

# Collection as (Re)assemblage: Refreshing Museum Archaeology

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## ABSTRACT

A number of recent publications, including a recent special issue of *World Archaeology*, have engaged with museum collections as assemblages that can be studied in their own right. This paper attempts to refigure 'collection' and 'assemblage' as action nouns, in order to explore the role these processes can have in generating understandings of the past, especially within museum settings. While nineteenth-century projects involving collecting and assemblage contributed fundamental disciplinary frameworks to archaeology, museums have increasingly been regarded as institutions exclusively focused on the archival storage of excavated material, and the display of archaeological knowledge generated through fieldwork. This paper makes the case that a creative and reflective reengagement with collection, as a process of assemblage and reassemblage, including in forms made possible by electronic media, has the potential to refresh museum archaeology for the twenty-first century, realigning it with other archaeological practices.

**KEY WORDS** collection; collecting; assemblage; reassemblage; museum, comparison

## Introduction

The recent *World Archaeology* issue dedicated to *Collection* (2016 Volume 48, Issue 2), succeeded in its intention to 'highlight some of the current contours of collection-based research', an increasingly vibrant sub-field of archaeology. Three of the papers concentrated on ethnographic collections from different parts of the Pacific (Flexner 2016b; Fowler, Roberts and Rigney 2016; Torrence and Clarke 2016) — a geographic area of focus for archaeological engagements with collections for some time (cf. Torrence 1993; Gosden and Knowles 2001). Four other papers explored collections and collecting practices with a much wider temporal and geographical range, from the impacts of Roman collecting of Egyptian Late Period statues (Colburn 2016) and the formation of British Iron Age hoards (Joy 2016), to collections of WW2 militaria in the Channel Islands (Carr 2016), and similar collections in Finnish Lapland (Herva et al. 2016). Finally, three papers considered collections that related to histories of archaeological practice: the distribution of Egyptian finds (Stevenson, Libonati, and Williams 2016), the collecting of Neolithic chalk art (Teather 2016) and the exchange of Australian stone tools (Sloggett 2016). What all papers in the volume shared, however, is that the collections they focussed on are safely distanced from contemporary archaeological practice.

Collection and collecting emerge from the volume primarily as objects of study and as foci for research. Indeed, one paper highlighted 'the ways in which collecting has severely compromised evidential function' (Sloggett 2016, 311), another suggested that nineteenth-century museum collections could be regarded as 'a supplement to archaeological research' (Flexner 2016b, 198), while other articles highlighted the peculiarities of amateur or historic collecting practices. This created the sense of collecting as a form of 'anti-archaeology', responsible for removing material from its depositional context: an 'other' against which contemporary professional methods and practices could be contrasted. Arguably this arises, at least partly, from a tendency for archaeology to imagine itself as a discipline founded primarily on excavation and fieldwork practices. This understanding of archaeology frames collecting and other museum-based practices as outside the disciplinary purview of 'archaeology' — a perspective captured in Hedley Swain's *Introduction to Museum Archaeology*:

Museums take the things that archaeologists dig up, keep them and put them on display, and interpret them for the public... Too often, the museums act as a repository for

archaeological material once the archaeologists have finished with it, and museums accept this role passively...

(Swain 2007, 12)

Despite developing a theoretically sophisticated vision of archaeology as ‘a science of new entities, new assemblages’ in his book *Understanding the Archaeological Record*, Gavin Lucas (2012, 265) appears to regard museums in similar ways. While he declares that his intention does not focus ‘on museums here but on archaeology as an academic discipline’ (Lucas 2012, 245), this formulation is itself extremely revealing. Lucas suggests that following excavation, ‘a bifurcation occurs with the archive, as it can enter two different disciplinary streams: museums and archaeology’ (Lucas 2012, 245). The roles available for the museum, it seems, are either as archive, or alternatively as a venue to display archaeological knowledge generated in the course of fieldwork. While many museums do attempt to manage archaeological excavation archives relating to their local areas, and mount displays of this type, restricting museums’ contributions to archaeology to these functions fails to do justice to the modes of archaeological work and knowledge production that are enabled by museum settings.

