

Biographies of Place – An Introduction

Biographies of Place – Towards a High-Definition Archaeology

The massive remains left by dense agglomerations of specialized and differentiated communities from ancient times to the present offer an alluring, yet dauntingly complex, record of anthropogenic processes in the past. Today, while the application of increasingly sophisticated analytical methods is transforming the means of archaeology to document and explore urban sites, new analytical and conceptual implications of these shifts are also being explored.

This issue of *Journal of Urban Archaeology* focuses on the theme ‘Biographies of Place’ and represents an effort to move the focus of urban archaeology from ‘bulk’ to ‘contexts’ — away from the aggregating approach, which is often encouraged by the massive sites and deposits, and towards an approach more focused on coherent situations and detail. It remains a tendency in urban archaeology to highlight finds and features individually and to study their relationships in a way that leads to incoherency. Therefore, the full potential of current and emerging methodologies has yet to be reaped. This approach to urban archaeology has been limited by a ‘feature-first’ approach, in which evidence is separated and analysed according to major, static structures such as monumental buildings or, for the artefactual finds, according to material classes. In the flow of analysis, they are often only reintegrated at a highly generalized level of interpretation.

In place of this, we call for a ‘context-first’ approach. By turning contexts into the principal unit of analysis, a multidimensional interpretation may form the point of departure for integrated ‘biographies’ of urban sites and groups, which we hope will stimulate a new approach to urban archaeology. Through this volume, we aim to show how archaeology may contribute more appropriately to ‘biographies’ of urban sites and communities.

‘Biographies of Place’ is a term coined within geography and cultural heritage studies, but proposed here in a new sense by the editors of this issue (Sørensen and Viejo-Rose 2015). While biographies have been written for individuals and places on the basis of literary and written sources, ‘Biographies of Place’ as experienced through archaeological materials have not been explored until now. In this meaning, it may provide a point of departure for new motivation and integration for research both within particular places and across regions and periods.

The issue aims to encourage an approach to urban places as patterns of evolving social practice and spatial networks, thereby underlining the dynamic nature of urbanism and urban developments. Cultural entanglements and urban networks are two sides of the connectivities that, in our view, foster the ‘urban-ness’ of cities: the first are the complex, differentiated, and sometimes novel networks which tend to develop within urban communities. The second are the communications and exchanges beyond (and between) city nodes.

The present issue of *Journal of Urban Archaeology* is aimed at setting the scene for ways in which the concept of ‘Biographies of Place’ may be applied usefully in an interdisciplinary setting, bringing together perspectives from several regions and periods as well as across disciplines heavily involved in exploring urban archaeology and history. In the issue focus is on how the combination of multiple methods and approaches contribute to characterize urban sites and societies as communities defined by the particular nature and intensity of their movement and interactions (‘circulation societies’, as termed by Sebouh Aslanian (2011, 13–14)). These societies are made up of individuals, but can be conceptualized more broadly as a gathering of people, things, and spaces.

Rubina Raja (rubina.raja@cas.au.dk) is Professor of Classical Archaeology at Aarhus University, Denmark, and centre director of the Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre of Excellence for Urban Network Evolutions. She specializes in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Archaeology in a diachronic perspective, often with focus on urban societies. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1387-874X.

Søren M. Sindbæk (farksms@cas.au.dk) is Professor of Medieval Archaeology at Aarhus University, Denmark, and co-director of the Centre of Urban Network Evolutions. He specializes in Viking and early medieval Europe, with a focus on urbanism and social networks. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1254-1256.

Biographies of Place — The Concept

As a concept, 'Biographies of Place' may be traced to the approach pioneered in the 1960s within the framework of 'new urban history', which aimed to understand 'cities as process' (Thernstrom and Sennett 1969). Unlike the more general (and much older) genre of 'city biographies', the aim is not simply to present a narrative of a place. Rather, the approach uses the detailed study of an urban site, analysed through the whole range of available sources, as a way to explore general patterns and dynamics. Biographies as a concept have also been used to explore the lives of things (Appadurai 1988; Thomas 1991; Gosden and Marshall 1999) and has attained a central role in approaches based on actor-network theory (Latour 2005) as well as in materiality studies and cultural-heritage studies (Sørensen and Viejo-Rose 2015). What we currently face as a challenge in archaeology is the grand comparisons afforded by comparative world histories versus the engaged and situated histories, which often make up a certain place/location/space. It is the current possibilities, arising through combining methods from archaeology and history with results from disciplines such as soil chemistry, radiocarbon dating, and isotope analysis, which we believe create a unique moment in time for pushing forward ways in which to work with the concept of 'Biographies of Place'. Through this concept a fruitful dialogue emerges between researchers mastering the mentioned disciplines and working towards understanding differing urban sites, on the one hand in a firmly situated perspective and on the other hand in a comparative perspective.

