FEATURED INITIATIVE

Danish PhD School in Archaeology: Making Connections with the British Museum and the UCL Institute of Archaeology

Fay Stevens
PhD candidate, UCL Institute of Archaeology
Else Roesdahl
Professor, Institute of Anthropology, Archaeology and Linguistics, Aarhus University, Denmark
Leslie Webster
Keeper, Department of Prehistory and Europe, British Museum
Helle Vandkilde
Professor, Institute of Anthropology, Archaeology and Linguistics, Aarhus University, Denmark
Bo Jensen
PhD candidate, Institute of Prehistoric Archaeology, Saxo-institute, Copenhagen University

Foreword
Else Roesdahl and Fay Stevens

The Danish PhD School in Archaeology was set up in September 2002 with a three-year grant, as one of several new 'Research Schools' that are dependent on government funding. The purpose of the School was to strengthen PhD studies and education in archaeology by developing systematic courses, wider scopes of study, networking, internationalisation and by joining forces among the five Danish archaeological university departments (Classical, Medieval and Prehistoric archaeology at Aarhus University, and Near Oriental and Prehistoric and Classical archaeology at Copenhagen University) and the Danish National Museum. The School is run by a chairman and board with one member from each participating department and the National Museum. It was supported by an international expert panel; the English members were Roger Matthews UCL Institute of Archaeology (UCL IoA) and Leslie Webster, British Museum. Leading on from the success of the Danish PhD School, a Nordic Archaeological PhD School, "Dialogues with the Past", was established in 2004 with a five-year grant. It comprises all archaeological university departments in the five Nordic countries and Estonia and whose aims are mainly the same as those of the Danish School.

The main focus for both the Danish and Nordic schools is PhD research and the organisation of a wide range of courses that to date include "Archaeology and Modern Society", in Denmark 2003; "Archaeology: The Theory and History of the Discipline", in Petra, Jordan 2003; "Man and Environment", in Denmark 2004; "Material culture – methods, meanings and use", in London 2005. The London course was the first which was co-organised with foreign institutions and which included non-Nordic PhD

students. It was also the first course to integrate problems of actual museum work. As 'material culture' was the main focus, this was considered crucial to the overall design of the course. This article discusses the London course and the links forged between the participating organisations.

"Material culture – methods, meanings and use" took the form of a four-day course, during 23rd-26th May 2005, co-organised by UCL IoA, University of Aarhus and the British Museum, and brought together PhD candidates and academic staff from the two London-based institutions and universities from Scandinavia to consider and discuss aspects of the material constitution of culture, society and social transformation. The course aims were to:

1. To increase awareness − among scholars − of the variability of material culture approaches to archaeology, and of material culture as the main source of empirical data about the past and as central to any interpretative enterprise.
2. Explore these major archaeological institutes in terms of their research projects, profiles and staff.
3. Engage with the British Museum and its collections in order to consider a range of issues such as museum politics, exhibition politics, ethics and the public, museums and material culture and issues of curation.
4. Create networks between PhD candidates from Denmark and University College London through the format of paired student research presentations.

Stephen Shennan (Director of UCL IoA) opened the event and presented a brief history of his institution, which included an acknowledgement to its former Directors, before introducing its current research projects, including The Centre for the Evolutionary Analysis of Cultural Behaviour. Eleven Danish and other Nordic students, and ten 'English' students, from a number of countries, took part in the Material culture – methods, meanings and use conference. The programme included tours of The British Museum, The Petrie Museum, Franks House, Temple Church and the UCL IoA Laboratories and Collections. Presentation of papers from PhD candidates took place either at the British Museum, Franks House or UCL IoA and were paired according to shared research interests (defined either by chronology, material, theoretical stance or geographical scope). Presentations by curators and researchers at the British Museum focused on the importance of its history, contextualising how material culture is to some extent accessed and perceived by the public. These contrasting presentations facilitated lively debate and a deeper exploration of how material cultures are defined.