Connections have been made between Actor Network Theory and the study of museums and collections for nearly two decades. Two related volumes over the past decade in particular, *Unpacking the Collection* (Byrne et al. 2011) and *Reassembling the Collection* (Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke 2013), have attempted to grapple with the implication of treating museums and their collections as assemblages. However, the words assemblage and collection, while operating as concrete nouns, can also operate as action or event nouns, describing the processes of assembling and collecting (cf. Moutu 2007). While collections can productively be engaged with archaeologically, as artefacts, I intend to suggest that ‘collection’ urgently needs to be reconsidered as a mode of assemblage (and crucially reassemblage) that remains fundamental to many archaeological projects and practices — not least within museum settings.<sup>1</sup>

As someone engaged in museum practice, my aim here is to resituate collection as a valid mode of both historical and contemporary archaeological practice. If archaeology is ‘a science of new entities, new assemblages’ (Lucas 2012, 265), which ‘changes the past as it works on it, changing the assembled evidence’ (Fowler 2013, 2), then the projects of ‘assembly’ and ‘disaggregation’ that take place in museums deserve the same level of theoretical consideration and engagement as similar processes associated with fieldwork and excavation (cf. Lucas 2012, 234–44). By connecting ‘collection’ with recent considerations of ‘assemblage’ theory in relation to archaeological practice (Hamilakis and Jones 2017), I intend to make the case both for the historical significance and the contemporary potential of the museum as a site of archaeological labour.<sup>2</sup> This is crucial to moving beyond an assertion in the main extant textbook on museum archaeology, that ‘most of what museums do has absolutely nothing to do with archaeology’ (Swain 2007, 4).

Recognising some of the problems inherent in this situation, Swain suggested that:

One of the challenges of museum archaeology in the twenty-first century is to build an equitable relationship between the two worlds of archaeology and museums, and between the worlds of museum archaeology and the public.

(Swain 2007, 12)

Rather than attempting to build an equitable relationship, my intention is to suggest that these worlds have never been quite as distinct as they might appear.

### **Returning from the field**

In his preface to *World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum: A Characterisation*, Dan Hicks (2013, p. xi) pointed out the differences between museum archaeology as ‘a collaborative exploration of history, geography and materiality’ and ‘the regional or period-based specialization of lone

scholarship' suggesting that museum archaeology 'is perhaps akin to the process of archaeological excavation'. He has also referred to the museum as a 'kind of archaeological site (2013, 2). While there is some merit to the analogy, especially in relation to the collaborative dimensions of excavation and much museum work, it is perhaps significant that such analogies are felt to be needed, as a way of 'bringing archaeological approaches and sensibilities indoors' (Hicks and Stevenson 2013, 2). This is undoubtedly connected to the place of excavation has assumed as the dominant mode of archaeological knowledge production during much of the last century.

In attempting to re-orient the archaeology of the contemporary past away from its concentration on excavation as a mode of engagement, Rodney Harrison (2011) has expressed disquiet at what he calls archaeology's investment in the modernist trope of archaeology-as-excavation. He has suggested that an alternative would be to emphasise the trope of archaeology-as-surface-survey and a process of assembling/reassembling. While Harrison's position parallels my own, and certainly applies to museum collections as one type of surface assemblages that can be productively studied in this way (cf. Wingfield 2012), what is potentially concerning in this formulation is the substitution of one field technique, excavation, for another, surface survey. While Harrison has emphasised the discipline's investment in 'archaeology-as-excavation', it might be more accurate to diagnose a considerable investment in fieldwork. This arose in the early twentieth century, when many previously museum-based disciplines similarly reconstituted themselves as field sciences. The geographer of science, David N. Livingstone, however, has pointed out that the field is 'anything but the obvious scientific site it might initially seem to be':

Characterized by ambiguity and constituted by academic projects, fieldwork has nonetheless been installed as an operational answer to questions about appropriate ways of knowing for certain traditions of scientific inquiry. Absence from home and presence in the field, as the necessary precondition of bona fide knowledge, was the outcome of historical negotiations that gave the field sciences their distinctive place in the scientific division of labor. Here cognitive warrant was built on the foundations of the spatial practices, for fieldwork literally grounded the claims of the scientist.

