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# Thing theory and lithics

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## Abstract

Presumably, all humans through the Stone Ages made at least one lithic artefact, most probably produced thousands. Lithic artefacts are still as very present today, as they were in the hands of past people, albeit handled and understood quite differently. They are found in billions around the world, they are like a fossil language with a multitude of dialects. They carry meanings and memories of past events. What is common through the times is that their full meaning is elusive, impossible to deplete – only fragments of their remembrance may be grasped.

Among the billions, every single lithic artefact is unique; archaeologists depend on simplified classification systems to oversee, analyse and communicate them. However, even the most sensible and successful systems used to classify lithic artefacts, drag along an unintended problem. They enhance and amplify our vision on certain lines of enquiry, while blurring others from sight.

This is evident throughout archaeology's research history and through all the efforts made to understand the multitude of memories lithics carry. The research history is long: In the early days, artefacts were studied in a naïve and intuitive functional manner. Later, they were grouped in 'types' to tighten chronological frameworks, moving away from their individual memories and function, while at the same time losing something of their vast variation. In line with the positivistic and strictly objective research tradition in processual archaeology, the functional aspects were completely and deliberately omitted from morphological classification systems. This improved the scientific communication of the basic technology and shapes of lithics. However, despite the obvious benefits, other problems followed. All of us bump into them as we study lithics, the implement at hand is more than a 'retouched flake' or a 'blade with concave retouch'. The terminology is unable to room the multitude of memory within the lithics. For instance, the cutting tool, the 'knife' that was probably the most common instrument in the past, is today absent as a morphological category in Norwegian museum catalogues. But there are ample 'retouched blades and flakes'. Similarly, researchers have gained new knowledge by studying 'attributes' to grasp variations in 'types', 'use wear' to approach function, 'experimental knapping', MANA, 'refitting' and 'chaîne opératoire' to gain insights into how lithics were produced. We have studied 'lithic raw material' and 'technological profiles' in lithic production to trace traditions and mobility. At present, there are considerable advances in the study of lithic technology. However, we need to be reminded that lithic artefacts have more to tell us, how lithic instruments were hafted, how they were used and what they did and do in their world still remains somewhat in the shadows.

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New and valuable knowledge is produced by all the mentioned methods, and all efforts in methodological expansion deserves generous credit. The point is that they all shed light on a tiny part of the bigger potential of lithics, and (unintentionally) restrict our ability to envision both the past and the contemporary agency of lithics. In this session, we would like to highlight the dilemmas associated with how lithic are studied and encourage new theoretical and methodological approaches aimed at better understanding the human–thing entanglements that flow from the billions of living lithics we have at hand.

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