The understanding and display of 'material culture' – ancient and new – is of rapidly growing importance in modern society, and archaeology and museums play an influential role in the development of material culture studies. The format of the event provided a great opportunity for participants to get behind the scenes of one of the world's most renowned museums, and to explore the research departments of UCL IoA. It was a truly international and inter-institutional course. It was also interesting to observe how general discussions happily spanned the geographically and chronologically diverse students' papers.

Overall, the course provided an excellent range of venues in which to explore the diversity of the material collections housed in museums, presentations from a broad range of key speakers who offered contrasting, complex and intriguing accounts of the histories of collections (including their design and placement within museum buildings) and an opportunity to explore current PhD candidate research projects. The following contributions consider a range of perspectives of how material culture is perceived, contextualised and articulated; that of the research student, keeper of a museum department and university professor in order to explore the range of subjects, contexts and problems inherent in material culture studies. As such, the following discussions consider how material culture is engaged with, the context within which it is studied, material culture as practice and as an avenue of enquiry.

The Role of the British Museum in the Study of Material Culture
Leslie Webster

From the outset, it was intended that the British Museum should give an opportunity to examine some of the ways in which material culture has been interpreted for public audiences in both the past and the present. I was the co-ordinator for this part of the programme, which was spread over two days.

Obviously, in a museum with huge collections, which span the world, it was necessary to select particular themes, which might lend themselves to general discussion. Rather than discuss the ways in which material culture can be examined in a research context, we decided that, in concentrating on the public-facing role of the Museum, it would be appropriate to focus mainly on two topics which are very relevant to the Museum at present. These were its function as a museum of the world and for the world, and, through selected case studies, an examination of the ways in which material culture has been presented. British Museum staff gave presentations on a range of topics, starting with the British Museum's role as a universal museum and as an international forum for debate on current issues, informed by a longer view of the past (given by Neil McGregor, the Museum Director), and its relevance to the world we live in now.

Jonathan Williams, who coordinates the Museum's international policy, spoke about cultural diplomacy, with particular regard to restitution issues, which have gained particular notoriety because of the Parthenon sculptures, and the Ethiopian Tab'ats – two very different cases, with very different religious and political backgrounds, both involving complex ethical issues. The Museum also makes significant investment in promoting closer relationships with museums and other cultural institutions across the world, generating collaborative projects and exchanging knowledge and expertise, through exhibitions, training initiatives and exchange programmes. Current initiatives focus on Africa, China and the Middle East. A number of collections case studies followed. John Curtis, for example, gave a behind the scenes tour of the Department of the Ancient Near East, and spoke about the international importance of the Department's collaboration with Iraqi museum colleagues in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, and also with Iranian colleagues, in preparation for the "Forgotten Empire" exhi-

bition, which ran in 2005, not long after the conference. Other papers and tours covered topics such as how material culture is presented and engaged with and how trends of museum display and interpretations of material culture change throughout the course of time (Ian Jenkins), the very topical issue of displaying a 'British' national narrative (Leslie Webster), the origins of the British Museum in the 18th century Enlightenment (Jill Cook) and the museum's current scientific work (Andrew Middleton).

This rather eclectic programme led to some lively discussion about the meaning and presentation of material culture, with some unexpected moments, for example, when the Museum was charged with being too defensive about how it presents its collections in a Post-Imperial world. The full timetable however meant that by the end of the day discussion tended to flag a little. I also felt that more could have been done to integrate the University and Museum programme so that the complementary nature of research and making research publicly accessible were seen as a shared theme. As it was, the range and scale of the Museum's collections, and the work of researching them and making them intelligible and accessible, in the particular political and social climate of the day, seemed at moments to be rather remote from the highly focussed academic work of the students. With hindsight, it might have been more productive to relate the Museum visits more closely to the student presentations, in a more interactive way. Nevertheless, there were very positive outcomes in terms of interesting possibilities for exchanges and for future collaboration, and we would welcome further events of this kind.

