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# Material Mnemonics

Everyday Memory in Prehistoric Europe

*edited by*

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## The art of memory: Personal ornaments in Copper Age South-East Italy

*Robin Skeates*

*This chapter explores how body ornaments might have been involved in a social process of constructing and transforming memories during the fourth and third millennia BC in South-East Italy: a time of growing socio-economic instability and competition in which appearances and memories mattered. It is argued that ornaments may have served as thought-provoking 'mnemonic devices', whose appearance and feel stimulated memories and facilitated their reinvention. Various strategies may have been employed in this process, including: reproduction and citation; association and displacement; selection, collection and ordering; display, inspection and representation; and distancing.*

### *Introduction: ornaments and memory*

Body ornaments are emotive and memorable cultural forms, which are often regarded as symbolically and socially significant. Combining a biographical approach to prehistoric artefacts with recent thinking about objects and memory (e.g. Appadurai ed. 1986; Hoskins 1998; Kavanagh 2000; Radley 1990), this paper aims to explore how such ornaments may have been involved in a social process of constructing and transforming memories in Copper Age South-East Italy.

From the Upper Palaeolithic onwards, people used a variety of ornaments in this region. Most seem ordinary, made of accessible raw materials, such as seashells, animal teeth and bones, whose physical properties were enhanced by makers using relatively simple techniques, such as perforation, carving and incision. In the Neolithic burial cave of Grotta Scaloria Alta in northern Puglia, for example, a large collection of naturally shiny and perforated tubular seashells was found in association with a human skull (Winn and Shimabuku

1980: 8–9). This may have been attached to a skull-cap, like to those found with Gravettian burials in this and other parts of Italy (Mussi 2001: 255–256). Other ornaments, however, seem more valuable, both in terms of the more restricted, exotic and visually distinctive materials used, such as greenstone and copper imported from neighbouring and more distant places and peoples, and in terms of the degree of their physical modification, using more innovative styles and laborious techniques such as polishing and drilling, to create more regular forms such as beads, rings and bracelets (cf. Perlès 2001: 221–226). They could be singular, particularly when used as personal ornaments, as in the case of the Iceman's polished white marble bead attached to a tassel of fur (Spindler 1995: 116–117). But, over time and space, these durable ornaments also accumulated dynamic and diverse associations and values, particularly during the course of their circulation through extended social networks of exchange and obligation, in which, like kula shells, they were displayed, evaluated, kept and given (cf. Campbell 1983; Malinowski 1922; Weiner 1992). During this process, they were sometimes collected and combined in sets and ultimately sacrificed in that form in burials. For example, a necklace of 62 steatite beads was found in the Copper Age burial cave of Grotta Cappuccini near Galatone (Cremonesi 1985: 58). This was probably imported, indirectly, from northern Italy, where steatite beads were manufactured at Copper Age sites such as Pianaccia di Suvero in Liguria and also circulated via exchange networks (Barfield 1981: 44; Tiscornia 1987). But at other times groups of ornaments were deliberately displaced, refashioned, refined, recombined and re-ordered, or accidentally lost or stolen. Traces of these transformations are occasionally reflected in the signs of modification, wear, patina and ageing surviving on the surface of the ornaments, although the cumulative effect of these processes generally erased earlier signs. Miniature greenstone axe blades, for example, found at Neolithic sites such as Passo di Corvo and Via Galliani in northern Puglia, were well-travelled exotic objects that were locally transformed by being perforated and polished, perhaps to be recycled as amulets, having become too small to use as tools but too valuable to discard (Skeates 1995: 291–292).

Contextually, ornaments were closely associated with people and their bodies, and so they inevitably became entangled in their social practices and relations, and imbued with their identities, values and potencies. For example, in the representational art of Neolithic and Copper Age South-East Italy (and, indeed, northern Italy), necklaces were regularly associated with the gendered bodies of women (Holmes and Whitehouse 1998: 108–110), perhaps within a system of social reproduction in which men attempted to control both. In particular, prehistoric artists appear to have represented desirable necklaces and breasts on

