



Figure 1: The Arma Christi scroll located in The Bar Convent, York, North Yorkshire. Photo

Credit: Francesca Lucia Caitar, 2025.

## Introduction

Archeology, at its core, is the loyalty and obligation to *things*, taking their materiality and object-hood seriously. A mediation of the tangible past and present where caring about *things* is further than the practical, it is caring for the impact they had on humanity and sequentially, humanity's impact on *things* (Olsen, B. Shanks, M. Webmoor, T. Witmore, C. 2012, 4, 3, 2). It is a commitment, a *fidelity* to materials, that archaeology delivers messages whether analytical, critical and/or speculative which relates to the core of the human condition (Olsen, B. Shanks, M. Webmoor, T. Witmore, C. 2012, 4, 3, 2).

This paper will proceed to consider and evaluate the main contributions of material culture theory, specifically highlighting the contributions of theory in areas of production and consumption to understanding the archaeological record. To achieve this, the paper will give a short introduction to material culture theory followed by an in-depth consideration of object biography and entanglement theory applied to an illuminated medieval scroll, concentrating on the area of production and consumption.

Material culture theory focuses on theories that surround material objects or *things* and their 'culture'. The lives of these materials reflect the hands of the creator, the viewer and the moulder. To understand the archaeological record, theories are used to develop ideas about the past. Theorising on the material culture of the past developed rapidly during and onwards from the 1920s with theorists such as Gordon Childe, Lewis Binford and importantly for this paper, Ian Hodder. Since then, each theory after has expanded upon, redeveloped, or, in some way completely argued against previous theories, such as the processualists and post-processualists, or later the humanists and post-humanists.

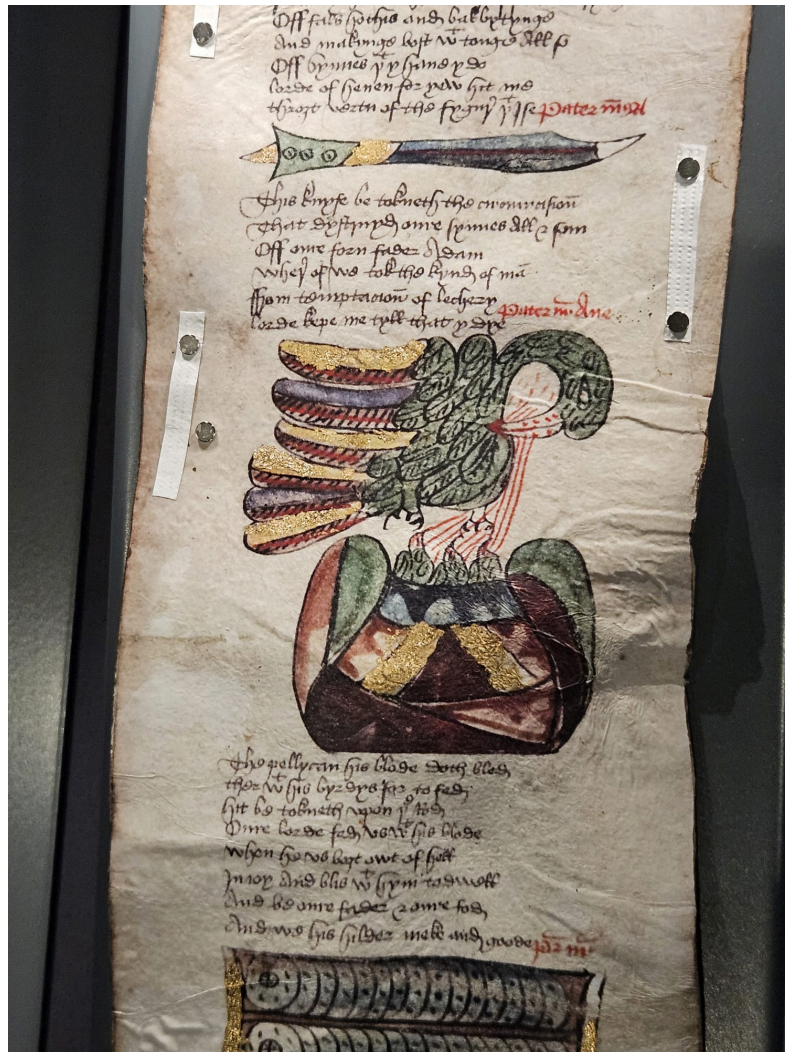


Figure 2: The Arma Christi scroll located in The Bar Convent York, North Yorkshire. Photo

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### Object Biography

At the heart of object biography are the links between people and *things*; objects can be seen as social actors that change social actions through their construction and influence which, had they not existed, may have not happened. The history of objects can be seen in the way they are composed of shifts in perspective and context (Gosden, Marshall, 1999, 172, 173, 174).