A Consideration of the Study of Material Culture
Helle Vandkilde

The papers of the joint British-Scandinavian course for research students in archaeology were about very different topics, but were nevertheless united by a material culture perspective, or at least exhibited some sort of union with material culture as an inescapable factor in archaeological studies. A number of papers started out to explore the field of material culture in terms of function and meaning, each in a constructive and reflective way. I would suggest that further work along these lines could well benefit from social anthropological debates on these matters. Although surprisingly similar the papers presented somewhat different emphases, depending on various factors such as: the research tradition, the archaeological sources put to use, the questions that were asked, the geographical perspective (whether local, regional or super-regional) and notably also the perspective of time in the sense that some papers operated on a more general scale of cultural and social change whilst others were concerned with specific situations or places.

Most papers used material culture, and material culture patterning, as empirical data reflecting or relating to a past reality. This is not to say that speakers were unaware of the mistakes that may result from reading material patterns directly − as if a mirror of past society. There are of course pitfalls, but everybody was conscious of the fact that material culture remains our main entrance to the past: the medium through which we must access past practices and societies, sometimes against heavy odds. Some speakers were

concerned with material classification and of the avoidance of confusion in regards to the material and social categories of our own modern world with those of past agents. Methodical aspects are certainly important, in particular the issue of contextualisation. Interestingly, few speakers used material culture strictly as a text to be read from its grammar in the structuralist manner. Only a few years ago this would have been a dominant approach. There were reminiscences in Bo Jensen's paper – "Amulets and amulet use on Viking Age Scandinavia" – in which post-structuralist thought popped up: a concern, really, with the immediate context.

The majority of the research students envision material culture in terms of function. Material objects obviously take on social and practical roles in a fairly unlimited range of activities that human agents have engaged in throughout the ages such as to day-to-day life, rituals, war or hunting. Objects certainly inspire social identification through such fields of practice, and therefore the functions material objects may have in mediating social identity remain a major issue for archaeologists to study, and I include here the related theme of longer-term reproduction and change of culture, power and society. Dependent as they are on specific contexts, functions and meanings are always in transit, however, when systems of domination change or when objects move between territories their functions and meanings may also change. I found Michael Seymour's (UCL IoA) paper, "Approaches to the Mesopotamian Past: A Study of Babylon in Modern Representation, Reception and Cultural Consumption", interesting in this respect since certain kinds of material culture can resist changes in meaning, either due to their materiality or due to a powerful interpretation already invested.

All speakers were aware of the changeability of function and meaning, but very few if any used this insight to reflect on the cultural biographies of objects, as introduced more systematically by Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) in the late 1980s. Personally I think there are huge opportunities in this field of research: in investigating transformations and transmissions over time and space in material form, function and meaning. Material culture quite easily moves as an idea or a thing through geographic space while connotations, attributes, and qualities may or may not be transmitted. It is also undeniably a potent communicator of social and cultural identity: a silent discourse, which is certainly not of less importance in the life of human beings than other forms of dialogue. This way of looking at the material world was popular in the presentations. The ambiguity of messages sent, as well as the inherent possibilities of a differential reception, or reading, was an important theme: the realisation that the inherent ambiguity can be strategically exploited by both senders and receivers. Elitism, profession and ethnicity (but not gender!) were among the identities discussed, in particular the roles material culture can have in communicating these. I believe the discussions speakers undertook in this field were sound and have much research potential. I think it is particularly worth investigating, on a comparative basis and in more detail, how agents, both consciously and unconsciously, have built their identities through material culture at different times and places.

Material culture can carry myth, memory of the past, various forms of knowledge (almost culture) and can thus be categorised as an *aide mémoire*. It can therefore be an

explicit reminder of hidden knowledge about, for instance, technology or rituals. This ability, however, transforms material culture into a potential power source, which was very clear from several papers. It is rarely enough with merely one kind of capital, and in the end the availability, possession and use of capital is a very class-related issue. The intentionality of material culture production and use was mentioned by Kimberlee Moran (UCL IoA) who reminded us that the production of material things is always intentional in terms of form and function, in opposition to the unintentionality of the almost invisible fingerprints she studied.

