

Stefano Biagetti · Francesca Lugli  
*Editors*

# The Intangible Elements of Culture in Ethnoarchaeological Research

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Stefano Biagetti  
Barcelona, Spain

Francesca Lugli  
Rome, Italy

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# Introduction

Over the past decade, the “intangible” has become a key word in anthropological research and in heritage management. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in October 2003 by UNESCO, is explicitly aimed at “...*the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage...*” (Art. 2 of the text of the Convention, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention>). The recognition of a body of intangible values and practices beyond the materiality of places, monuments and artefacts, has direct relevance to ethnoarchaeological and archaeological research as well. Archaeological theories and methods regarding the explorations of the meaning and the significance of artefacts, resources, and settlement patterns increasingly focus on non-material evidence. In fact, concepts of *value* motivate and trigger human activities, in context-dependent ways. Every archaeological item, whether a monument or a single arrowhead, holds *immediate* value(s) linked to its physical and material attributes. We, as archaeologists, are able to study these tangible manifestations of human culture from technological, morphological, physico-chemical and many other materialistic points of view. On the other hand, we are aware that artefacts are likely to hold other *mediate* value(s), constructed through time and space and elaborated through individual and social memories. As a result, a variety of meanings is attached to “things”, in turn driving human attitudes toward them.

As a research strategy (or an approach), ethnoarchaeology has largely been used by archaeologists to investigate *all* the aspects of the archaeological record worldwide, including technology, material culture, settlement patterns, burial customs, and symbolic universe. Given its ancillary position, ethnoarchaeology has no intrinsic limits in playing its supporting role to archaeological research. Fairchild, Ruggles, and Silverlaine (Eds. 2009) recently pointed out that the fact that archaeological research has long focused on the study of tangible artefacts does not imply that the intangible elements become less important to understanding a culture. Therefore, the “intangible” thrives (also) in the *present* if one is to perceive it all, and, due to that, it can be approached by ethnoarchaeology. The “intangible” refers

to the conceptual dimension of material data, which is that conferring sense to things and ethnoarchaeology can venture in the non-material realm, and to the material consequences or by-products of intangible factors. This is the aim that binds the chapters of this book—namely, the ethnoarchaeological exploration of the non-material elements, processes, factors, and perspectives that can be observed in the present and used to improve our capacities of archaeological interpretation. Ultimately, the authors will look at the material correlate of non-material practices, and discuss whether they can be interpreted as cross-cultural regularities or particular/historically driven processes.

In the past, a wide range of cases had already highlighted the potential role of ethnoarchaeology in coping with the non-material activities and processes that lie behind the material outcome of human behavior. Seminal research carried out by Richard A. Gould (1980), I. Hodder (1982), and David et al (1988) are just some examples of how a set of non-material factors can affect the formation of the material (i.e., archaeological) record that operates within given societies. In this book, we gather the findings of a variety of scholars who deal with the problems that arise when moving from the material record to the social relationships that generated it, or ... *from stuff to people*. This book brings together scholars who are considering the role of the intangible in the interpretation of data in their ethnoarchaeological projects, with the aim of discussing the implications for archaeological research.

Readers will see how ethnoarchaeology shows great potential when applied to the perception and use of landscapes that are politically or socially charged and differently valued (e.g., Lyons, Biagetti, Lugli, Baroni, Bazzanella). Ethnoarchaeological investigation of these intangible perceptions of artisans, farmers, and pastoralists, reveal the ontological scaffolding on which, as Lyons suggests, social difference, meaning, and power arise. Similarly, in the study of artefacts, Cunningham suggests a more holistic approach, which includes explicit references to capitalism, which is in turn central to post-positivist ethnoarchaeologies that wish to move beyond the discipline's traditional concern with law-like behavioral material correlates in order to study intangible elements of culture. As an example, Piqué and colleagues, along with Lancelotti et al. focus on the social perspective of wood/plant collection and processing, exploring local knowledge and embedded procedures that can be used to generate hypotheses for the interpretation of the archaeobotanical records. Casey, Nandibling, and Grebska-Kulow's chapters, for instance, aim at highlighting the *different* roles of daily life objects that can be loaded with particular significance.