Objects can obtain 'prestige' through their association with certain events, such as the Arma Christi scroll pictured in *figures 1, 2, and 3*. The scroll, through its connection with the past, develops itself as a relic of events that have transpired to it rather than a reflection of the

events of history. The medieval historian Arnold (2014) suggests that rather than thinking of objects as a *thing* acted upon as only what people do with objects, we should consider the possibility that objects can act upon people and with them (Arnold, 2014, 65).

A significant area of an object is its biography; Gosden and Marshall (1999) provide the central idea that objects as well as people gather change, movement and time, which constantly transforms them. Their transformations are intimately tied with each other, the history of humans and objects respectively inform the other; object biography seeks to address social interactions between objects and people to create meaning (Gosden, Marshall, 1999, 169). They both contribute to the ideas of production and consumption within archeological themes of study.

Objects of relevance to the belief structures of medieval Christianity break the tradition of seeing objects as lacking a constitutive role. These *things* as they have been used, practiced and experimented with in the context of medieval Christianity in relation to religious devotees, become relevant to the practices and beliefs of medieval Christianity in such a way that they become less of a story teller but the story itself (Arnold, 2014, 66). The materials can be studied as an object which, within itself holds the physical traces of belief and devotion – they communicate the active relationships they carry with religious devotees (Arnold, 2014, 72).

This paper develops an understanding of how meaning emerges through social action with artefacts, a mutual process of creating value between people and *things*. When considering the scroll within *figure 2*, the *Arma Christi* illuminated scroll, archeologists can discover the significance, connections and meanings, despite the ‘static’ state the scroll has lived in. The creation, use and discovery gives meaning to this object, the ‘what if’ the unanswered questions, who made it, all relating to its place of discovery within the Bar Convent of York. To further the biography of this object, the Convent held a religious mass based on the scroll, a recording of which can be accessed online, therefore adding an accumulated value. Those who have encountered the scrolls in person, culminating the addition of spectacle, added upon this historical object is carried for the rest of its life.



The use of object biography to interpret the archaeological record has helped shape the way archeologists have thought about objects, developing from a processual view of objects as a list of criteria into a further, deeper understanding that objects hold within themselves further meaning than what can be observed under a list of 'ingredients' of what makes an object. Of relevance to the chosen artefact of this essay is the idea of production, in the way the scroll was made. Also in the case found and the idea of consumption, the way the scroll has been used during mass as a *thing* that shares its wisdom and history with the visitors, it contributes itself to the body of knowledge, to a service.

The scroll is capable of having its biography written as if it were a person, as suggested by Kopytoff (Kopytoff cited in Joy, 2009:540). The birth of the scroll is intertwined with the parchment maker, who created the surface, its face, using sheepskin, followed by the artist and scribe who worked together on the poem itself, perhaps simultaneously (Bar Convent, 2026). Following this is the life of the scroll, which we know very little of, the five hundred years it spent outside of living or recorded memory. What the archivist of the convent has found, is the responsive text written in red on its surface, perhaps an indication of its use in communal as well as private prayer. Lastly, we know the life of the scroll as its state of loss within the box it was found, unfortunately, we know little else. As for the death of the scroll, this paper must state that it has not yet died, as its 'social relationship' has not ceased (Holtorf, 1998 cited in Joy, 2009:540), only temporarily paused until it was found again, where its relationship with religion, prayer and communal worship has been resuscitated, as can be seen in the '*Recording of the Arma Christi Mass*' from the 9th of May, 2025. However, archaeologist Joy (2009) may state that an object can surrender to multiple deaths as it leaves and enters different spheres of relationships, such as its change from being in use in 1475 to its silence until its finding, then to its place under a transparent box in the museum part of the convent, where it has acquired a new relationship.



Figure 3: The Arma Christi scroll located in The Bar Convent York, North Yorkshire. Photo

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### Entanglement Theory

Hodder (2012) in his book on the material culture of archaeology, *Entangled*, sets out to define entanglement in chapter five. It is outside the scope of this essay to follow all aspects of his theory so a summary must do. Firstly, Hodder sets out a series of themes about *things*, such as the dependence of humans on *things*, or the dependence of *things* on humans, at times it depends entirely on its use as a *thing* in relation to other *things* (Hodder, 2012). Using the image of the medieval scroll in *figure 3*, to emphasise this, the parchment and the pigments painted on are two *things* connected by a human person, an artist, at once to create an illuminated scroll, yet without the human, the parchment and pigments it would not have existed.

Hodder states that entanglement is simply the addition and dialect between four sets of dependences and dependencies; the dependence of *things* on *things*, humans on humans, humans on *things* and *things* on humans (Hodder, 2012, 88). He builds the ways in which *things* and humans are involved, dependent and intertwined with each other, that the actions of one, *thing* or human, can directly affect the other in a form of “sticky entrapment”

(Hodder, 2012, 94, 95). This theory contributes to the themes of study within production and consumption of material culture, it helps archeologists understand the way certain objects are produced through the interconnectivity of dependences and dependencies or in other cases consumed through the similar influence of material objects and humans and their impact on the entanglements. Entanglement is made out of the way these actors and subjects are bound and tied together by a series of differing strands of entanglement which tug and constraint each other (Hodder, 2012, 97).

