



Susanna Harris

TAG 2009, “Wrapping Objects”

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UK

The Theoretical Archaeology Group, abbreviated to TAG, was set up in 1979 to encourage debate and discussion on theoretical issues in archaeology. It is now one of the major annual archaeology conferences in the UK. During the conference the session “Wrapping Objects” explored textiles as one of many materials used to cover and contain objects and to develop the concept wrapping in archaeology.

Seven research presented paper. Susanna Harris explored wrapping materials and introduced concepts of wrapping from social anthropology. This ranged from gift wrapping as formal presentation and concealment to layers of packaging materials as a means to enhance sensory experience, add information and value. Three papers were based in the Americas. Peter Whitridge (Memorial University of Newfoundland) presented his research on dressing wooden dolls as a feature of Inuit play and learning. Wendy Whitby (University of Central Lancashire) looked at how the Chumash used basketry, pottery and grasses to conceal ceremonial objects at cave sites. Kirsten Halliday (The British Museum/University College London) took a technological approach, showing wrapping as a style of production on the Peruvian North Coast. Here the covering and layering principals of textile technology were translated into ceramics and metals. Researching Bronze Age Mesopotamia, Agnès Garcia-Ventura (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona) described the special role of wrapping in foundation deposits, with textile and clay used to envelope cuneiform tablets.

Christina Riggs (University of East Anglia) looked at the ancient Egypt practice of wrapping mummies and shrine statues in linen textiles, and the associated ideas of the ritual cleanliness of linen and the role of women in production. From Copper Age Europe, Lesley MacFayden (FLUP) presented buildings and

clay construction materials as a means of containment. Margarita Gleba looked at the way textile wrapping was simultaneously used to increase and decrease the visibility of objects in Iron Age burials in Italy – from dressing cremation urns to ritually killing mirrors and other metal items.

A number of themes came up in the discussion. Wrapping often seems to be used to add value, change the nature of objects or separate them from unwrapped versions. There is also the question of who wraps the objects and how this relates to production. In terms of materials, wrapping may consist of multiple layers using combinations of soft, flexible materials such as basketry and textiles in combination with hard, inflexible materials such as wooden boxes followed by further containment inside caves or buildings. A recurrent theme was the importance of unwrapping. In this archaeologists of earlier times may have been a little too keen to unwrap their treasures, often cleaning off or discarding the ancient wrapping materials.

The wrapping theme has barely been explored by archaeologists and the TAG session was an excellent arena to encourage initial discussion on the applicability of this concept in archaeology. Judging by the level of discussion and the range of speakers, the concept and practice of wrapping offers potential for textile specialists to explore their material in new ways. In May 2010 this session was followed up by “Wrapping and Unwrapping the Body – Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives” at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, UK. (see next ATN issue). Selected papers from these two sessions will be published.