**Bodily Objects: Encounters with Material Culture**

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There exists an increasing wealth of medieval written and material evidence for bodily objects, and the methodological and scientific approaches used to interpret them have also evolved rapidly in the past few decades. In the process, the definition of what items might qualify as bodily objects has had to become more flexible in acknowledgement of their fluidity in both symbolism and function. In this discussion, which uses methodological approaches as an organizing principle, I have chosen a selection of things that were bound with or produced for the human body, though the items covered are by no means comprehensive. Items explored here are associated with grooming, dress, pharmaceutical care and personal defense (whether spiritual or physical); objects that might be actively used to express individual or group identity, such as clothing, jewelry, and weaponry; and, finally, goods that were linked to the human lifecycle, including birth, coming-of-age ceremonies, sickness, and death, which nonetheless were not necessarily produced with these exclusive ends in mind.

Before turning to the objects themselves, I want to draw attention to an important distinction among many (though not all) of the material things we possess from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, which differentiates them from most of those produced and used in the eighth century and afterward. Namely, a large percentage of the extant bodily objects that survive from the period prior to the eighth century derive from cemeterial excavations. Although “furnished” burials are one of the most rapidly growing categories of medieval evidence that we possess, their discovery has created interpretive challenges. Debates over the significance, symbolism, and role of bodily objects in the social “transformation” of the dead have been fierce. Because there is insufficient space to address them fully here (but see Halsall 1995; Hadley 2001; Fowler 2008; Theuws 2009; Hakenbeck 2011, among others), it must suffice to state that this essay will argue against the assumption that individual artifacts or assemblages had only one possible reading with regard to ethnic, status, and gender identity. This chapter also challenges the historiographical premise that there was no formal culture of “fashion” in the West prior to the late eleventh century (summarized in Heller 2007). Instead, grave evidence from this epoch reveals the existence of significant chronological and regional variation in dress and funerary custom that distinguished even neighboring villages and cemeteries from one another (see Williams 2006).

However, grave objects for the most part were not made expressly for this purpose, but rather were produced for a variety of uses. They acquired new meanings and functions when applied to funerary contexts (Knox 2017). They did not work alone but as a part of networks or assemblages that contributed to their symbolism (Knappett 2011). Following the deaths of family members, surviving relatives and neighbors, or individuals or groups with whom the deceased were socially bound, chose to consign particular items to the graves of the deceased. These passed from their own use or that of their descendants (Scull 2011). Yet, in some cases, these goods were retrieved at a later date. In the past, the reopening of graves was seen mainly as evidence for grave robbery; more recently, archaeologists have argued that these retrieved goods served ritual or practical purposes (Aspöck 2011; Bill and Daly 2012; Theuws and van Haperen 2012; Klevnäs 2013, 2015; Lund 2017). This understanding has further blurred the distinction between bodily objects used in a funerary context and the infinitely larger number of early medieval things that were not placed in graves, few of which are extant today. Funerals and burials gave new meanings to objects in assemblages, though it appears that some bodily objects were excluded such as the jet-like beads and bangles used in medieval Ireland till the twelfth century that are rarely found in cemeterial contexts (Stevens 2017). Early medieval wills, few of which survive, hint at others (see Jervis and Semple this vol.). One of these rare documents, the last testament of Erminethrudis, an aristocratic woman who died at some time between 590 and 630/645 CE, documents her bequest of gold jewelry and clothing to her son, churches, and monastic houses near Paris (Atsam and Vezin 1982; Effros 2002b: 27-28).