(Livingstone 2003, 48)

If museums and their collections are not simply to be reconstituted as new fieldwork locales, whether for excavation or surface survey, what alternative futures are possible for museum archaeology? One possibility is the refiguring of collections as 'archaeological archives' and there is certainly a great deal of evidence that historic collections can contribute to contemporary research questions (Hicks et al. 2009; Baird and McFadyen 2014). Nevertheless, the notion of the museum collection as archive, like the notion of the museum as field site, positions the museum as a site of extraction, from which evidence may be gathered, to be assembled elsewhere. Developing an understanding of the museum as a museum, rather than as a field site or archive, is perhaps best approached through a reconsideration of archaeological labour and knowledge production in the period before archaeology constituted itself as a field science.

### **Assembling archaeological ages**

Bruce Trigger (1996, 121) has located the origins of scientific archaeology in work of Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865). In 1816, partly on the basis of his experience collecting and classifying coins, Thomsen was made responsible for a large collection of Danish antiquities, amassed over the previous decade by a Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities (Rowley-Conwy 2007, 36; Eskildsen 2012, 31). As further finds arrived at the museum, Thomsen instituted a standardised record for each group received (Rowley-Conwy 2007, 39). Starting from the notion of successive ages of stone, bronze and iron, Thomsen used the co-occurrence of artefacts in the same assemblages, which he called 'closed finds', to determine the relative dating of artefacts, including those made from materials used across different periods, such as gold, silver and glass.

Thomsen sorted artefacts into categories of use, which he refined by material, form and style of decoration. Ultimately this resulted in five groups of material, with the Stone and Iron Ages divided into early and late stages. According to Trigger:

Thomsen's observations of formal similarities among some of the artifacts that he assigned to the early and later phases of the Iron Age and between his later Iron Age and the historical period constituted the earliest, probably unselfconscious, use of a crude form of seriation to produce a prehistoric cultural chronology.

(Trigger 1996, 125)

Arguably, it was by bringing archaeological material into a single location, the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities, as a 'centre of calculation' which made it possible for Thomsen to undertake the work of comparison necessary to establish these relationships (cf. Olsen et al. 2012). However, it was also by physically arranging artefacts into series, according to materials and function within the space of the museum, that the three-age system came to be assembled (Eskildsen 2012, 34–5). It is noteworthy that the archaeological ages assembled by Thomsen were not simply the result of excavation — antiquarians had been active in northern Europe for centuries. Nor were they simply the consequence of archiving — amassing material in one place did not itself directly produce a system for sequencing and ordering it. Rather, it emerged from the creative, but also somewhat tentative process of reassembling material — a process that necessarily involved removing objects from their associations and assemblages in contexts of deposition. Indeed, this process of reassemblage was by no means complete when the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities opened to the public in 1819, but was a continuous process that took advantage of the relocation of the museum in the 1830s to develop new arrangements (Eskildsen 2012, 34). Ultimately it was the physical process of reassembling the collection that generated a relational framework that was novel, enabling newly excavated material to be understood in new ways.

### **Reassembling archaeological ages**

While Thomsen is credited with establishing the three age system as the central archaeological framework for understanding prehistory, the English polymath John Lubbock (1834–1913) is credited with coining the terms 'Palaeolithic' and 'Neolithic' in his 1865 book *Pre-historic Times* (Lubbock 1865; Trigger 1996, 147).<sup>3</sup> Lubbock's work also involved assembling material — he formed a collection of more than 1200 items from key prehistoric sites of the period, including St. Acheul and Hallstatt (Owen 1999, 284–9). According to Janet Owen, who has analysed this collection, it began in 1863 when Lubbock purchased a collection of 251 items, reluctantly sold by a Danish student, Vilhelm Boye, to fund his studies (Owen 1999, 291). Boye provided a catalogue written in English, linked to the collection by numbered labels. Lubbock thus acquired a collection that had already been assembled, consisting of artefacts, labels and catalogue, the shape of which was presumably significantly influenced by the arrangement of material within Thomsen's museum in Copenhagen.

