

When the archaeological object is a historical subject (Lyon, 14-15 Nov 24)

Lyon, Nov 14-15, 2024

Deadline: Jul 15, 2024

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International conference: "When the archaeological object is a historical subject. Perception, function and reception of artefacts", Lyon, November 14th -15th, 2024.

The ArchéOrigines junior research laboratory, founded with the support of the Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée nearly two years ago, has devoted all its activities to the history of archaeology. In 2023, we organised a round-table seminar on the words of archaeology, followed by a workshop on the birth of archaeological museums. The diversity of the "Histories of Archaeologies" was presented in Dijon and, more recently, a seminar on the connections between archaeology and nationalism was held in Lyon. Lastly, the contribution of gender studies to the history of archaeology was put into perspective on 18 April 2024. The conference closing the programme of this junior laboratory will focus on the archaeological object and its importance in the history of this discipline.

Since the end of the twentieth century, the concept now known as material turn has given rise to new ways of considering the framework for the study of the object, no longer confining it to a simple research case, but bringing it fully into history as an agent. This notion has proved particularly fruitful in archaeology where the idea of material culture studies is the subject of lively discussions within the archaeological and anthropological communities (Hicks 2010, p. 25-98). Similarly, the role of material culture has redefined certain aspects of global history, particularly in the conceptualisation of space and in providing different scales of analysis (Riello 2022, p. 193-232).

An archaeological object is first and foremost a material vestige, i.e. evidence of human activity on, initially, natural materials (Djindjian 2011, p. 167-177). While its meaning is increasingly wide, the archaeological object must inevitably be identified by an archaeologist, who makes this particular object a material source that can be used to think past societies, while the place given to the object itself in history is often questioned (Gauvard & Sirinelli 2015, p. 660-662). The object is therefore the archaeologist's main source who lays down several theoretical rules for its study. An isolated artefact loses most of its scientific value outside the context in which it was discovered, that is why methodical excavations make it possible to unearth close-set objects that are essential to archaeologists. Similarly, the setting up of a corpus and the standardization of types are fundamental steps and, today, numerous physico-chemical processes allow to deepen the material knowledge of an object.

The "isolated object", the "beautiful object" or the "work of art" – the boundaries between these dif-

ferent categories are fluid – is very present in the history of archaeology. Collectors, art dealers, archaeologists, or art historians perceive the object differently, that is why the object as such is not an element of disciplinary definition. Many representations have been constructed on the basis of an object alone and/or isolated from its context (illegal excavations, discoveries made by detectorists, purchases on the art market, etc.). Despite the loss of scientific interest, isolated objects still arouse our contemporaries' interest, since a single artefact, sometimes even a "unicum", can be an "emblematic object", and thus become a key element in the image we have of an ancient society.

The history of archaeological objects is constantly transformed by the new meanings we attribute to them. Krzysztof Pomian describes the artefact as a "semiophore" (Pomian 1987, p. 42) and, when exhibited in a museum space, it can be called an "expôt" (Desvallées & Mairesse 2011, p. 599). The links between museology and archaeological objects call for further discussion (Kaesler 2015, p. 37-44), as the object changes function and status several times in the course of its life. The archaeological object no longer has its original function, the one for which it was designed, and, for archaeologists, it comes into being, so to speak, at the very moment it is unearthed. Collected, bought from an art dealer or the result of supervised or uncontrolled excavations, the archaeological object is part of a process of discovery, study, exchange, acquisition and exhibition, although these different phases are not necessarily linked together.

Major expeditions in the 19th and 20th centuries led to the discovery of archaeological objects that have greatly benefited European museums (Amkreutz 2020; Leblan & Juhé-Beaulaton 2018). These objects are perceived in very different ways: as curiosities, travel souvenirs, scientific objects or objects intended for a museum. The contexts in which they were collected are often little-known and poorly supported by rare or inaccessible documentation, so excavation notebooks, among other sources, are a boon for researchers when they are preserved. In this respect, archives, both institutional and private, represent invaluable knowledge for tracing the constitution of scientific collections in all their dimensions (Daugeron & Le Goff 2014).