All practice is material. Monuments, architecture and landscape are materialised structures that enable as well as constrain action and interaction. They are slowly changeable and may persist through centuries and continue to structure people's thoughts and actions, thus being past, present and future at the same time. Henriette Rensbo (National Museum of Denmark and Aarhus University, Institute of Anthopology, Archaeology, and Linguistics) contributed to this theme, reminding us, as did Birger Ekornåsvåg Helgestad (UCL IoA), that material culture as material action is intentional, but often has unintentional consequences.

Paulo Guarino (UCL IoA) noted that material culture plays an active role in society by acting back: reproducing and changing social structure. Can we then reduce material culture to simply material culture, as itself so to speak? The question evokes current debates whether material culture possesses some kind of inherent property and power due to its visibility and materiality, or whether its impact is always due to the meanings and functions we invest in it. The expression that objects create persons, or perhaps rather their social identities, is persuasive: there is some kind of interdependency in the relationship between people and the material world that is difficult to leave unattended. It implies, as some speakers rightly pointed out, that materiality has to be incorporated as a third party in the dialectics between structure and action. So things, monuments, and pictures have enormous influence on how we feel, think and act today, as in prehistory of the more recent past. Similarly, Fay Stevens (UCL IoA) emphasised the constant dialogue between material culture, landscape and body in a continued process of internalisation. This is reminiscent of Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective: landscapes and other social spaces contain traces of former actions and therefore, in a sense, imply that past persons still dwell there.

Kathryn Piquette (UCL IoA) reflected on written texts in terms of material culture and put forward a tripartite model of material form, written signs and context. She described meanings and functions as dependent on these three fields, among which context is, presumably, the most decisive factor. However, archaeologists tend to use the term 'context' very frequently and in an unreflective manner, and this tendency was also present at the seminar. There can be no doubt that we need to discuss more, perhaps define, what is meant by this key term within our discipline. Text and material culture as two separate but interrelated sources to the past, and their 'reliability' in a comparative perspective could be further explored. How far can the term 'material culture' be extended? Is it synonymous, wholly or in part, with the term 'visual culture' which is being used increasingly in and outside archaeological settings?

Ahead of the seminar I had expected the presentations to be heavily influenced by different archaeological traditions tied to national modes of practicing archaeology. Instead I found that we were all more or less speaking the same archaeological language and that hybrid culture has therefore become a characteristic component in what increasingly looks like a European way of doing archaeology. Simultaneously, however, curiosity was a main structuring element of all seminar presentations, lending them individuality and distinctiveness. This is a positive sign, since in my view archaeologists must dare to be dissimilar in order to inspire and provoke their readers. This is a basic requirement in preparing and developing the discipline for the future.

Interpreting Material Culture
Fay Stevens

Throughout the course it became clear that an understanding of the contextualisation of institutions is to know how that institution perceives and presents material culture. As such, the political, social, historical, locational, individual, local, global etc. aspects are embedded, whether implicitly or explicitly, into that institution's ethos. We can see from the contributions above that the current interest and focus on the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason and analysis as the basis for all human knowledge, resonates within current archaeological practice (cf. Thomas 2004: 27-35) in a range of archaeological establishments. These resonances range from conducting research in a number of academic universities (to be commented on by Jensen), funding for new research schools (as outlined by Roesdahl) and the setting up of new museum galleries (explored by Webster).

These contextual considerations also have an effect on the kinds of meaning we extract from material culture. For example, looking at the themes of memory and conflict through his analysis of 'Trench Art' emanating from the Great War of 1914-1918, Saunders (2000) connects the archaeological excavation of artefacts with wider notions of recycling and rejuvenation. Thus the purchase of Trench Art souvenirs are associated with reconfigured identities and spiritualities. Through his exploration of the transmission of memory, as indicated by the place in which artefacts originate and are purchased, Saunders is able to explore concepts of empathy and the reworking of meaning of material culture over time. The need to consider these flexible attributes of material culture was commented on by Vandkilde in her thematic review of the course. Vandkilde stressed for the need for papers presented in the course to re-consider how we access material culture, in which she promoted the need for a more reflexive methodology (i.e. material culture as data reflecting past realities) and interpretation (i.e. issues including practice, agency and context).

