EDITORIAL

We live in an immensely interconnected world. Digital information and data, being immaterial, can travel across the globe in seconds. Modern technology also enables the rapid movement of people. If one wishes, it is possible to have breakfast in London, dinner in Tokyo, and continue on to New York the following day. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the ontological turn that archaeology has experienced in the last decade or two, we must also recognise that the same mobility was also bestowed on non-human things. In fact, things may now be more mobile than people. Although I cannot support this with precise statistics, it is difficult to ignore that there are more machines in orbit than astronauts, cargo ships outnumber cruise liners on the seas, and parcel lockers have quietly taken over our streets and parking lots, distributing vast quantities of goods each day.

Things have become largely trans-local. It is not uncommon that a single, relatively simple object may consist of components produced in far-flung regions of the world. Unfortunately, with such mobility of things also comes greater dependency; the comfort of the modern world proves to be fragile. A few years ago, the COVID pandemic exposed the weaknesses of complex global supply chains on a full scale, only to be continued today by trade wars and the use of critical resources as weapons of international politics.

But is interconnectedness and the long-distance transport of objects a uniquely modern phenomenon? Archaeological evidence suggests otherwise. Although they likely did not bind people in such dependency, extensive networks can be traced deep into prehistory. This issue's first paper provides an interesting example. Milan Salaš and colleagues tracked the origin of a Late Bronze Age casting mould found in South Moravia back to the Carpathian Basin. Petrographic analysis shows that the mould was made of rhyolite tuff available in adequate quantities in northern Hungary. The type of spearhead it produced was also common in the northern Carpathian Basin. What remains beyond the reach of current methodology is whether inhabitants of South Moravia realised the origin of the mould they were (most probably) using for smelting.

Although prehistoric connections are widely acknowledged, the nature of exchange differed significantly from today's systems. In his classic 1924 study, Marcel Mauss described the exchange of things in traditional societies as governed by complex social and symbolic obligations. Rather than a system shaped by supply, demand, and profit, it functioned through a hard-to-escape framework of gift-giving and obligations. Nonetheless, it allowed objects to migrate from one owner to another and reach distant sites. When and how then did our modern commercial system commence? In his paper, Maciej Miścicki examines an interesting aspect linked to the Hanseatic League, a medieval organisation that laid the ground for the modern capitalist economy. Miścicki analysed 112 fragments of medieval wooden barrels with carved or branded marks found in several Baltic towns. The results show that at least some types of marks can be related to mercantile contexts, either as ownership or content labels. In some ways, they can be considered similar to the modern EAN 13 bar code system. These inconspicuous, yet likely the world's most widespread marks can provide information about the state of origin, which can be inferred simply from the first three digits of the code, no scanners needed. Most people are completely unaware of this, even though they are surrounded by EAN 13 codes every day.

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Were barrel marks so mundane but also encrypted for inhabitants of Baltic towns in the 14th to 16th century?

Trade did not occur randomly, but was organised in specific places and times – the markets. These gatherings, bringing together people, goods, and materials from diverse backgrounds, have always attracted the attention of anthropologists and archaeologists. Jakub Sawicki and Jan Hasil contribute to this line of research through their spatial analysis of a modern flea market in Cieplice, Poland. Their study is a fresh contribution to Central European archaeology, where garbological approaches are still relatively rare. As many scholars engaged in analysing spatial patterns and taphonomy know, spatial data from archaeological sites can be frustratingly ambiguous. Despite this, Sawicki and Hasil were able to identify several behavioural patterns in the material record of the flea market. Indeed, their task was eased by their familiarity with the social and functional contexts of the objects they studied, which is a luxury that prehistorians usually do not enjoy. Still, their results bring an important grain of hope that spatial analysis can help us to interpret medieval marketplaces and other periodically used sites frequented by large numbers of people.

The triad of high-medieval papers in this issue is concluded by Martin Miňo and colleagues, who present a multidisciplinary analysis of material excavated at the site of the medieval town hall in Bánská Bystrica, Slovakia. Dealing with material retrieved during rescue excavation, the authors were faced with difficulties due to insufficient documentation. They used 3D-based modelling aided by artificial intelligence. I believe this approach can inspire many other researchers dealing with a similar situation. The study by Martin Miňo and colleagues provides insight into the economy of the town, which was oriented toward livestock. Herding influenced the surrounding landscape and helped to preserve open niches of meadows and pastures. The authors thus demonstrate that intra-mural archaeological research is also valid for addressing broader ecological questions.

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