The transportation of artefacts is an essential part of their history, especially as the historical and institutional framework for excavations is sometimes highly complex. Agreements between states, effective support for explorers (government authorisations, letters of recommendation, decrees, etc.) and local authorisations for excavations are integral part of this context (Gran-Aymerich 2007). Many excavations took place in annexed or occupied territories, sometimes in a colonial context. These specific situations are now deeply rooted in the current issues of restitution, which intersect the history of archaeology and heritage (Lehoërff 2023).

In *À qui appartient la beauté ?* (Savoy 2024), Bénédicte Savoy looks at all forms of appropriation of works of art and heritage in the context of unbalanced relations between two spaces. She calls these practices "translocation patrimoniale" to distinguish them from the looting and spoliation that occur in other contexts. In short, the artefact is an object of desire for the archaeologist, whether he excavates or not, and it is missing from dispossessed regions. The territorial ownership of works of art, the importance of objects from a scientific point of view and, finally, the question of the ownership of beauty refer to multiple social, political and military issues, some of which still very lively today. This symbolic, tangible and intangible journey has a lasting emotional impact (Fabre 2013).

Thus, a history through archaeological artefacts is necessary. These objects, studied for themselves and in their context, tell us something about the societies of the past and about our own perception. In many cases, the object is subsequently associated with other archaeological artefacts where, organised in a certain way, they can serve a wide variety of purposes. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the creation of museums and the organisation of world exhibitions played a key role in the development of archaeology. The 1867 Paris World's Fair celebrated agriculture and industry (Vasseur 2023), and the Galerie d'Histoire du Travail incorporated the notion of industry - already used by Jacques Boucher de Perthes - and presented "primitive", i.e. prehistoric, objects, while Gabriel de Mortillet was responsible for organising the prehistoric collections. Associated with the second session of the International Congress of Prehistoric Anthropology and Archaeology, this major event combined theoretical reflection with an exhibition of archaeological objects and contributed to the recognition of archaeology as a scientific discipline.

So how do objects play a part in our archaeological representations? From the 19th century onwards, certain chronological systems were constructed on the basis of discoveries; this was one of the epistemological possibilities for chronologies, which at that time were driven by the notion of industry. The three-age system is based on the very material of objects and the acceptance of such a system in the mid-nineteenth century was not a given (Rowley-Conwy 2007). The consequences of major discoveries or the study of objects considered remarkable in the construction of prehistoric and protohistoric archaeology, which are struggling to find institutional legitimacy, remain largely to be questioned.

Papers may cover any period or geographical area. Proposals dealing with lesser-known archaeological objects or lesser-studied periods are welcome, as one of our ambitions is to achieve an archaeology "à parts égales" (Bertrand 2011).

Topics of discussion may include, but are not limited to:

- Case studies of archaeological objects, from excavation to museum
- Artefacts and scholarly networks
- The role of the art market in the circulation of objects
- Cultural transfers and collecting practices
- Exhibition design for archaeological objects
- The status of the object and its reception within society
- (Re)presentation of the past through artefacts
- The object at the heart of conflicts: spoliations, restitutions, confrontations
- Digital cartographies and museum databases

Submission:

Abstracts in French or English (maximum 2500 characters) with a title and a short biography will be sent to the following address: archeorigines@gmail.com by July 15th, 2024. A notification of acceptance or rejection will be sent to the authors by July 30th, 2024.

Please note that presentations will last 20 minutes and will be followed by a discussion.

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Savoy Bénédicte, *À qui appartient la beauté ?*, Paris, La Découverte, 2024.

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CFP: When the archaeological object is a historical subject (Lyon, 14-15 Nov 24). In: Arthist.net, May 5, 2024 (accessed Dec 22, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/41821>>.