Vandkilde also raised a number of thought-provoking questions:

1. Is truthfulness a term that can or cannot be used in archaeology: i.e. is material culture more truthful than text?
2. What is meant by context? Is it helpful or has it grown into a phrase that legitimises our interpretation?

3. How should we extend the term material culture?

At the outset, it was the general agreement of the course participants that material culture signifies relationships between people and things. Whether these relationships are passive, active and/or malleable widens the debate further. There are a number of routes that could perhaps extend this debate:

1. Review our approaches to the role of artefacts as metaphors (as outlined by Tilley 1999).
2. Re-scrutinise the term material culture as an objective view of the world (seen as a logical distinction between inanimate objects that are part of the material world and animate subjects seen as part of the cultural world) in which the term material culture fuses these distinct elements of the world together (Jones 2002: 65).
3. Extend our understanding of how things that are regarded as mute and static are only set in motion and animated by persons and their worlds (cf. Appadurai 1986).
4. Explore the concept of gesture in archaeology, as based on the reconstruction of past human behaviour, the evidence for which comes from the material culture record. E.g. can we access gesture through the production of material culture (explored in a recent round-table discussion at the European Association of Archaeologists Conference, 2005 - see www.semioticon.com/virtuals/archaeology/arch.htm)?
5. Re-emphasise that things have biographies, or life phases, as people (Kopytoff 1986).
6. Examine the ways that individuals use material culture to project aspects of their identities (Stevens 2006).

It is appropriate to conclude with a comment on the visit to the Temple Church guided by Dr Philip Dixon. Dixon discussed in detail standing buildings as material culture; the destruction, restoration and reconstruction of monuments and the role of material culture in the materialisation of cult practice. It is however the current, almost cult-like, re-interest in the Temple that emanates from a work of fiction, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (2003), that perhaps allows us to develop our reflexive approaches to material culture. In the case of the Temple Church, it will be interesting to observe how long a work of fiction which can often, at times, be presented as historical fact, if indeed it is not already.

Studying Material Culture: a PhD Research Student's Perspective
Bo Jensen

As a Dane, a prehistorian and a researcher concerned with the politics of research and exhibition, the context in which I physically and theoretically study is crucial to how I perceive and engage with material culture.

We were all impressed by the work undertaken in London: in particular, the seamless

integration of library research, laboratory work and research in museum collections is impressive. In Scandinavia, laboratory work is generally carried out extramurally. Few of our home institutions have integrated hard science in their studies to the degree evident in London, nor ready access to so many different facilities. Furthermore, Scandinavian institutes tend to be small and highly specialised. Few have anything like the geographical breadth found at UCL IoA or The British Museum. In Scandinavia, internal discussions tend to focus on well-known localities, excavations and theories. For example, many of the finds I work with were reported by people I have met, even worked for personally.

On the whole, the London research appears to be far more international and experimental, often more concerned with method and less with a thorough command of the material. The fact that the coordinators were able to pair off every Scandinavian student with an interesting and relevant "opponent" for discussion speaks volumes of how much variety exists within the Institute. One of the most important results of the course was that it exposed us to research milieus and literature we would not otherwise encounter. I was certainly as surprised as anyone by the methodological parallels between studies of Viking Age Scandinavia and Predynastic Egypt. Ideally, material culture research should be both firmly grounded in an established, specialised research milieu and willing to engage with more general issues. The course certainly reminded me of this latter need.