'Biographies of Place' may be viewed within the genre of biographies. However, it may also be viewed in its own right as a concept which exactly tried to refine and transcend the concept of biography as a history told through or by sources. 'Collectives', such as a city, were by Bruno Latour (2005, 75) and others (Christophersen 2015; Jervis 2016) conceptualized as a gathering of people, things, and spaces, implying that biographies may be conceptualized as a clustering on different levels that also interact. However, biographies of places have not been explored in the lens of network dynamics — expanding and contracting, connecting and disconnecting — through which they potentially may tell us much more about past societies than hitherto possible through a largely descriptive approach. If we can get at the interface levels/slices of such biographies and extrapolate from the network dynamics new ways of approaching these problematics, then we might be able to reach new levels of insight into how we may view 'Biographies of Place'.

Past archaeology has been limited in its ability to approach the specific details required for a biography of a place. The sheer scale and time depths of many urban sites require excavations to cut comparatively small trenches through deep stratigraphies, as, for example, in many Middle Eastern *tell* sites. The biography resulting from such excavations may be highly limited and uncertain. In a now famous example, four seasons of work were required to reach and explore parts of late fifth- and early fourth-millennium BC buildings, buried under 11 m of stratigraphy at the site Tell Braq in Syria. Yet even this small addition led to fundamental revisions of the early urban history of Mesopotamia, one of the most intensively studied archaeological regions of the world (Oates and others 2007).

In other places, excavations have focused on sites or levels that can be exposed more fully, as in cities struck by natural disasters or abandoned due to political changes, or simply because excavators decided to use heavy-handed methods to uncover specific levels. Impressive, comprehensive plans can be presented for 'dead' cities such as fourteenth-century BC Amarna in Egypt and first-century AD Pompeii in Italy; but by the same token, the biography of these sites lack historical depth.

Recently developed techniques allow archaeology to extract more biographical material from less costly excavations. Improved geoarchaeological methods for characterizing activities from deposits, together with refined biomolecular and isotopic methods for identifying and sourcing materials, as well as still more exact dating methods, all improve the ability to understand the developments testified by contextually excavated material evidence. This 'high-definition' revolution in archaeology creates the evidential platform for pursuing biographies of places.

The contributions to this volume have grown from a series of meetings hosted by the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions. We have invited a multidisciplinary group of researchers who have worked in innovative ways on urban sites and communities from the Indian Ocean world and the Mediterranean to northern Europe and the Americas, and chronologically from the ancient world to the end of the Middle Ages, to share and contrast perspectives on the use of archaeological biographies of places.

What we intend with this special issue is to challenge narratives of particular urban sites and fundamental assumptions about trajectories, dynamics, and causal conditions of urbanization. Through the refinement of the level of comparison of written history and archaeology, a 'high-definition archaeology' combined with a network approach to urbanism have the potential to tip the balance of causes and

effects in historical narratives and to transcend existing disciplinary and epistemic boundaries within and between archaeology, history, and science. Such an approach is what we intend to explore and spur with the contributions gathered here. We believe that such a new integrative approach to urban archaeology may allow us to view large-scale events and move from ‘grand narratives’ to ‘high-definition narratives’, integrating high-precision chronologies, site biographies, and recorded history and thus moving urban archaeology into a new era.

Works Cited

- Appadurai, A. (ed.). 1988. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Aslanian, S. 2011. *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, California World History Library (Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- Christophersen, A. 2015. ‘Performing Towns: Steps towards an Understanding of Medieval Urban Communities as Social Practice’, *Archaeological Dialogues*, 22: 109–32.
- Gosden, C. and Y. Marshall. 1999. ‘The Cultural Biography of Objects’, *World Archaeology*, 31: 169–78.
- Jervis, B. 2016. ‘Assemblage Theory and Town Foundation in Medieval England’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 26: 381–95.
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Oates, J. and others. 2007. ‘Early Mesopotamian Urbanism: A View from the North’, *Antiquity*, 81: 585–600.
- Sørensen, M. L. S. and D. Viejo-Rose. 2015. *War and Cultural Heritage: Biographies of Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Thernstrom, S. and R. Sennett. 1969. *Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Thomas, N. 1991. *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