Through his efforts, Thomsen made prehistoric chronology visible, but in the process assembled things in a way that would influence others to emulate him. Boye's collection enabled John Lubbock to start from Thomsen's assembled groupings to develop a more global framework: in Lubbock's hands, comparative material was added from sometimes distant locations in the British Empire. In a straightforward material sense, the collections made by Thomsen, Boye and Lubbock each constitute assemblages as groups of artefacts 'recurring together at a particular place and time, representing the sum of human activities' (Renfrew and Bahn 2008, 578). In another sense, however, these were also all reassemblages, since material was reconstituted in relation to ongoing projects of (re)classification and (re)organization. They are assemblages in the way this term has been used by Deleuze:

In assemblages you find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs... But an assemblage is first and foremost what keeps very heterogenous things together

(Deleuze 2007, 176–7)

In a Deleuzian sense, what Thomsen assembled was not simply a collection of artefacts, but a chronological framework of archaeological periods binding together artefacts, descriptions and their relations as constitutive parts. This framework could be reassembled in Boye's collection not only through his selection of prehistoric artefacts, but also through his adoption of labelling and cataloguing practices, and transmitted to Lubbock, who supplemented, reassembled and named the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic. Indeed, these assembled frameworks, with some modifications, continue to be cited, forming the basic chronological classification for many archaeological museum collections to this day, thereby continuing to form a core reference point for our understandings of the prehistoric human past.

### **Artefacts of history and 'natural history' as a 'way of knowing'**

In her classic paper, *Artefacts of History*, Marilyn Strathern (1990) contrasted the way in which Europeans and Melanesians engaged with both artefacts and events. She argued that a typical European response was to attempt to understand things in relation to an underlying cultural context, suggesting that:

Above all, he or she will "make sense" of individual incidents by putting them into their social or cultural context: an encounter with strangers requires understanding in terms of the society from which the strangers come, as a happening must be interpreted as an event in history.

(Strathern 1990, 37)

What Strathern argued was the case for 'Europeans', while possibly true of late-twentieth century British Social Anthropologists, was certainly not true of Christian Jürgensen Thomsen in the early nineteenth century. He could not attempt to understand artefacts from excavated contexts in terms of the significance they had for the people who made them, and had no adequate frames of reference in relation to which to situate them. They were literally artefacts of history, intruding into Thomsen's contemporary world, and he had to make what sense he could of them. To do so he had to assemble new artefacts on the basis of apparent relationships that existed between these artefacts and their assemblages.

Strathern also attempted to characterise the ways in which her idealised Melanesians might have related to events or artefacts:

One might imagine, however, that the Melanesian would understand encounters in terms of their effects... They construct further artefacts... to see what the further effects will be. And the revelation will always come as a surprise.

(Strathern 1990, 37)

Although Strathern noted that the modernist phase in anthropology was one in which the 'study of material culture became divorced from social or cultural anthropology' (1990, 37), she recognised that by giving 'attention to the artefact *qua* artefact' and displaying things in a way that 'minimises reference to wider social or cultural contexts', museologists might be behaving more like 'Melanesians' than her 'Europeans' (Strathern 1990, 39). If one puts to one side the modernist project of attempting to elucidate the 'world views' of 'others', a number of analogies emerge between the ways in which Strathern suggests that Melanesians responded to the unexpected

arrival of outsiders, and the ways in which Thomsen responded to the discovery of ancient artefacts. Without a ready-made context in relation to which he could relate and situate these artefacts, Thomsen constructed further artefacts in the form of museum displays. These were tested by their effects — their ability to assemble the material in ways that made new understandings possible, and the resulting revelations were presumably unanticipated and came as something of a surprise.