In contrast, bodily objects from the Carolingian period forward derive mainly from institutional (whether ecclesiastical, monastic, royal, or aristocratic) settings or settlements. There are also numerous extant descriptions of bodily objects such as inventories found in final testaments, contracts, historical and literary sources, and art historical depictions, which tend to be more plentiful and detailed in this period. Because of the widespread decline in the popularity of the tradition of depositing objects in graves in western Europe during the seventh and eighth centuries (with important exceptions in Scandinavia, areas of the Viking diaspora, and northern Germany, where they were used far into the eleventh century), most medieval cemeteries later than this date do not contain a significant number of objects. Additional noteworthy exceptions include the occasional burial of knives, combs, buckles, coins, and other objects with the dead (Hadley 2001: 96-97). During the High Middle Ages, high-ranking clerics were sometimes buried with liturgical objects and their emblems of office. In some cases, they received burial in ecclesiastical garments or monastic habits (even if they had not achieved the latter status), rather than being interred in simple shrouds (Fry 1999: 158-163; O’Sullivan 2013).

These circumstances make discussion of the meaning and use of central and late medieval bodily objects comparatively less fraught than those from graves, since they are typically discovered in the contexts in which they were employed or can be verified by means of written sources. However, their interpretation is not always straightforward, such as with the weapon deposits found in wetland areas and at crossings that date to the Viking period (Lund 2017;Pedersen 2008). The use of art historical and historical accounts of the use of clothing and other bodily objects, while important in explaining the symbolism and function of material culture in the Late Middle Ages, should thus be understood as ideologically freighted rather than reflective of lived realities (Gilchrist 2012). Just because enclosed nuns in the Late Middle Ages were not supposed to have personal possessions, did not preclude them from controlling bodily objects, making things, or offering these items to others as gifts (Hamburger 1998: 74-79).

Finally, whether from the early or late medieval period, the bodily objects that are extant today are not reflective of the lives of the majority of the population who lived in Europe in the premodern period. Possessions of elites were likely to endure longer than those belonging to those of more modest backgrounds; this discrepancy resulted both from the materials from which they were produced, since precious metals and stones were more durable than perishable organic materials, and due to the skill that went into the manufacture of items. Objects with more intricate or aesthetic workmanship had the advantage of the “heirloom effect”, namely that future generations desired to retain them because of the memories attached to them, their aesthetic value, or their general utility. Possession of these objects by a member of the elite, whether lay or religious in orientation, also increased the likelihood that they would be preserved in a church treasury, elite household, or monastic institution. Few organic materials avoided degradation when inhumed in the soil, whereas they enjoyed greater longevity if preserved above ground in dry and protected conditions in a church or castle treasury or a stone or lead-lined tomb.

**Materiality Studies and Bodily Objects**

The field of materiality studies has pushed the agency of objects and classes of objects to a more central place in our analysis of human society (Brown 2001). Inherently fluid in their meaning, things, whether personal or shared, shape interactions with and among people and fluctuate in response to the unique circumstances in which these interactions take place (Meskell 2005). In the Middle Ages, extraordinary iconic artifacts like the reliquary of St Foy or the nef of St Ursula reveal the complexity of such transformational processes in sacred and profane vessels (Remensnyder 1990, 1996; Normore 2012). However, medieval bodily objects also had powerful properties independent of the meanings with which they were freighted by human usages and imagination (Bedos-Rezak 2013). In practical application, intrinsic material attributes often determined the shape or limited the effective functioning of the object (Ingold 2007). At the forge, blacksmiths worked with the materials at their disposal, some of higher quality than others. The products of their labors such as swords and spears—defined here as bodily objects due to the personal relationships that people developed with the artifacts upon which they depended in life or death situations—relied upon a number of factors. These included the basic material properties of the raw or recycled iron, the “memory” possessed by the once-living wood that went into their shaft, the skill, experience, and tools of the artisan, and the demands of those individuals who would subsequently deploy them (Welton 2016, 2018). The act of a potter throwing pottery on a wheel was a collaborative project, one determined not just by the potter’s intentions and skill but by his or her engagement and “dynamic tension” with the raw materials (Malafouris 2008).