The book includes also some major contributions that stem from lifetime research projects and substantial theoretical material. Paul Lane stresses the potential of ethnoarchaeology as a research field to ultimately bridge the distinction between tangible and intangible heritage, considering it a by-product of Western philosophical tradition. The Pétrequins discuss the advantages and risks of their ethnoarchaeological and experimental approach to the circulation of polished axes in the Alpine region in the Neolithic, focusing on non-material values of those artefacts. By a "logiciste" approach, Gallay shows how prestigious goods are loaded with a variety of meanings that can be ethnoarchaeologically approached. A critical reassessment of the role of ethnoarchaeology in exploring the intangible practices behind material

artefacts is effectively provided by Cazzella, who sees a genuine paleo-ethnological approach as a tool to study past cultures from a holistic perspective. Ultimately, the observation and the study of recent and current cultural aspects from a multidisciplinary point of view can be useful for improving the ethnoarchaeological theoretical discussion. From this viewpoint, Forni is a paradigmatic example.

The wide variety of topics and case studies included in this volume shows that the ethnoarchaeology of the intangible elements of culture is a promising—yet puzzling—field. Usual criticisms directed toward our sub-discipline, such as the failure to find unambiguous material correlates, or its being limited to generating cautionary tales, are severely challenged by many of the authors of this volume, who claim a major involvement of ethnoarchaeology in the archaeological interpretive processes, especially when venturing into the realm of non-material significance embedded in artefacts, or even in landscapes.

Barcelona, Spain  
Rome, Italy

Stefano Biagetti  
Francesca Lugli

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# About the Editors

**Stefano Biagetti** is a Marie S.Curie post-doctoral researcher at the CaSEs (Complexity and Socio-Ecological Research Group) at the UPF Department of Humanities, where he is conducting research on the human-environment interactions of central Saharan pastoralists from historical to current times. His PhD (UCL Institute of Archaeology 2012) focused on the ethnoarchaeology of a group of Tuareg herdsman from SW Libya, where he investigated the reasons of their successful adaptation to a hyper-arid environment, and the implication for the archaeological research in such regions. He has published in major journals such as *Nature*, *Quaternary Science Reviews*, *The Journal of African Archaeology*, *Azania*, and *The African Archaeological Review*.

**Francesca Lugli** is the president of the Italian Society for Ethnoarchaeology (AIE). She carried out several excavations in Italy and abroad, and directed ethnoarchaeological research projects in Italy, Tunisia, and Australia, funded by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Italian Institute for Africa and Asia (IsIAO). She is currently leading ethnoarchaeological investigations in Mongolia and Siberia (Russian Federation), also funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which are focused on modern nomads, their campsites, their land use strategies, and their intangible heritage. She has edited six books on ethnoarchaeology and written more than 60 papers for international journals.



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## Chapter 23

# The Intangible Weight of Things: Approximate Nominal Weights in Modern Society

Nicola Ialongo and Alessandro Vanzetti

### Theoretical Context of the Study

One can well define the basic forms of materiality of an object by its dimensions or its size and weight. Weight, in particular, is crucial for the determination of the value of goods in most economic transactions. Even in modern technological and market economy society, there are circumstances under which weight itself is not routinely controlled. This form of “loose materiality” of things largely depends on another way of defining the proper quantity to be involved in economic processes, that of “portioning.”

The portioning process will be investigated using ethnoarchaeology, here assumed as the study of living contexts, and activities, in order to explore their material correlates (Longacre 1991). Furthermore, terms and definitions from Michael Schiffer’s “behavioral archaeology” have been borrowed (Schiffer 1976; Schiffer (ed.) 1995). While the case study is of affluent contemporary Italian society, a significant input for its implementation comes from ongoing research into past Bronze and Iron Age Mediterranean use of weight as a more or less precise descriptor of the quantity of exchanged and used metals.

### Past and Living Archaeological Implications

When archaeologists, using proper mathematical tools, look empirically for weight regularities—e.g., in past bronze object weights—some blurry concentrations or “peaks” of recurrent weight values can often be identified. A frequent

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N. Ialongo (✉) • A. Vanzetti

University of Rome “La Sapienza”, Scienze dell’Antichità, via dei Volsci 122, Rome, Italy  
e-mail: [nialongo@hotmail.com](mailto:nialongo@hotmail.com); [alessandro.vanzetti@uniroma1.it](mailto:alessandro.vanzetti@uniroma1.it)