Later Neolithic female clay figurines found at Passo di Corvo and Canne, and on a group of Copper Age female stone statue-stele at Sterparo (Acanfora 1960; Radina 1992; Tinè 1983: 98–99; Tunzi Sisto 1999). As aesthetically appealing, tactile and culturally meaningful objects, ornaments complemented the human body, and enhanced its natural attractiveness and expressiveness. They also helped to secure and transform social relations between interacting people, by visibly framing and highlighting their identities, including their kin-based and community affiliations, their age-based status and their gender differences (cf. Robb 1997; Whitehouse 1992a). They would have been particularly effective in this way during special gatherings of members of normally dispersed social networks, in which bodily appearances and non-verbal communication mattered. They even extended the body's capabilities, acting as valued intermediaries when circulating between people over long distances and across generations (Finnegan 2002: 247–248). Seashells in Neolithic South-East Italy, for example, were transported over distances of up to some 50 kilometres inland from the coast, while 'greenstone' artefacts travelled much further from sources in the Alps or South-West Italy (Leighton and Dixon 1992).

Ornaments may also have served as thought-provoking 'mnemonic devices', whose appearance and feel stimulated remembering and facilitated forgetting. Such objects, more commonly labelled today as memorabilia, mementoes, souvenirs, heirlooms or heritage (*e.g.* Lillios 1999), can evoke powerful memories of the past people, relations, places, events, stories and beliefs with which they have been associated. Rosaries, generally consisting of a repetitive and orderly string of knots of beads, are a good cross-cultural example. They are generally designed as an aid to the memory and, when used in religious practices, can facilitate counting the recitation of prayers or the repetition of the names and attributes of a deity (Blackman 1918). These kinds of object can stimulate people to remember, talk about, celebrate and make sense of their past and present life experiences, both personal and collective, and they can trigger emotions ranging from pleasure and pride to nostalgia, sadness and shame. They also comprise part of the cultural process through which people selectively materialise, commemorate, project into the future and relinquish their personal and shared memories and views of the past. These memories may, in turn, play a crucial part in the formation of shared and differentiated social identities and values in the present. Prehistoric ornaments would seem to be well-suited for use in this way, particularly as a consequence of their durability, their mobility, their expressive aesthetic properties, and their close association with various kinds of human body: living, dead and represented. In particular, through their display, exchange, inspection and evaluation, old and well-travelled ornaments may have

stimulated people to remember the histories of their use and the ancestral places and people from which they came and through which they continued to be connected (cf. Whittle 2003: 102–111). In other words, they could have acted as vehicles that made people subjectively sense the presence or proximity of the Other (Chapman 1998: 109). This process may have been dominated by elders, not only because it is possible that they controlled the circulation of the most highly valued items of exchange, but also because older people's memories tend to be richer, deeper and more numerous, being interwoven with their broader life experiences (Kavanagh 2000: 104). However, memories of the ornaments' biographies and origins could also have been unintentionally clouded, lost and forgotten, particularly when objects became divorced from their original contexts of use. They could also have been intentionally hidden, distanced, reinvented and transformed, especially during ritual and artistic performances. As potentially ambiguous material symbols, they could have been mobilized with the aim of advertising and legitimating both old and new social knowledge, narratives and orders, with reference to the past. Their historic meanings could also have been disputed by different people, particularly since memories associated with personal objects can be highly individual.

### *Copper Age ornaments and the construction of memory*

Below, I shall argue that this process of remembering, forgetting and reinvention lay at the heart of the material and visual culture of the Copper Age in South-East Italy. More specifically, I shall propose that, at a time when exchange networks were being expanded and social relations renegotiated, traditional memories carried by well-travelled ornaments may have been increasingly reworked in order to establish and legitimate the reinvented social histories of strengthened kin groups.

Compared to the Neolithic period (c. 6100–4100 BC), the archaeological record of the Final Neolithic and Copper Age (c. 4100–2300 BC) in South-East Italy is characterised by clear patterns of continuity combined with significant transformations in the procurement, manipulation and representation of visual material in general and ornaments in particular (Cinquelpalmi *et al.* 2004; Skeates 2005: 75–158). Portable art-forms include a significantly expanded variety and quantity of personal ornaments, tools and pottery vessels of various materials, forms and origins. Copper Age body and clothing ornaments include: beads of bone, shell, baked clay, wood, and stone, including imported steatite, basalt and amber; pendants of stone, boars' tusk and leather; perforated seashells and teeth



*Figure 4.1. Bossed bone plaque from Casal Sabini (Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Altamura).*