The function and distribution of personal objects such as combs, which have often been discussed with respect to the symbolically rich traditions associated with hair (Leyser 1993), were also shaped by the circumstances of their production. Riveted with iron or copper-alloys, Viking Age antler and bone combs required both specialized skills and the appropriate raw materials, thus limiting the places in which these objects could be produced (Ashby, Coutu, and Sindbaek 2015; see Ashby this vol.). Although they were bound in a cycle of “production, exchange and consumption” (Gosden 1999: 160-163), they differed from more modest, “utilitarian” ceramics used on a daily basis in medieval households, which were presumably not as difficult to procure.Cooking and storage pots, whether wheel thrown or handmade were shaped by their environment and production. They contained minute, but recognizable attributes, that stemmed from the geology of the soil from which their clay was harvested, the methods and skill of their potters, and the kilns and fuel used in their firing (Blinkhorn 1997). Physical things—including ones that had intimate relationships to human bodies—and people were deeply entangled with one another both in distant historical periods as they are today (Hodder 2012; Miller 2010).

Ian Hodder has observed that the interdependency of objects and people, while often leading to positive outcomes such as a better quality of life, can also cause entrapment, a term that he uses to refer to the establishment of complex regimes by which the supply of particular goods or materials is maintained (2014). In the Middle Ages, human dependence on particular things and the consequences of entrapment were exposed to a greater degree during times of crisis when essential items difficult or impossible to acquire. For example, inhabitants of England developed alternative supply chains and recycling to provide precious iron in the period following the collapse of Roman infrastructure on the island in the early fifth century (Fleming 2012). These conditions directly affected the form and quality of personal goods. In the late seventh century, a reduction of the availability of raw materials procured via long distance trade with lands around the Indian Ocean caused artisans in northwestern Europe to substitute colored glass ornaments in the place of semi-precious garnets, which had previously been inset in high status gold cloisonné brooches, buckles, and ornamented weaponry that were so greatly valued by elites in the late Merovingian period (Calligaro, Périn, Vallet, and Poirot 2006-2007). In early medieval cemeteries in what is modern day Belgium, glass beads whose component ingredients may have been procured from as far as Sri Lanka, India, and Mesopotamia during the late fifth and early sixth century, were replaced by beads of more local manufacture. These adjustments in burial usages owed not as much to changes in consumers’ stylistic preferences as to trade disruptions with the Byzantine world that made it difficult or impossible to procure the ingredients necessary to make popular colors and types of widely used glass beads worn strung on necklaces and bracelets and contained in purses or sacks (Pion and Gratuze 2013; Pion, Gratuze, Périn, and Calligaro forthcoming).

The concept of materiality usefully brings into consideration the idea that biographies, or more accurately, itineraries, of objects were not exclusively dependent upon the intentions of the humans by whom they were shaped or used (Kopytoff 1986; on itineraries, see: Joyce and Gillespie 2015). Even modest items might have multivalent symbolism and complex histories (Ashby 2014). Physical objects, including personal ones, underwent periods of flow and stasis, experiences that might take them in very different directions from the original intentions of the persons by whom they were created and with whom they were first intimately associated. Roman coins thus might be reused as pendants on a necklace throughout the middle ages (Ciric 2013). Iron and wooden objects and clothing could be made and remade; incised identifiers of early owners might be rubbed out and replaced by their next owner (Frantzen 2014). Although efforts to control certain precious objects through minting and hallmarking were undertaken in the Middle Ages, they were far from universally effective in controlling the standard of precious metals in coins and jewelry (Oakley 2013). The transformation of an object into a valued heirloom or a thing that “held” the memory of ancestors or events might not survive in the absence of the connected story that activated its embodiment (Gilchrist 2013). Ex-votos, too, offered as proxies at saints’ shrines, were intended to bring healing to a person or animal by conveying an effigy of the person or part of the body; the use of some part of them modeled in wax, wood, or ceramic, might attract holy intervention in the appropriate circumstances (Gilchrist 2012: 224-225). However, there was no guarantee of lasting success despite humans’ best efforts to shape, personalize, or transform particular things around them into biographical objects.

