



PANEL DISCUSSIONS (INVITED)

## Material Worlds: Objects and architecture in Egyptology

Moderator: Aaron M. de Souza; Panellists: Bettina Bader, Anna Garnett, Martin Sählhof, Anna Stevens

AARON M. DE SOUZA<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Austrian Archaeological Institute, Austrian Academy of Sciences

Submitted: August 2, 2021

Published: March 31, 2022

### Abstract

This panel discussed the value (and privilege) of direct engagement with material culture and the necessity of communicating that experience accurately in publication. The importance of integrative, holistic, and experiential analysis was discussed, as was the problem of typologies that impose false divisions on the archaeological record. Panellists also discussed the problem of social relevance and the power that material culture has to engage wide audiences and create personal connections with the past. The challenge of academic 'pigeon-holing' is also addressed, in particular as it relates to assumptions that certain types of knowledge are more valuable than others.

**Keywords:** material culture, architecture, typology, museology, public engagement

### العوامل المادية: القطع الأثرية والعمارة في علم المصريات

#### الملخص

قامت هذه الجلسة بمناقشة قيمة (و ميزة) الاحتكاك بصورة مباشرة مع الثقافة المادية و ضرورة توصيل تلك التجربة بصورة دقيقة من خلال النشر العلمي. كما تمت مناقشة أهمية التحليل التكاملي، والشامل، و التجريبي، بالإضافة إلى الخوض في مشكلة التصنيفات التي أدت إلى وضع تقسيمات خاطئة للمكتشفات الأثرية. وقد قام المحاضرون أيضًا بتناول مشكلة الصلة الاجتماعية ومناقشة القدرة التي تمتلكها الثقافة المادية في إحراط جمهور واسع و مقدرتها علي خلق صلات شخصية مع الماضي. وكذلك تم تناول التحدي الخاص بـ "pigeon-holing" الأكاديمي، خاصة أنه علي صلة بالافتراضات التي تشير إلى أن أنواعًا معينة من المعرفة أكثر قيمة من غيرها.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الثقافة المادية، عمارة، علم ودراسة الرموز، علم المتاحف، المشاركة العامة

\*Corresponding Author: aaron.desouza@int-eg.org

## 1 Introduction

*Material Worlds* was the second session in *IntEg*'s inaugural panel discussion series and brought together a group of specialists working on different aspects of material culture. Bettina Bader takes a 'bottom-up' approach to objects to explore challenging questions such as the links between material culture and identity. Anna Garnett is an archaeologist and curator committed to ensuring objects are accessible for research and education. Martin Sähhof is a building archaeologist (German: *Bauforscher*) who carefully examines monumental structures, their biographies, and their place in the landscape. Anna Stevens is an archaeologist whose work on material culture and urban space explores the lives of non-elite communities in ancient Egypt. As the moderator, I brought my own specialisation in Nubian material culture. Collectively, the group spans the spectrum of material culture studies in Egyptology, from settlements to cemeteries, elite to everyday, monumental to modest, field to museum, and Egyptian or 'other'. What we all share is a desire to understand the ancient world and the people who lived in it through things that they made and used.

So why do we study objects? And what can objects tell us? In the first *IntEg* panel discussion, *Words Matter*, the panel explored the concept of 'the tyranny of text' and how the written historical record implicitly—and often explicitly—takes precedence within the field of Egyptology. We can see how objects and physical materials are often viewed as secondary if there is text involved. For example, were it not for the text, an ostrakon would just be a non-descript pottery sherd that would likely be thrown on a spoil heap. Likewise, a so-called 'magic brick' without its inscription is just a normal mudbrick. More attention is given to the text written on a papyrus than the material itself or the ink and tools used to write that text. Tourists are ushered around temples to marvel at the images and inscriptions on the walls, but not all would stop to consider the physicality of the wall itself.

