



## Anthropology of the Object

Material objects seem to be matters of fact and yet they have a 'biography' indicative of man making, using, and valuing them. Relics of human material culture are more often than not looked at for their material, handcraft, and artistic qualities as well as their cultural meaning and effect. Then, an anthology edited by Arjun Appadurai broke the ground for investigating *The Social Life of Things* (1988) going beyond the 'production' with a more anthropological Marxist perspective – notably as commodities of value, their exchange and the politics of value. Kopytoff in the second article discovered 'The cultural biography of things'. Ian Hodder was 'Reading the Past' (2003) with objects. The present RomanIslam Centre's workshop has taken this approach to the Early Islamic period and invited ten speakers to ask: What does the object tell us about its own life? What do we - as historians - learn from the object and its view on the framing culture and society? But such questions would be too general. We not only want a proof of concept. At the RomanIslam Center we are asking more specific questions. How can we use objects beyond the archaeological evidence as a source for transcultural changes between the Roman and the Islamic empire, and how does the social framework, or 'Pattern' reflect on the object itself?

Here, the anthropology of things would focus on the objects biography from its production to its use to its disposal, and may be secondary life, and the larger social embeddedness asking for the agents, and the 'pattern' meaning the dominating styles, distribution system, education, economic and monetary systems and much more.

The talks spanned objects such as coins and lead seals, jars with dipinti, ashlar masonry in a valley on the Iberian Peninsula, as well as the transcultural perspective in a village, or temple architecture and the use of spolia. The exciting moment were when in a form of retro-engineering the objects, and their production can be reconstructed by a careful close reading of the text, as in the case of washing textiles for the rich, and objects in religious procession in North Africa. It was shown from different perspective, that with focussing the objects, part of the social, economic, and political, pattern can be revealed, as well as information on the agents retrieved, and production and use, can be reconstructed from the object. E.g., when an Umayyad lead seal lead seal, carrying on its obverse side the name of the *amir*, the military use, and perhaps an '*alāma*' (personal device) of a second person, on the reverse the imprint of the rings of chain-mail, it had once been attached to. It bears the evidence of a class of early Islamic military objects that itself is lost (early chain mail) – while the seal refers to military administration.

One recurrent issue was the need of terminology which allows the transcultural comparison, even the notion of what constitutes an 'object' was raised.

The round table dealt with 'theory and terminology', 'the intra-cultural perception of objects, versus the dissecting archaeological look,' 'the Object in the center' providing insight about the production and use, and the agents and the social framing, the opposite direction of 'Retro-engineering of objects and processes' via a close reading of text, and the venue of 'transculturally' manifest in the object.