In medieval European studies, the agency of objects has often discussed in relation to swords and other weapons in Anglo-Saxon and Viking literature, which were often portrayed as having personalities and qualities that were not linked uniquely to those who held and fought with them (Lund 2010: 50-51). At the same time, it is possible that magical practices and regeneration were mainly the stuff of fireside performances (our main source of such information being epics like *Beowulf*) (Welton 2018). It is perhaps preferable to focus on weapons’ association with such powers that made them effective mnemonic tools which might play a central role in commemorating the dead (Williams 2006). The desire to mark weapons as possessions, such as post-Roman swords circulating in Gaul and England with rings on their pomels, may be seen in the runic engravings that adorned them (Fischer, Soulat, *et al* 2008). Visible mainly to the user, these inscriptions pointed to a common culture of warriors and perhaps also represented an attempt to establish control over what might potentially be disobedient possessions, although they were perhaps not as unruly as living and breathing possessions like stock (Kreiner 2017). Nonetheless, iron weapons were not the only artifacts that had such potential for independence. Holy relics, bits of bone or personal possessions like the erstwhile clothing of the saint, were believed to retain some essence of the saints’ personalities; these fragments were known to resist or encourage movement according to whether those seeking to transfer them did so in accordance with God’s will (Geary 1990; see too Jørgensen this vol.). Amulets, and found or saved objects, including heirloom coins, shards of glass, inscribed incantations, fossilized shark teeth, bear teeth and claws, and shells, strung or contained in small pouches or coffers, might develop an itinerary of their own, functioning as versions of their initial incarnation long after fragmentation had occurred (Meaney 1981; Pion 2009-2010).

Ordinary things, such as utensils like knives, had practical and symbolic applications. Worn at the belt throughout the Middle Ages, such basic artifacts could play a role in ritual practices and can provide modern observers with hints of the possible economic features and worldviews of the particular community in which they were employed (Theuws 2004; Knox 2016). If nothing else, the significant effort and resources required to gather large numbers of objects and preserve them in hoards during the Viking period should indicate the determination of those whose activity and connections made such acts possible to preserve this legacy of control (Hinton 2005: 108-140; Jervis and Semple this vol.). It has also been argued that objects in hoards should be understood as actors in and of their own right, anticipating human actions by motivating marauders to pillage, creating divisions or links between people, and serving as markers of conquest or resilience and survival (Latour 2005: 70-72; Felder 2015). These examples are intended to demonstrate the limitations of human-centered understandings of medieval personal things; they help us reimagine how inanimate yet powerful bodily objects fulfilled basic human needs and yet occupied spaces and existences outside of the restrictions imposed by the finite boundaries of mortal human lives (Hahn and Weiss 2013).

**Bodily Objects in Motion**

Although initial research on material culture in late antique and early medieval Europe focused almost entirely on luxury goods that traveled long distances, as highlighted in Henri Pirenne’s famous thesis (1937), more recent studies have acknowledged that many of the objects that circulated must have been more modest and belonged to individuals of a variety of social backgrounds (Theuws forthcoming). The role of *emporia* and later market towns were particularly important to these developments and the regional circulation of goods (Pestell and Ulmschneider 2003); exploration, conquest, and new trading partners were also important factors (Sindbæk 2014). While some of the artifacts with which the deceased were buried in the early medieval West were produced locally or at least in the same region, others originated from more distant places, sometimes from areas far beyond the frontiers of the former Roman empire (Drauschke 2011). We may surmise that many bodily objects in the medieval period circulated via trade rather than ritual exchanges. It is worthwhile to consider briefly the role of objects in these latter, less easily accessible transactions.

The phenomenon that Annette Weiner has famously called “keeping-while-giving” is driven by “the need to secure permanence in a serial world that is always subject to loss and decay” (1992: 7). Ironically, these “things-in-motion”, as characterized by Arjun Appadurai (1986), were themselves inherently fluid; their interpretive adaptability was a strength in defining their human and cultural context. Exchanges of objects, which at times might be commodities and at other times became inalienable possessions, played an essential role in shaping human relations throughout the Middle Ages. Small but powerful and mobile relics, for instance, were thought to contain the *praesentia* of the saints. Sixth-century bishops such as Gregory of Tours might be lucky enough to wear one upon his body; the translation of holy remains played an integral part in ritual gift-giving that bound patrons and clients. They offered solidarity and protection not just as the Christian faith spread around the Mediterranean in Late Antiquity but also throughout the Middle Ages (Brown 1981; Hahn 2010: 296-297).