Ultimately, texts must be written on something, and they must be written with something. It is the materials—stone, clay, wood, brushes, pigments, etc.—that give those words form and make it possible for us to read them. The ostrakon is always a pot sherd, the magic brick is always a mudbrick, the Turin Canon is always papyrus and ink, and the decorated temple wall is still a wall made of stone. All of those objects and those materials have their own stories, even without the words inscribed upon them. They are the physical, tangible remnants of the ancient world that we can hold, touch, and sense, and they have an almost magical power to directly and physically connect us to the long distant past. That being said, all of the panellists agreed and acknowledged that material culture (and indeed all types of evidence) needs to be approached from multiple angles in which all approaches should be given equal weight. The objects and texts inscribed on them are equally important and necessary for establishing factors such as chronology, function, and many other things. In her introduction, Bader neatly summed up the necessity of examining objects in association with their archaeological context, historical and artistic evidence, and through scientific analysis.

## 2 Material culture must be experienced

This physical nature of material culture was a theme central to this panel discussion, and all of the panellists agreed that the first-hand analysis of objects is essential and indispensable if objects and buildings are to be properly understood. While some may attempt to write studies of material culture based solely on published data, such studies cannot possibly replicate direct engagement with objects. The things and structures that we study were created by people for people, and so to fully understand them, we need to physically engage with them. Bader discussed the value of hands-on study and thorough documentation of material culture, and in particular the importance of recording traces of the technological processes that remain on the objects. Garnett used the ancient fingerprints left by the objects' makers as a conduit for reflecting on the human aspects attached to objects

and how this in turn can be used to build connections between the ancient past and modern audiences, and hence to promote their relevance for contemporary society. Stevens considered how the rigidly formal typologies that we use to sort and categorise material culture can often get in the way of accessing the communities who made and used the objects. On a larger scale, Sählhof discussed buildings and architecture as material culture. As such, he focused on many of the same ideas presented by the other panellists, namely the need for careful study and documentation of buildings from a technological perspective, as well as the value of experiencing a building or a space. He also stressed the importance of the environment as a factor in understanding buildings in relation to humans, for example the play of light, air circulation, and access routes. Similarly, Stevens also commented that very often these environmental factors are best understood through prolonged exposure over many seasons of living and working in a particular environment.

The panellists also acknowledged that having direct, first-hand access to objects, buildings, and archaeological sites is a privilege that is not available to all researchers, nor to the wider public. It is therefore essential that those of us fortunate enough to have those experiences ensure that we work in a way that communicates that experience as clearly as possible to the person receiving the information. In a research context, this relates to the way that objects are documented and published. Both Bader and Sählhof noted during the discussion that the person conducting the first-hand analyses of objects and buildings should look beyond formal aspects such as shape, decoration, and layout, and should also record aspects of the technological processes involved in making and using material culture. For example, marks left by a tool or hand on ceramic or metal objects can provide information into how a vessel or tool was made, and traces of wear or abrasion on the surface of an object can tell us how an object was used in daily life. For architecture, things like the dimensions of mudbricks should be recorded alongside more technical aspects such as the composition of the mud used to make the bricks. Research on stone architecture should consider traces of the processes used by the ancient stonemasons to cut, dress, and place the stones. Such micro-analysis of material culture looks beyond simple typological divisions and takes the research into the realms of cultural practice and habitus, in the process making the objects more ‘human’ and hence more familiar, relatable, and relevant for the end consumer.