The knowledge we have about the material nature of scroll in *figure 1, 2 and 3* is of a generalised nature. The starting point in evaluating entanglement is the scroll's composition in the forms of materialism and uniqueness it shares with other scrolls of a similar nature, physical location and condition. Importantly for this artefact is the immaterial, the usage of the scroll in prayer, in mass, the entanglement of the scroll to the current nuns living at the convent and conversations that have happened, its missing 500 years of history all just a web of entanglement we have not discovered. The use of the scroll as a case study in this paper opens the opportunity for future entanglements which would not have been possible without this.

An experiment has been attempted in creating a tanglegraph based on the theory presented by Hodder. The inspiration for this stemmed from wanting to visually see the networks between differing stages of creation that eventually lead to the Arma Christi Scroll. For this graph (*see figure 4*) one of the most prominent subjects is the recurrence of 'skilled human' who is essential to the evolution of certain materials, namely the gathering of resources such as wood and metal, the role of the farmer in keeping sheep, the role of the human to treat the sheepskin into parchment, later the role of the human in becoming the illustrator who uses pigments to paint the scroll and the role of the scribe, a human, in writing the poetry on the scroll which funnels down into the *Arma Christi* scroll.



Figure 4: Simplistic Tanglegraph of the Arma Christi scroll, created by author. 2026.

### Critical Evaluation

In considering the roles and contributions of theory, object biography and entanglement theory will be evaluated using a more critical eye, focusing on the effectiveness of these to understand the archeological record as well as counter arguments of when their use would prove ineffective.

When undertaking the creation of an object biography, the researcher must have a good base of knowledge on the life of the object so far, from archaeological find to written documentation, the object – in this case the Arma Christi scroll – can only effectively have an object biography if something tangible exists for archaeologists to study. The large gap in its history, the distinctiveness of the object – which in this case isolates it, its unknown origins and owner all serve to make object biography harder. On the other hand, its presence now does open the opportunity for the scroll to collect a new biography, creating and developing new connections between itself, other *things* and humans. It creates a means of understanding that objects develop history alongside us, thereby having their social value established.

The area of *entanglement* and how it has contributed to understanding the archaeological record is much more active, although it still retains a similar problem of a lack of knowledge



regarding the object's history. The contribution of entanglement to archaeology is furthering the idea that *things* are likely to influence human lives and correspondingly humans can impact the life of *things*. This allows archaeologists to integrate differing areas of history into particular objects, such as the role of sheep farmers in creating medieval parchment. The interconnectedness of this object to actions in history that do not only relate in the short term is to be appreciated, as well as thought deeply about on a further academic level. As concluded by Hodder (2012) in his book, the attractiveness of entanglement is the 'messiness' of the methods by which it catches objects and people within this web of shared histories and futures all tugging and pulling together.

The theme of production, specifically of the scroll, relates to the way it was produced and how this facilitated further interactions with *things* or humans. The need for a surface to write on suggests an interaction between farmer and tanner, a need for writing by the scribe and a reader to pass the knowledge, this entertainment of need and function produces the object. Whereas the theme of consumption relates to the use and eventual exhaustion of an object, their use rather than production and distribution and how this is reflected on the object, more importantly, how the object reflects the culture studied. Such as the wearing down of the scroll as it gets unrolled and rerolled, the accumulation of touch on the surface, the wearing down of ink as it gets exposed to different conditions and light. The consideration of production and consumption alongside object biography and bibliography is crucial to understanding the archaeological record.

With regards to themes of production, such as the methods of production, material or immaterial such as direct creation of scrolls or relationships between scrolls and people, the theories accomplish, as illustrated by this paper, a substantial job at deciphering the social relationships produced through the creation as well as usage of this scroll within a ceremonious, religious way. On the other hand, with consideration on the theme of consumption – how *things* are used – the theories paint a trajectory for the life of the object but most prominently, the consumption of materials leading to the possibility of 'evolution' or 'transformation' of one stage into another, the theories stated are reasonably effective at the evaluation and prognostication of how a *thing* has or is going to be used.

## Conclusion

The main aspect of this essay is how object biography and entanglement has contributed to understanding the relationship between humans and *things*. The archaeological record benefits greatly from in depth conversation on the manner in which we as archaeologists think about and act upon objects, such as how we perceive the scroll mentioned throughout this essay as important, and why.

Alongside this, our impacts on objects and their 'lives' deserves further thought and insight to understand the archaeological record; having a grasp of material culture theory opens pathways to further the field as well as the thinking of archaeologists. By making sure to go beyond the study of archaeology as a purely material study of *things* and into an interpretation of objects and human life, the archaeologist can study the past to a fuller magnitude. Objects such as the *Arma Christi* scroll are overflowing with potential history and interpretation, for which material culture can provide a path of discovery.

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