Among the types of inalienable possessions that were used in medieval diplomatic exchanges and marriage alliances were large gold and silver vessels, valuable foodstuffs, water clocks, horses, and bodily objects (Hardt 2004; Shanzer 1996-1997). Intended to confirm treaties or political agreements, bejeweled items or those made of precious materials such as rings, clothing, belt buckles, brooches, and other items offered in the right circumstances signalled loyalty, cemented ties of fealty, or expressed submission (Curta 2006). Heavy iron belt buckles in southwestern Gaul after the Visigothic conquest, some inlaid with intricate and unique silver damascene patterns, might be consciously divided and distributed as a way of cementing bonds of “allegiance, service, and status” among the people who wore or were laid to rest with them by those who survived them (Patrello forthcoming). Some of the bonds thereby reinforced were deeply personal. In the Late Middle Ages, surviving gifts highlight the way in which objects could “convey the promise of intimacy: such objects carried the personal essence of the giver” (Gilchrist 2012: 109). Between generations, meaningful offerings could also include commissioned manuscripts such as Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Auct. D. 4.4, which marked the close relationship between a mother and daughter at the time of marriage. This small, hand-held psalter-hours is thought to have been given by the widow Joan Fitzalan to her eleven-year-old daughter Mary de Bohun to commemorate her ancestors and remind her of her marital duties just prior to her royal union circa 1380/1 to Henry Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby (Havens 2017).

Medieval heirlooms and biographical objects moved not just between people but also between the domestic sphere and the church; in doing so, they were transformed or sacralized. The sixth-century Merovingian queen, Radegund of Poitiers, who fled from her husband Chlotar I with the intention of convincing Bishop Medard of Soissons to allow her to take the veil, deposited her silk garments, diadem, and jewelry as offerings on the altar at the time of her consecration as deaconess; after the death in the late seventh-century of the Queen Balthild, the nuns of the royal monastery of Chelles, in which she was interned at the end of her remarkable life, commemorated her memory by means of a blouse embroidered with a pectoral cross and imperial necklaces that she was said to have worn in the monastic house (Effros 1996). In the late Middle Ages, similar forces were at work as women donated their finery to parish churches, items which were in turn consecrated by a priest or through contact with saints’ statues. Serving as a vehicle of edification for the nuns of Barking Abbey, Elizabeth de Vere’s gift in 1474 of a manuscript with 28 religious treatises in French became a focus of spriitual contemplation (Wogan-Browne 2017). Through this process, they were transformed into relics (Gilchrist 2013: 178-179).

Once seen as “soft” productions, textiles created through spinning, weaving, and embroidery by women, played a fundamental role in public rituals and more private exchanges. Taking the form of clothing, liturgical items like altar cloths and ritual garments, and wrappings for relics, they required costly raw materials, skill, patience, and time to produce. The few items that survive from the Carolingian period were not only economic commodities but conveyed something of the social status and religious identity of their maker; offering such goods to someone outside the family could enhance the donor’s visibility, underline the bonds that existed between two families, and commemorate (with woven or embroidered inscriptions) the maker, the recipient, or the saints (Garver 2009: 224-268). Silk garments, such as those worn throughout the Anglo-Saxon period in England and acquired at great expense or through continental connections, were employed as a powerful statement of elite status, sophistication, and religious piety, since relics collections were often wrapped in silk (Fleming 2007). In high medieval romances, new and constantly changing garments were the focus of attention of their poets; they were often given as gifts “to win attention, to seduce, to give and gain pleasure” (Heller 2007: 74). Emphasis on the constant rotation of what may have been fantasy (and often gendered) objects in these works may have stemmed from their relative inaccessibility following the promulgation of sumptuary laws in late thirteenth-century France.