If a Melanesian notion of artefact includes performances and events, created in response to the other artefacts, we can certainly regard the exhibitions, displays and events developed within museums similarly — as artefacts that are themselves created as part of ongoing processes of reassemblage. However, this entails shifting common understandings of the work that museums away from an exclusive focus on archival storage and public engagement. Collection, as a mode of assemblage and reassemblage, is fundamental to the generation of forms of archaeological knowledge associated with description, comparison, classification, and generalisation. It is a ‘way of knowing’ which the historian of science, John Pickstone (Pickstone 2000, 12), has categorised as ‘natural history’ and positioned as the foundational basis for other modes of knowledge (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1966). It can be argued that museums have, at times, functioned as large-scale scientific instruments, akin to telescopes, which have combined technologies of containment and enchainment to materialise archaeological knowledge (cf. Lucas 2012, 178–214). In the case of Thomsen, the Royal Museum for Nordic Antiquities made archaeological ‘events’, and with them prehistoric chronology, visible and therefore communicable (Olsen et al. 2012, 40–3).

### **Museums, analysis and experimentalism**

Alongside ‘natural history’, Pickstone highlighted two other ‘ways of knowing’: ‘analysis’ and ‘experimentalism’. If collecting is a form of ‘natural history’, then archaeological excavation is arguably a form of ‘analysis’, a ‘way of knowing’ that seeks order by dissection in order to specify ‘the composition of the known’ (Pickstone 2000, 12). If ‘natural history’ allows the world to be known through practices akin to craft production, ‘analysis’ depends on forms of rationalised production associated with technical professionals and nineteenth-century industrialism. ‘Experimentalism’ by contrast is associated by Pickstone with ‘putting together elements and controlling them to create new phenomena’ through systematic invention. Pickstone has suggested that while disciplinary histories are sometimes narrated in terms of the replacement of one ‘way of knowing’ by another, most disciplines proceed by displacement, rather than replacement, as different ‘ways of knowing’ become dominant.

It is perhaps instructive to consider the rather different reputations attached to the museum work and the field work of General Pitt Rivers (aka Augustus Henry Lane Fox, 1827–1900), as a way to consider the displacement of collection by excavation within archaeology. Pitt Rivers’ approach to excavation, and particularly his richly illustrated Cranborne Chase volumes, remained a reference point for archaeology throughout the twentieth century, enabling him to acquire a reputation as a ‘father’ of field archaeology (Lucas 2001, 19). His museum work, by contrast, was, over time, largely dismissed as an effort to illustrate Victorian racial hierarchies, and the museum he established in Oxford was increasingly regarded as an ethnographic or anthropological museum, rather than an archaeological one. Pitt Rivers himself, most likely would have understood both strands of work as contributing to an overarching project to collect and reassemble both contemporary and historic artefacts in order to demonstrate the development of artefact types and their forms (Lucas 2001, 26). When his collection opened to the public in 1875, Pitt Rivers stated:

Since the year 1852 I have endeavoured to supply this want by selecting from amongst the commoner class of objects which have been brought to this country those which appeared to show connection of form. Whenever missing links have been found they have been added to the collection, and the result has been to establish, however imperfectly, sequence in several series.

(Lane Fox 1875, 294)

Pitt Rivers' collecting aims were effectively a continuation and expansion of those of Thomsen (Eskildsen 2012, 43), and are paralleled by Lubbock's attempts to globalise the three-age framework.<sup>4</sup> Pitt Rivers understood his project as inspired by the work of Natural Historians in developing evolutionary typologies of animal speciation, with archaeology replacing geology in providing the time depth against which evidence of relationships between contemporary examples might be compared (see Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers 1890).

The relationship between fieldwork and museum work in archaeology is extremely complex, but it seems that a number of major excavation projects in the early twentieth century were justified as a means to provide museums with artefacts that would contribute to museum based projects of global comparison and typology (Lucas 2001, 32; Stevenson 2013). While museums regularly sponsored major excavations, the sense that new discoveries primarily lay underground, where they would be discovered through increasingly analytical 'ways of knowing' associated with excavation, accompanied a shifting of the centre for archaeological research from the museum to the field during the twentieth century (Stevenson 2015).