### 3 The tyranny of typologies

In relation to the question of typology, Stevens initiated the discussion about what I would like to call the ‘tyranny of typology’ in response to the ‘tyranny of text’ introduced during the *Words Matter* panel discussion. The study of material culture is dominated by typologies that are intended to aid researchers in sorting, categorising, and describing objects, as well as in cross-regional comparisons and establishing relative chronologies. These typologies are generally based on formal aspects such as shape (for objects) or layout (for buildings), which the analysis can use to identify similarities and differences between objects and assemblages. However, the problem with typologies is that they privilege the superficial, formal aspects of material culture. One need only think of the plates of object illustrations in archaeological reports from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which pottery vessels were reduced to outlines of plane shapes that have since been used to construct the relative chronologies that remain largely in use to the present day, and which we now understand should be approached with a more critical eye. This typological approach to material culture reduces objects and buildings to univocality, but objects are not univocal, and they can be used for more than chronological sequences. Most researchers are now shifting toward an approach that combines traditional typological studies with more practice-based approaches as outlined above, as well as asking more complex questions relating to identity, culture, ethnographic studies, and the complex interconnections between objects and their historical contexts. Additionally, equal focus should be given to broken and incomplete objects, which are just as informative and scientifically useful as intact ‘museum-quality’ objects. In order to properly understand objects, we must also understand the world in which those objects were created,

used, and discarded, which by necessity requires a collaborative interdisciplinary approach.

#### **4 Material culture is multivocal**

Communicating the multivocality of material culture is also essential in museum contexts, where it will inevitably reach a wider audience than traditional academic publications. As a museum professional, Garnett emphasised the importance of using objects to create narratives that are accessible, relevant, and that enable museum visitors to form more direct and personal connections with the ancient past. The panel discussed how this might be best achieved, but ultimately the multivocality of objects meant that there is no single solution. I noted my own personal frustration with how assemblages are often broken up, with individual objects being displayed with others of the same type, e.g. a coffin might be on display with other coffins, while the accompanying objects are displayed in different rooms. Keeping assemblages together might give visitors a better sense of what an ancient Egyptian burial comprised, and how ancient funerary practices are both familiar and unfamiliar to our modern customs. But that is only one story. The same coffin might be displayed with other coffins to tell the story of coffin development, or of changes in beliefs and practices over time. Food offerings originally found with the coffin might be displayed with other food objects, pottery vessels, and artistic representations of food to create narratives of ancient foodways. Of course it is impossible for any single object to tell all of these stories at once, but it is essential that museums and academics work together to construct engaging narratives that are meaningful, that communicate the multivocality of objects, and that are relevant to the wider community. The point about relevance is especially important now, when funding and support for the arts and humanities is declining in favour of areas of research that are more obviously relevant to current global concerns (e.g. the environment, health, sustainability).

#### **5 The problem with pigeon-holes**

There is one additional theme that was not discussed during the workshop due to time restraints, but it is something that Bader raised during the group's preparatory conversations, namely the 'pigeon-holing' of material culture specialists. I can speak from personal experience, as someone who specialises in and has published work about Nubian pottery, that I am often seen to be a 'pot person'. That perception in turn brings a certain number of assumptions—that pottery people focus only on typological and chronological sequences, which in turn means that I am not capable of reading or understanding ancient textual sources, which in turn means that I am not a 'real' Egyptologist. I can tell you objectively that none of those assumptions are correct. Specialisation is a necessary part of Egyptology—there is simply too much data for one person to be up to date on the latest research in every branch of this very wide discipline. This does not and should not equate to a total disregard for evidence that falls outside one's immediate interest. In many ways, dividing scholars into groups such as 'pot people', 'text people', 'coffin people', 'bead people', etc. creates typologies of Egyptologists, and as outlined above, typologies are problematic because they divide rather than integrate. Moreover, within the 'traditional' framework of Egyptology, there is a long-standing (but thankfully dwindling) assumption that the study of the written and artistic records is the only real Egyptology. In fact, specialists in all areas have the ability to make valuable contributions to Egyptology in its broadest sense as a modern scientific discipline. Rather than creating and maintaining such divisions, Egyptologists of all kinds must work together and integrate their knowledge and experience in an interdisciplinary way, because we are all ultimately telling different parts of the same big story.

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincere thanks to all of the panellists for their sharing their time and expertise, and for their comments on earlier drafts of this summary.