Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice, Rosemary A. Joyce, Susan D. Gillespie
Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2015. 284pp

Sandra H. Dudley
University of Leicester

*Things in Motion* makes stimulating reading for a broad readership: anyone interested in relations between people and things will find much to reward them here. The book is framed around an object itinerary approach, which the editors argue yields an understanding of the movement, activeness, routes, and effects of things over time. It enables, they claim, insight into what things do, both on what Joyce describes as the ‘intimate’ level of one human life and on the far larger ‘scales of geology, cosmology, and social history’ (p. 37).

The volume comprises an introduction and ten essays that consider the trajectories of objects through a range of archaeological and museum contexts. The themes and analytical approaches, however, are relevant well beyond archaeology and museums alone. There is an applied focus to some of the contents, too. Bauer’s discussion of the circulation of museum objects through loans and shared stewardship (Chapter 8), for example, uses object itineraries as a means to explore how increased recognition of the rights over objects of originating communities, affects involved museums. He argues that those communities, museums, and moving objects have formed a global system of exchange that offers a workable alternative to hierarchical, market-based patterns on which museums historically relied and that so-called universal museums still typify.

Some chapters trace the itineraries of archaeological artefacts right up to the present day, exploring recontextualizations, new assemblages and contemporary uses (e.g. Gillespie’s Chapter 3, on an Olmec cache of jade celts and stone figurines, and Walz’s Chapter 9 on beads and healers in contemporary Tanzania). Object forms that in other approaches might be characterized as afterlives or echoes, such as chips knocked off a Tarascan obsidian idol in Prehispanic Mexico (Haskell’s Chapter 4), or printed and digital images of designs stamped on ancient pottery from southeastern North America (Wallis’s Chapter 11), are treated as parts of the object itinerary(s). Contributions also exemplify the potential of the object itinerary idea to enable insights into the makings and re-makings of place. Law Pezzarossi (Chapter 10), for instance, examines the production and sale, and later museum curation, of Native baskets in southern New England, paying especial attention to their role in the creation and negotiation of Native space.

The book’s contributions vary in how far they explicitly engage with the notion of object itineraries. There are connections of this idea to de Certeau’s spatialized stories and relational places (1984; Joyce’s Chapter 2 investigation of Ulua marble vases from first millennium CE Honduras) and Ingold’s concept of meshwork (2009; Blair’s Chapter 5 discussion of glass beads excavated at a Spanish island mission site off the Georgian US coast). Communities of practice are also attended to by some, including Diaz-Guardamino in her treatment of prehistoric megaliths on the Iberian Peninsula (Chapter 6) and Roddick in his of materials and pots in the Lake Titicaca basin (Chapter 7). Interestingly, however, none sought to connect object itineraries with the archaeological method of *chaîne opératoire*. 
The editors are ambitious for their framework, and it has resulted in a worthwhile volume. Elements in the argument for their approach are problematic, however. Most challenging, is its positioning as alternative to the widely used concept of object biography. The latter is or can be, more complex and subtle than the Aunt Sally that appears in the book’s first two chapters. Biography, of person or object, need not be linearly temporal nor stop at a moment of physical death. Relational shifts and makings and remakings of meanings and values through time and space are all – or should be – the stuff of biography, too. This is not to diminish an object itinerary approach; the point is that had less effort been expended on constructing it as superior to object biography, more might have been spent expanding upon what is arguably its real contribution: its emphasis on movement and change. It is, however, ultimately still an anthropocentric perspective, contrary to the editors’ view (p. 13): like ‘biography’, ‘itinerary’ infers an account, a story. The questions that then need to be asked, are whose story, told from which perspective? And how might that perspective be interrogated and/or flipped around? This could have been examined and theorized further. The editors rightly note at the end of the introduction that scholarship about objects is also part of objects’ itineraries. But scholarship – like other processes in the past – creates itineraries. Its additional privilege is the possibility of critically reflecting upon that. Elements within the book do this. I would love to have seen more. Either way, however, it is a fascinating text.

References