*Figure 4.2. Decorated jar from Grotta Nisco (Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Altamura).*

of deer, dog, fox and shark; copper rings; carved bone pins with decorated heads; and grooved bone toggles. A rare finely decorated bossed bone plaque, probably carved from the long bone of a sheep or goat, was also found close to a body in a rock-cut tomb at Casal Sabini near Altamura in central Puglia (Figure 4.1). It exhibits close stylistic similarities to other examples from southern Puglia, Sicily, Malta, Greece and Turkey. These objects may have been exchanged over long distances, perhaps having been originally manufactured by members of the Castelluccio culture in South-East Sicily (Holloway 1981: 11–20; Setti and Zanini 1996), and at least would have evoked distant stylistic connections. An indirect indication of the growing cultural significance of these ornaments might also be provided by the predominant style of decoration seen on contemporary fineware in South-East Italy, which changes from Neolithic geometric motifs painted over the surface of light figulina ware and comparable to textile patterns, to Copper Age incised lines, impressed points and raised studs arranged in a more restrained fashion on dark burnished ware, particularly around the upper body of vessels, like necklaces (Figure 4.2).

People occasionally deposited ornaments at settlement sites, such as Cerfignano in south Puglia, where two perforated fossil shark's teeth, a bauxite nodule pendant and some boars' teeth were found (unpublished material in the Museo

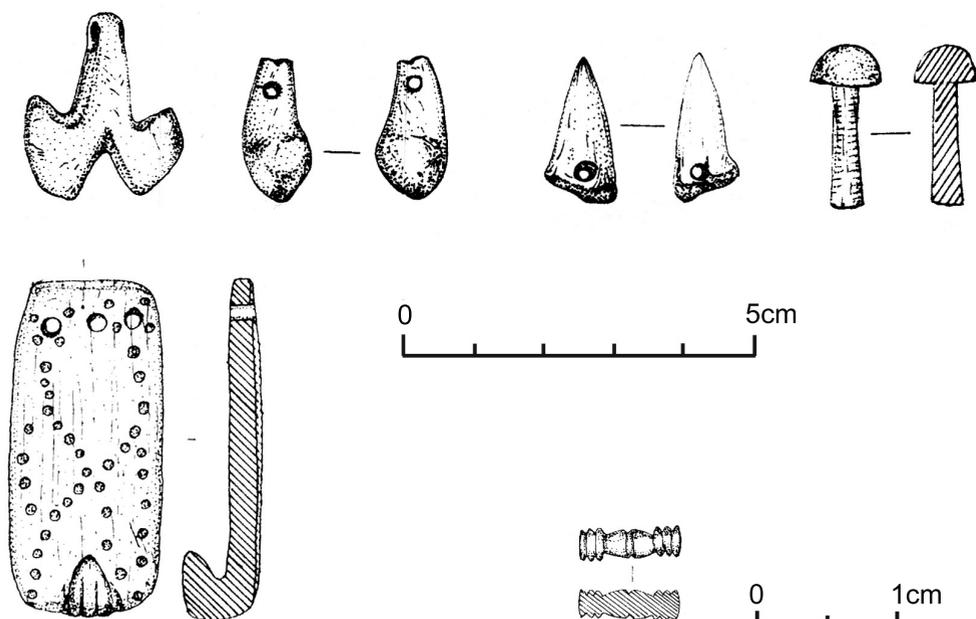


Figure 4.3. Bone ornament grave goods from Grotta Cappuccini: (1) pendant, (2) perforated deer canine, (3) perforated shark's tooth, (4) pin head, (5) toggle, (6) decorated plaque (after Ingravallo 2002).

Provinciale 'S. Castromediano', Lecce). However, ornaments were especially deposited in the mortuary domain (Figure 4.3). Here, increasingly elaborate funerary rites focussed attention on the successive collective burial of relatives, especially adults, accompanied by larger collections of valued goods, in sealed but accessible underground chambers, ranging from traditional burial caves to novel rock-cut tombs, which were increasingly separated from contemporary settlements. The average individual appears to have been accompanied by just a couple of ornaments, two or three tools and a pottery vessel. The largest assemblage in Copper Age Puglia comes from rock-cut Tomb 3 at Laterza (Biancofiore 1967). This housed the remains of about 100 individuals and contained over 67 ornaments of a wide variety of types and origins, as well as over 100 tools of copper, stone and bone, and numerous pottery vessels. Ornaments were also occasionally represented on novel forms of 'landscape art', including groups of statue-stele, menhirs and rock engravings, established in vantage points overlooking major fluvial and maritime communication routes (Figure 4.4). At Sterparo in northern Puglia, for example, some 'female' statue-menhirs were ornamented with: a series of vertical segments arranged at the