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that 'analysis' as a 'way of knowing' was restricted to fieldwork and excavation, any more than 'natural history' approaches to classification and categorisation ceased to operate in the field. Frances Larson (2007) has demonstrated some of the ways in which Henry Balfour, the first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (1891–1939) and a University trained Natural Historian, engaged in forms of analysis that extended the museum's classificatory and comparative projects. In particular, Balfour's paper on the composite bow shows that he engaged in dissection as a means of understanding the composition of museum objects. He also engaged in 'experimentalism', including the knapping of stone tools, and experiments with other pre-industrial technologies (see Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007). However, these 'ways of knowing' when conducted in museum settings essentially remained in the service of 'natural history', enabling enhanced comparison and categorisation of artefacts within the museum.

One of the greatest contrasts that emerges between nineteenth and early twentieth-century museum archaeologists and mid to late twentieth-century field archaeologists is in the forms taken by the assemblages they were engaged in producing. Unlike museum archaeologists who spent their time assembling museums and collections, publishing relatively infrequently, fieldworkers have developed a textually focussed mode of production, generating written accounts that ground their syntheses in fieldwork experience. While we can read the texts produced by Lubbock as emerging from his collecting activities, with artefacts prominently illustrated to support his argument, many twentieth-century texts are based on evidence that arises from projects of assemblage involving texts, photographs and diagrams, as much as objects themselves (Lucas 2012, 246–57). Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that the contrast drawn by Strathern between Europeans and Melanesians is fundamentally a contrast between ways of making knowledge that are primarily textual, and those that are primarily artefactual, and that the fundamental challenge for museum archaeology in the twenty-first century is to build a more equitable relationship between these different ways of constructing knowledge.

### **Refreshing museum archaeology**

While Pickstone suggested that the History of Science has witnessed a partial displacement of 'natural history' by 'analysis and rationalisation' as well as by 'experimentalism and invention', he nevertheless argued for situating 'natural history' as a 'descriptive, classificatory way of knowing at the heart of the scientific enterprise — as a cultural achievement on which analytical and experimental modes are built and one which remains a major way of dealing with our world' (Pickstone 2000, 209). One of the reasons for this is that it is more continuous with ordinary language and experience than 'analysis' or 'experimentation', making it more accessible to untrained publics, who can become active participants in scientific projects of this kind (indeed he uses archaeology as a model of public participation). However, Pickstone (2000, 81–2) also highlighted the contemporary potential for an 'omnivorous' digital technology to expand the accumulating and

sorting of 'information' associated with the natural-historical 'way of knowing' well beyond the institutions that once anchored it (cf. Frieman and Wilkin 2016; Nancarrow 2016).

Arguably these are the same conditions which provide museum archaeology with a central role to play in an inclusive and expanded conception of the wider discipline of archaeology as 'a science of new entities, new assemblages' (Lucas 2012, 265) which '*changes* the past as it works on it, changing the assembled evidence' (Fowler 2013, 2). However, it would be wrong to suggest that the problems of museum archaeology are solely problems of conceptualisation and recognition. What nineteenth-century examples demonstrate is that collection, as mode of description, comparison and classification, inevitably involved near-continual processes of reassembly. While Thomsen reassembled prehistoric assemblages to create archaeological periods, Boyes reassembled a portable version, which Lubbock reassembled through additions and adjustments. Collection and reassemblage are endlessly iterative processes, which in archaeology work to reassemble material in a manner that better captures earlier human projects of assemblage.