**Bodily Objects, Identity and the Medieval Lifecyle**

In the archaeological exploration of medieval artifacts, it is clear that bodily objects helped construct, negotiate, and communicate the expression of sex and gender in combination with other constituent aspects of identity, like age, social rank, ethnicity, and religious affiliation (Lucy 2005). These factors are imperative to an holistic understanding of the significance of early medieval lifecycle rites including burial (Sørenson 2000: 42-59). Although ethnicity has received far more attention than gender over the last century and a half, being seen as tied intimately with the choices made in object styles (see, recently, for instance, Owen-Crocker 2011), this emphasis has had a distorting effect on our understanding of such artifacts (von Rummel 2007). As emblems, bodily objects (seen most frequently, as outlined here, from the context of burial), were multivalent and conveyed information about multiple dimensions of individuals’ personal identity or group affiliations (Marcus 1993). Rather than suggesting uniformity, they communicated the complexity of personal expression and reflected religious transformation and resilience in times of transition. They revealed the nuances of an array of community responses to changing beliefs and practices (Thomas, Pluskowski, Gilchrist, et al. 2017).

Bodily objects should thus not be understood as static in their function or meaning. Just as they shaped and structured the lives of those who used or wore them, they also evolved in significance for those who possessed or came into contact with them. Over the course of a person’s lifetime, childhood objects like toys gained new meanings and purposes, either because of the memories of play with which they were associated or because of the changed ways in which items such as games were used in adulthood (Hall 2014; Martin 2016). Although surviving objects can tell us about specific phases in the medieval life cycle like burial better than others like birth and marriage, it is possible to glimpse the important roles of such bodily objects in these transitions. Miniature weapons are sometimes found in children’s graves in Anglo-Saxon England and on the Continent: they were possibly toys or training implements for warfare (Crawford 1999: 159). The choice and number of object placed in early medieval graves thus reflected, at least to a degree, the age, gender, and anticipated fertility of the deceased (Halsall 1995), even if such responses were not uniform.

In fifteenth-century Florence and elsewhere in northern Europe, moreover, devotional dolls (*bambini*) have been observed listed in the wedding trousseau inventories of high status and middle class brides as well as girls entering convents as gifts from their parents at this time of transition. These dolls, frequently depicting the Christ-child, although in other instances female saints, were richly dressed in pearls, linens, brocade, and velvet clothing. Depending upon their context and circumstances, they appear to have offered inspiration for religious devotion, encouragement for successful procreation in the transition to adult married life, and the cathartic joy of being able to express spiritual union with the baby Jesus (Klapisch-Zuber 1985).

In adulthood, bodily objects were intimately linked to individuals’ official roles and religious status. Clothing such as the *chlamys*, an “ankle-length cloak of semi-circular cut that was fastened at the right shoulder with a brooch” was worn by the Byzantine emperor and his officials (Parani 2007). Religious garments and hairstyles also marked off early medieval clerics, monks, and nuns from members of the laity in both life and death (Effros 2002a). In the late Middle Ages, the masculinity of clerics was often manifested in their graves through the inclusion of a chalice and paten similar to the ones they had used in the course of their liturgical duties; these sacred objects, which one would not consider bodily objects in their earlier incarnation on the altar, now became firmly linked to the celibate body of the priest (Gilchrist 2009).

Bodily objects could also constitute physical expressions of faith in the power of the saints, such as in the case of relic pendants like the “talisman of Charlemagne”, believed to date from the ninth century, or the fourteenth-century reliquary ring from the Thames Hoard. Worn in close contact to the skin, they were not necessarily visible to anyone but the wearer (Robinson 2011). By contrast, badges, tokens, and ampulla acquired at a saint’s shrine following pilgrimage, or more general religious amulets thought to protect children or pregnant women, were often worn in plain view. They moved with the wayfarer who collected them (Gilchrist 2012: 134-144). Marking the devotional accomplishment of the pilgrim in a visible way, they set him or her apart from other Christians who had not gone to as great lengths to seek a saint’s sponsorship and protection (Hinton 2005: 209-211).