Similarly, the tours of the British Museum revealed faces of an institution rarely seen from abroad. The exhibitions and the political controversies centred on textbook cases (e.g. the Parthenon Frieze), but the global scale of the collections and the excellent laboratory facilities are much less well known. The wealth of material here is staggering and open to many different readings. For instance, the exhibition in The Enlightenment Galleries, and our tour of it, focused on the history of the Museum, and on the struggle between rationalism and romanticism in that history. However, I later had an opportunity to hear a Maori spokeswoman, invited by the Museum, present her very different perspective on a few of the objects kept there. My own instinctual reading of the exhibition centered as much on the emergence of the proletarian intellectuals as on the discovery of knowledge. The problems of collecting and designing exhibits in the 21st century must be highly relevant to all, and the British Museum's policies on these matters are certainly thought-provoking. Likewise, the basic concerns and perspectives made relevant by the various techniques of non-destructive analysis of material culture are certainly relevant for all, as are the basic principles of public access and research strategies described at the various collections. The discussions of the politics of curation here should lead us to re-evaluate the situated nature of our local knowledge, again exposing the specialized research communities to a larger world. More time could easily have been spent discussing these issues.

Despite its title, the course did not focus much on materiality and rarely invoked the concerns raised by laboratory work and curation. This is also relevant for the scientific aspect of the course: it included several whirlwind tours of laboratories and collections, from glass conservation to destructive techniques like gas chromatography, from Pal-

aeolithic France to the problems relating to war-torn Rwanda and Iraq. These gave a reasonable impression of what can be found where, though it may be some time before this information has percolated down through the various home institutes to the specific people who will use it. In time, however, hard science may add significantly to our knowledge. One outcome of this course, then, may be a greater awareness of materiality and of the potential contributions of hard science to understanding this.

For my own work, there have been three main consequences of the course: first, the focus on materiality has reminded me that artefacts are not comparable to writing, and that the sensual experience of weight, brightness and intricate surfaces may be as important as the symbolism of the form. Second, the same focus reminded me that the development of artefacts may owe as much to other artefacts as to ideas. I now suspect that certain Scandinavian amulets owe more to recontextualised, imported jewellery than to any native mythological belief. Third, I was reminded that artefacts are not mere commodities. They were created by specific people, used and re-used by other people, and may throw some light on the relationship between these different groups. I am still working on how to incorporate this aspect in my work, though an initial focus on the distribution of different techniques of craftsmanship seems helpful. These three points aside, the most important aspect of the school may have been the chance to meet people working within very different traditions. This certainly raised new questions, as well as suggesting new directions for research. Not incidentally, it also helped me clarify my own theoretical position. I remain a post-structuralist but hopefully my post-structuralism is now strengthened by critical awareness. This owes much to dialogue with people with quite different theoretical approaches. The course was a great success; however, there was almost too much information at once. A tighter focus on materiality might have been equally interesting.

Afterword
Else Roesdahl

In July 2005 the Danish PhD School received a new four-year grant to continue the School, with a focus on internationalisation. We hope the fruitful collaboration with The British Museum and the Institute of Archaeology will proceed in various ways, and that we shall see some London PhD students in Denmark. So far two of them joined the Nordic PhD school's course in Rome in October 2005, and another joined the Danish school's course in Warszawa in May 2006 (which also includes Polish PhD students), and there is now a formal collaboration agreement between the Danish PhD school and the Institute of Archaeology.

Perhaps what is particularly encouraging is that students participating in the London course have continued discussions and networking across the North Sea. We look forward to hearing about their future plans.

References

Appadurai, A. (ed.) 1986. *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Ingold, T. 2000. The *Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill.* London: Routledge Press.

Jones, A. 2002. *Archaeological Theory and Scientific Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kopytoff, I. 1986. The cultural biography of things: commoditisation as process. In A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 64-91.

Saunders, N.J. 2000. Bodies of metal, shells of memory: 'Trench Art' and the Great-War recycled. *Journal of Material Culture* 5(1), 43-67.

Stevens, F. forthcoming December 2006. Identifying the body: representing self. Art and ornamentation in Iron Age Europe. In J. Sofaer (ed.) *Material Identities*. London: Blackwell.

Thomas, J. 2004. *Archaeology and Modernity*. London: Routledge.

Tilley, C. 1999. *Metaphor and Material Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.