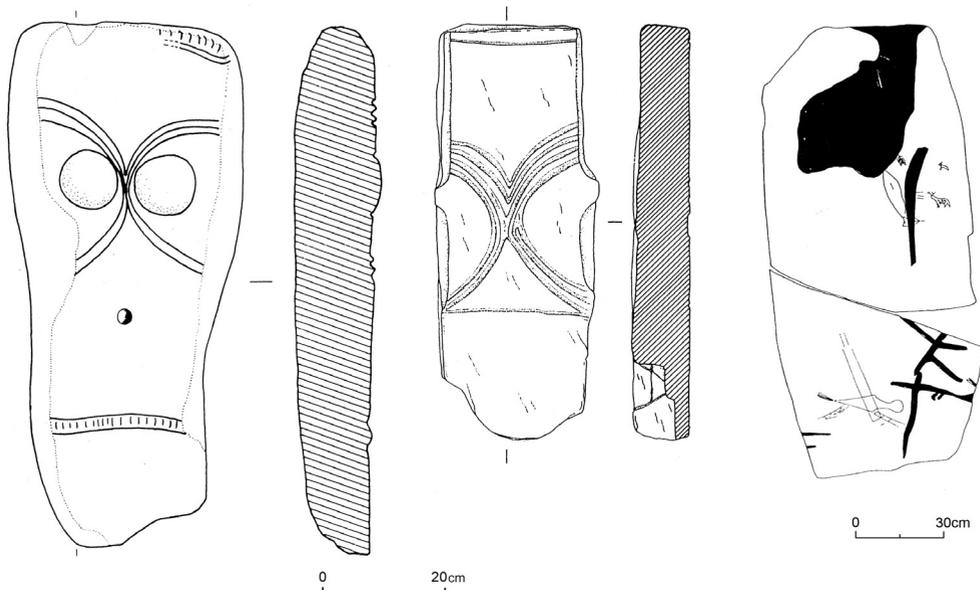


Figure 4.4. *Statue-stele from Bovino (after Tunzi Sisto 1999).*

top, interpreted as a head-dress; circles carved in relief, interpreted as breasts; concentric circles and spiral motifs above, between and around the ‘breasts’, interpreted as necklaces and circular ornaments; a hole further down, interpreted as a navel; and bands of horizontal incised lines towards the bottom, possibly representing a belt.

In producing this visual material, local people maintained their traditions, but they also rejected and reinvented them, with increasing ambition. In particular, they conformed and contributed to more widely shared styles. They absorbed novel stylistic elements, artefacts and raw materials (including small amounts of copper) from a wider variety of sources within the Mediterranean, and they produced socially and symbolically valued artefacts and monuments that helped to establish distant social connections and local social distinctions. This contributed to the establishment of a distinctive new culture in Copper Age Puglia, integrated by a more innovative and exotic set of cultural concepts, practices and symbols compared to the Neolithic.

These transformations were arguably brought about by local people who responded to demands placed upon them by influential members of their social groups. At the same time, they participated in a more expansive and competitive social ‘tournament’, based upon the control of local resources, reciprocal gift-exchange and warfare, in which individuals may have sought to further enhance

the status and prestige of themselves and their supporters, particularly through more overt visual displays. As a consequence, valuable objects of beauty were carried and worn about their bodies, and repeatedly sacrificed as votive gifts during formalised ritual performances enacted at significant places in the landscape, such as statue-stele and rock-cut tombs. These performances may have symbolised and constructed socially advantageous claims and prestigious connections: between the social bodies of living members of extended kin-groups, their ancestors, the supernatural and the landscape within which they all resided. They may also have highlighted social distinctions, between and within communities.