**Bodily Display and Burial**

Many of the personal objects dating from especially the Early Middle Ages that survive today exist because they were entrusted to graves in their most recent incarnation and only “rediscovered” when exhumed due perhaps to an unplanned encounter with an agricultural or industrial undertaking or metal detector, or, in happier circumstances, by an archaeological excavation. Indeed, they offer one of the few opportunities in which we can see the practical applications of objects like brooches and buckles which served to fasten cloaks, clothing, and shoes in addition to the bold visual language of these often costly dress items. However, they also effectively communicated consensus or new meanings that were arrived at in the context of the preparation of the body for burial and the funeral itself. The burial site, seen as an active rather than a static place, has therefore been described as a performance or dialogue, one in which the objects with which the deceased was buried provided the props or vocabulary (Halsall 1998). This ritual occurred in the context of the cemetery, which itself had often been chosen because of ancient, sacred, or desirable features in the landscape (Semple 2013); it also helped negotiate the dynamics of a community’s relationships in this life and the next (Bazelmans 1999). Although the circumstances of burial meant that the objective of those who organized a funeral and prepared the grave was foremost the commemoration of the deceased rather than an accurate picture of him or her, we should consider how and why personal objects were used in this fashion.

When thinking about early medieval burial artifacts, modern conceptions of individuality may be counterproductive in understanding their nature and symbolism. In other words, archaeologists, and to a lesser extent historians, have long acknowledged the difficulty in interpreting the objects contained in medieval graves as providing an accurate reflection of the lives led by the deceased arrayed in this fashion (Theuws and Alkemade 2000). The concept of personhood, as opposed to the individual, is helpful in reminding us that these graves were not representative of the individual status or identity of the deceased but rather suggest the needs and objectives of the collective responsible for commemorating the dead (Gillespie 2001: 84; for an early medieval example, see: Theuws 2009). This approach rejects the assumption that bodily objects in mortuary contexts were necessarily an individual’s personal possessions, or that biological death represented the end point of that person’s existence in that community’s interactions, even if these selves were now “disembodied” (Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth 1999). Because bodily objects were not just constitutive of personal identity, we must be more wary of one-to-one correlations (see for example of the dispute over the burial of Aregund’s ring: Périn 2015). Looking at graves through the lens of personhood highlights the fluidity of the meanings with which objects were imbued, and allows us to move away from the debates about ethnicity that have far too long distracted us from discussing other important dynamics of the role played by objects in cemeterial settings.

To be fully effective in conveying the nuances of an individual’s significance to a community, the meaning of the symbols conveyed vis-à-vis objects had to be understood by those who attended a particular burial site (Gilchrist 2012: 79-99). Because early medieval artifacts like brooches, buckles, jewelry, amulets, weaponry, and vessels were each unique, being made by artisans by hand, there was significant variation in even objects meant to be used in pairs. Because particular objects were not always available due to fluctuations in trade and family wealth, this dialogue was inherently unstable and constantly evolving (Williams 2006; Felder 2015). Within relative boundaries established by local custom (or fashion), the existence and resources of surviving family members, a surfeit of goods that allowed them to be consigned to graves rather than conveyed to heirs, and access to trade, members of early medieval communities closely moderated and curated the objects laid to rest with the dead. These factors explain the incredible variation in usage not only over time but within individual cemeteries. Although we cannot reconstruct fully the habitus of which early medieval graves were an intrinsic part, we can, at the very least, give much needed attention to the fact that cemeteries were meaningful arenas in which sex, gender, religious, ethnic, and other differences were negotiated, performed, and reified within the unique cosmology of those communities.

