hicks, D. 2010. The Material-Cultural Turn: Event and Effect. In: Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*. Oxford: OUP (25-98). To be found on the web – Google for this one!

Ingold, T. 2012. Toward an Ecology of Materials. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (427-42).

Stewart, S. 1993. *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Also, it might be of interest that the theme ‘Possession/s’ emerged from the organizers’ internal discussion regarding symmetrical archaeology and relational theories, and that we read and discussed (apart from other, obvious works like Appadurai, Haraway, Latour, Olsen etc) in particular: Witmore, C.L., 2007. Symmetrical Archaeology: Excerpts of a Manifesto. *World Archaeology*, vol. 39, No 4 (546-62).