Too often, however, processes of collection and reassembly in museums have stalled, with the result that the forms of classification and documentation operating in museums have been superseded by those current in the wider discipline. Collection as an ongoing process has been replaced by collections as artefacts, whose value lies chiefly in the evidence they provide of historic, now abandoned, projects of assemblage. This is in part because some museums have attempted to transform themselves into archaeological archives, rather than collections, but it is also a question of available funds (see Flexner 2016a). Given the shortage of resources faced by most contemporary museums, it would be impossible for them to attempt to restart nineteenth projects of global artefact typology and comparison — although making their collections available online provides the means for specialists to draw museum collections into digital projects of collection and reassemblage. However, there are also ideological and theoretical reasons why such totalising projects can be problematic.

David N. Livingstone has suggested that the shift of cognitive authority from the museum to the modern research university was accompanied by a 'realization that the meaning of artifacts is unstable and shifts depending on how objects are arranged' (Livingstone 2003, 40). While this may have contributed to the downgrading of 'their scientific significance' in the past, this can also be regarded as a significant opportunity in the present. Historic museum collections that were acquired in the pursuit of totalising projects of assemblage can be repurposed to meet alternative needs in the present. It is partly through a more explicit engagement with the way these practices have operated in archaeology's disciplinary past that it may become possible to move beyond the inherited and often superseded classificatory constructs which constrain so much current museum practice, enabling current and future museum archaeologists to develop modes of collection and (re)assemblage that are creative and revealing, while remaining intellectually productive (cf. Macdonald and Basu 2007). Work to recover indigenous agency from nineteenth-century ethnographic collections is one example, as is the testing of historic collections using new techniques of analysis, whether DNA sampling, residue analysis or X-ray fluorescence. The ability of historic collections to service multiple projects of assemblage, reassemblage and collection lies at the core of their ongoing potential, particularly when rendered in digitally accessible form.

Nicholas Thomas (2010, 7) has suggestively written about 'the museum as method', arguing that 'the activity and method of museum work was and is profoundly different from that of the academic discipline'. He has suggested that practices as seemingly simple as writing labels and juxtaposing different objects in displays can be highly contingent and unpredictable, arising from moments of 'discovery' that occur when objects are 'happened upon' in ways that disrupt existing disciplinary and political narratives (2010, 7). Thomas has suggested that simple questions such as 'what is it?' can enable an exploration of what particular categories and distinctions might mean (2010, 8). Such moments arise during the ongoing process of assembling and reassembling museum collections when there is a 'responsiveness to material evidence' (Thomas 2010, 8), of the kind



illustrated in the work of Christian Jürgensen Thomsen. However, using nineteenth-century craft production as a model for 'ways of knowing' associated with collection, while potentially inspiring for museum curators, does not capture the potential that arises when these ways of knowing are transposed into a digital realm. Rather than simply returning to nineteenth-century modes of practice, a renewed focus on collection as the creative assemblage and reassemblage of materials is intended to enable the development of new forms of museum archaeology 'in and of the present' (cf. Harrison 2011). It is by recapturing the possibility that new discoveries and forms of knowledge can arise from approaching collection as a creative process of (re)assemblage that museum archaeology will most effectively be refreshed for the twenty-first century.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Fowler (2013) for a consideration of assemblage in relation to the work of archaeological synthesis, and more recently in relation to typology (Fowler 2017).

<sup>2</sup> A recent special issue of the Cambridge Archaeological Journal has explored *Archaeology and Assemblage* more widely (See Hamilakis and Jones 2017), but its engagement with museums has largely been with the work of artists rather than museum archaeologists.

<sup>3</sup> This book also includes one of the first straightforwardly archaeological uses of the term 'assemblage', although Lubbock did not define it (Joyce and Pollard 2010, 295). For a more complex rendering of this history see Rowley-Conwy (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Lubbock became Pitt Rivers' son-in-law in 1884.

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## Notes on contributor

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CAPTIONS



**Figure 1** Drawing by Julius Magnus Petersen of Christian Jürgensen Thomsen showing a large golden ring to visitors at the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities in 1846. Courtesy Antikvarisk-Topografisk Arkiv, Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.



**Figure 2** Photograph of Henry Balfour reassembling collections in the Upper Gallery at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, most likely in the early 1890s. *Courtesy and Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.*