Body ornaments, which comprised an increasingly significant element of personal and social display, were embedded in this cultural process of identification. When caught up in the routine experiences of daily life, their significance may generally have been taken-for-granted, and their loss quickly forgotten. However, on special occasions marked by embodied ritual performances and social tension, collections of ornaments may have been displayed and represented more overtly and also concealed, as access to their powerful symbolism and biographies became increasingly contested, restricted and controlled. In particular, during the course of complex underground mortuary rituals during the Copper Age, the cyclical and selective accumulation, display and sacrifice of valued personal ornaments may have helped to construct memories of the deceased and their continued place within a network of reciprocal relations (cf. Battaglia 1992; Chapman 2000:191; Jones 2001). They may have reminded mourners of the prestige of selected newly deceased individuals, especially as members of long-established and well-connected descent-groups (cf. Malone 1996: 54; Whitehouse 1992b: 171; Whittle 1985: 286; 2003: 124–132). They may also have been used to re-shape memories of the dead, to forget them as individuals, and to establish and legitimate a myth of a collective, distant, ancestral past. Removed from circulation and effectively destroyed, the buried ornaments could also have been remembered in their absence (cf. Levy, this volume; Rowlands 1993: 146–147). Similar meanings may also have been expressed during the course of seasonal rituals performed before, during and after the erection and engraving of the upland statue-stele. These vaguely anthropomorphic standing stones may have represented the bodies of important adult men and women, possibly ancestors. As such, they could have acted as commemorative monuments or memorials, which prompted their makers and viewers to remember, reconstruct and celebrate the history of kin groups, including the material and social relationships of their deceased and living members (Keates 2000). Some were decorated by appropriately prestigious symbols, including value-laden female necklaces, male

weapons and hunted animals. As representations of absent objects, these symbols may also have triggered memories.

### *Conclusion: the art of memory*

Prehistorians cannot easily identify ‘mnemonic devices’ and ‘heirlooms’ in the archaeological record. Indeed, attempts to separate them out as a particular category of analysis may be unwarranted (*e.g.* Lillios 1999; Woodward 2002), particularly in the case of well-travelled personal ornaments, which were entangled in a wide range of social practices and historic processes and imbued with diverse meanings and values. Nevertheless, the more general goal of adding memory into the interpretative mix, and of considering the processes through which memories were materialized and transformed, is surely a valid one for anthropologically-minded archaeologists.

In this paper, I have mentioned at least five sets of processes that influenced the way that personal ornaments may have stimulated memories and facilitated their reinvention. The first can be described as reproduction and citation. New ornaments were designed and produced with conscious reference to pre-existing, earlier and sometimes distant, styles. The bossed bone plaque from Casal Sabini, for example, exhibits close stylistic similarities to arguably earlier examples from south-east Sicily, and to contemporary pottery decoration. The second can be defined as association and displacement. Durable ornaments, throughout their life-histories of production, use, circulation, loss and artistic representation, were subject to dynamic associations with particular people, places and things and displacements within those networks. As a consequence, the accruing and detachment of histories to and from them would have stimulated the construction and reconstruction of memories. This is likely to have been the case, for example, with the necklace of imported steatite beads ultimately deposited in the burial cave of Grotta Cappuccini. A related set of processes involved selection, collection and ordering. Various traditional and new styles of ornaments were selectively acquired, combined and rearranged, particularly when assembled together in linear series on necklaces. In this way, editorial choices would have had to be made concerning the social and aesthetic values, traditions and memories attached to and expressed by those interrelated groups of objects. These processes might be indicated, for example, by the numerous ornaments of a wide variety of types and origins deposited in Tomb 3 at Laterza. A fourth set of processes comprised display, inspection and representation. Ornaments, which had the power to represent and convey information, were actively exhibited in a

wide variety of memorable performative contexts, notably during repeated social gatherings and ritual performances at prominent places in the landscape marked by stone structures and associated with ancestral commemoration. Sterparo, with its ornamented statue-menhirs, is one such site. In this way, ornaments may have helped to demonstrate and authenticate the historic narratives being performed and to evoke previous ones. At the same time, their meanings may have been manipulated through another set of processes, which can be described as distancing. High values were evidently ascribed to the materials and styles of ornaments derived from distant people, places and times. It is also clear that these objects were actively manipulated by their successive owners. They were physically reworked, refined and aged, and conceptually exoticised and sacralised. They were also taken out of circulation, by being ritually sacrificed and concealed in separated and sealed tombs, one example being the rock-cut tomb at Casal Sabini, where the bossed bone plaque was found. In these ways, attempts may have been made to control, even reinvent, the memories attached to them. Through a combination of these social processes, then, personal ornaments may have become increasingly thought-provoking and memorable resources in Copper Age South-East Italy, helping people identify with the past but also reorder it in the present, at a time of growing socio-economic instability and competition, in which appearances and memories mattered.

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