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What's it all worth? Material possessions and value in past societies

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That objects do not possess innate value but have it projected upon them by people is a fundamental precept of archaeology. Objects may possess value through their materiality and its affordances (gold, wood, silicon, clay), but this value is far from static: it varies according to social, cultural, and environmental conditions, on timescales ranging from seasonality to the long durée. Moreover, worth and meaning may be gained (or lost) at any stage of an object's 'biographical' progress from raw material to workshop, from use to exchange or deposition. A key recent theoretical concept considers modes of perpetual becoming, where the object in its final form never comes to fruition but flows from one state to another, re-purposed, re-envisioned and re-valued. Further, an object's biography does not end when it is put into the ground. Some objects are buried with a view to their retrieval; others are seized from their resting places by archaeologists or looters, past or present. Realisations such as these have disrupted our belief in a neat, terminal and unidirectional 'biography' and complicate our understandings of value. The field of economic anthropology has long directed archaeological approaches to value, with concepts of alienable/inalienable possessions in particular being widely applied in archaeological interpretation. This borrowing often lacks contextual grounding, and is recently part of an overwhelming focus on elite prestige valuables. Now that the commodity/gift division is understood to be varied and mutable, can we move on to develop more nuanced understandings of the fungibility of different forms of possessions in past societies, and relationships between the values of different forms of property? This session will explore where the archaeology of value might take us in the context of contemporary material culture theory and welcomes papers from all periods exploring ideas of value and worth from the material record.

Presentation Preference - Regular session (half day)