 Recent studies incorporating scientific tests like stable isotope analysis have begun to blur many of the assumptions about early medieval identity that were built on the basis of historical and archaeological studies of bodily objects. In Thuringia, in the cemeteries of Rathewitz and Obermöllern, where scholars applied Sr isotope analysis to skeletal remains, they have determined that the birthplace of individuals did not always determine the types of personal artifacts with which they were buried. In the case of both adult males and females, locals apparently adopted non-local gear just as the opposite was true, a result that suggests the importance of crafting identity in life and at the graveside (Knipper, Maurer, Peters, et al. 2013; Hakenbeck 2011). However, results from DNA-testing have sometimes proven more equivocal in our understanding of gender and identity. At Niederstotzingen in southwest Germany, a small cemetery containing the remains of what appear to have been fourteen individuals of high status and three horses, two of the individuals buried with armament were determined in 2000, on the basis of DNA, to have been biological women. The first (grave 3C), was laid to rest with sword (*spatha*), dagger (*saxa*),shield, belt, seven arrowheads, in addition to an iron chain and a bronze bell. The second (grave 12C), much disturbed by the mechanical excavator by which was found, was also buried in a triple grave. At a minimum, this biological female was laid to rest with a sword, several knives, and possibly a helmet (Schneider 2011). However, these results were disputed, and following new DNA tests of the skeletal material at Niederstotzingen in 2012, scholars determined that 3C was not female but male, whereas the sex of 12C remains undetermined. Continuing challenges in working with ancient DNA have made it difficult for scientists to produce consistent results in sexing skeletons but these efforts will no doubt yield important results in future decades (Wahl, Cipollini, Coia, et al. 2014).

In England, recent discussions led by technological innovation and double-blind anthropological assessments have highlighted important discoveries related to sex and gender in early medieval graves. The discovery of women with armament, once thought to be rare if not impossible (Härke 1990; Stoodley 1999), has become a more common event. Recent efforts to sex cremation burials have produced intriguing results, with one definite and one possible woman at Spong Hill, Norfolk, laid to rest with sword fittings (Hills and Lucy 2013: 69). A recent survey of more than 4,000 graves at 56 recently excavated early medieval sites has determined from the roughly half of the 718 weapon graves that could be sexed anthropologically, an average of 8% of the graves that contained weapons (mainly spears, and less commonly shields) belonged to adult biological females. In the seventh century, the proportion of female weapon graves was as high as 17% (Welton 2018).

It is long past the time to do away with value judgments of graves on the basis of proposed sexuality of the deceased (Halsall 2010: 342-349), or labels like “cross-dressers” or “third gender”, that suggest the marginal standing of such individuals in their communities. These individuals were buried with costly and exclusive bodily objects; at least in some facets of their lives they were not condemned to the margins of community life (Halsall 2015). It is safe to infer, on the basis of skeletal development and wounds suffered, that at least some of the women buried with weapons in their graves fought with them (Beckford A2 in southern Worcestershire is one example), even if they were a minority (Evison and Hill 1996). Moreover, “masculine” weapons in graves may have been deployed differently with biological women than they were for their male counterparts. Spears, for instance, might be laid to rest at the level of the belt of the deceased, replacing other typically feminine artifacts, rather than alongside the dead, as was more typical (Welton 2018). Joining jewelry in the grave, these weapon burials suggest that bodily objects like spears in late sixth- and seventh-century England were multivalent objects. They could be coopted in the expression of women’s identity and that of men as individual passed from life to death (Marcus 1993: 170-172).

**Conclusion**

The thematic strands highlighted in this essay are necessarily overlapping but are not comprehensive: they have been presented here as a stepping-off point for further consideration of bodily objects. Following an introduction to the what some have called the material turn in medieval studies, the essay was divided into thematic sections based on concepts highlighted in recent research on materiality. These comprised: things that moved; things that helped shape and express individual or group identity; and things that played a role during the successive stages of the lifecycle, including those that helped bridge the gap between this world and the supernatural (Gilchrist 2012: 91-106). If anything has become clear in this essay, it is the wealth of meaning to be found in medieval material culture and the caution which we must exercise in their interpretation and application to studies of medieval life and customs.

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