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'Because other people have done it':

Coin-Trees and the Aesthetics of Imitation

Introduction: The Prevalence of Imitation

Imitation has always motivated human behaviour. It plays a large role in our learning processes; as Meltzoff observed, a 'wide range of behaviours – from tool use to social customs – are passed from one generation to another through imitative learning' (2005: 55). As children we learn through imitating the actions of others, and we continue to do so as adults, to the extent that imitation is what Dijksterhuis has termed 'default social behaviour' (2005: 207-208). Basically, we imitate without thinking about it.

Imitation is often the driving force behind collective behaviour: religious revivals, fashions and fads, political choices, consumer preferences, and mob violence. Consciously or subconsciously – rightly or wrongly – people trust the majority, and so they follow suit. In doing so they add to that majority, encouraging others to imitate in a snowball-like effect (Markus 1987; Rogers 1995: 333). Bikhchandani et al. term the basis of this model 'information cascades' (1992; 1998), whereby people infer social validation from the participation of others – i.e. 'if others can do it then why shouldn't I?' – a process highly evident in public protests, demonstrations, and riots (Lohmann 1994).

There are, however, many examples of 'information cascading' occurring in our daily lives. The most common anecdote given by sociologists is that of the indecisive diner: a person, having to choose between various restaurants, will probably select the establishment which appears the most popular, hence why waiters tend to seat customers close to the windows (Banerjee 1992: 797; Bikhchandani et al. 1998: 151-152). Similarly, desire for social validation means that a person sitting in a tedious lecture or party will often wait to observe others leaving before they themselves will. By leaving themselves, they will contribute to the 'information cascade', encouraging others to depart as well (Gravonetter 1978: 1424). Likewise, an individual trying to choose which model of mobile telephone to buy, where to holiday, what clothes to wear, books to read, films to watch, etc. will have been greatly (if not consciously) influenced by the choices of their peers. And it is this behaviour – this desire for social validation – which is prominent in the topic of this paper: the public's participation in the custom of the coin-tree.

Introducing the Coin-Tree

For readers unfamiliar with the phenomenon, a coin-tree is exactly what its name would suggest: a tree (most often in the form of a log or a stump) which has coins inserted edgeways into its bark. For the research behind this paper, I have been cataloguing these sites and have so far identified 34 examples, distributed widely across the British Isles, which contain at least one coin-tree but often more. These sites are usually in rural areas accessible to the public, often located alongside popular woodland or riverside footpaths. Of the 34 sites, 31 are considered active: people today are contributing their coins, most often one and two pence coins, to these accumulations.

The designation of a coin-tree as an accumulation or a hoard is quite obvious; Osborne defines a hoard as a 'quantity of similar items being found together' (2004: 5), whilst

Chapman observes, rather tongue-in-cheek, that a mere two similar items discovered together is the 'minimum necessary to establish the presence of a hoard' (2000: 112). With quantities of coins in single coin-trees ranging from the tens to the tens of thousands (one coin-tree in Ingleton, Yorkshire, for example, contained at least 48,000 coins in 2012), it is difficult to deny the coin-tree the status of coin hoard or accumulation.

The coin-tree's classification as a *ritual* hoard or accumulation also appears quite straightforward. The prefixing of 'ritual' to 'hoard', 'accumulation', or 'deposit' usually follows the rebuttal of more pragmatic interpretations, such as accidental losses and savings hoards. Archaeologists have tended to make the distinction between 'ritual' hoards and 'non-ritual' hoards based on a set of criteria, the primary point being the question of sacrifice: are the artefacts irredeemable and physically damaged? Non-ritual deposits, such as 'savings hoards', generally occur in locations from which they can be retrieved; ritual deposits, on the other hand, tend to be treated as 'sacrifices'; they should be difficult – or impossible – to recover and/or physically damaged (Robertson 1974: 18; Bradley 1990: 10; Insoll 2011). Tens, hundreds, or thousands of coins hammered into a tree, a process which often damages the coins and renders them irretrievable, can certainly be interpreted as the 'sacrifice' of coins. The coin-tree can therefore quite comfortably be designated a ritual accumulation.

The earliest known coin-tree is an uprooted oak (*Quercus*) on Isle Maree, Loch Maree, the Northwest Highlands of Scotland. The first reference to a tree's ritual employment at this site comes from Thomas Pennant's 1775 *A tour in Scotland and voyage to the Hebrides*, in which he describes the island's holy well, said to have been consecrated by seventh-century saint St. Maol Rubha (also known as St. Maree) and widely purported to cure insanity (Pennant 1775: 330; Reeves 1857-60: 288-289; Mitchell 1863: 251-262; Dixon 1886: 151; Godden 1893: 500-501; Muddock 1898: 437-438; Barnett 1930: 113; Hamilton 1981: 101; Donoho 2014). Beside the holy well was a tree which was utilized as an 'altar'; pilgrims seeking a cure from the holy well would deposit their tokens of thanks to St. Maree on this particular tree (Pennant 1775: 330).

Originally the deposited tokens appear to have been rags, which have long been employed as votive deposits in the British Isles. They are most often affixed to the branches of trees and bushes within close proximity to a holy well, producing a rag-tree, of which there are numerous examples across the British Isles, along with their respective holy wells. Jones, for example, lists 1179 holy wells in Wales (1954; Dowden 2000: 42), whilst Lucas estimates more than 3000 in Ireland (1963: 40). These wells were often employed for their curative properties, originally as part of pagan hydrolatry but later adopted by Christianity, the wells transferring to the custodianship of Christian saints – such as St. Maree (Daly 1961; Rattue 1995).

Hartland writes that rags were affixed to branches of trees because they were believed to 'contain the disease of which one desires to be rid' (1893: 460), and according to the notion of contagious transfer – a subcategory of Frazer's 'sympathetic magic' (1900: 39) – the disease was expected to transfer to the tree, leaving the depositor cured. The tree on Isle Maree was similarly employed as a rag-tree for contagious transfer and the curing of ailments. However, during the nineteenth century pilgrims began depositing other objects, such as pins and nails (Campbell 1860: 134; Mitchell 1863: 253). These metal objects had initially been employed to hold the rags in place on the trunk of the tree, but had gradually become offerings in and of themselves (Dixon 1886: 152).

Metal pins and nails were popular 'vehicles of disease' in such rituals of contagious transfer across the British Isles. Knocking nails into an oak tree, for example, was a well-known remedy for toothache in Cornwall; the toothache was believed to transfer into the tree, from the sufferer, through the nail (Walhouse 1880: 99n; Porteous 1928: 188). Pins were also employed as cures for warts; pins were inserted into each wart, then into the bark of an ash tree, transferring the affliction to the tree (Wilks 1972: 121). It is unsurprising, therefore, that pins and nails eventually replaced rags on the Isle Maree tree.

However, by the late nineteenth century, coins had become the predominant metal object deposited at the site (Fig. 1). For example, when Queen Victoria visited Isle Maree on her tour of Scotland in 1877, she described the tree in her diary, in an entry dated the 17th September, 1877, as follows:

> The boat was pushed onshore, and we scrambled out and walked through the tangled underwood and thicket of oak, holly, beech, etc., which covers the islet, to the well, now nearly dry which is said to be celebrated for the cure of insanity. An old tree stands close to it, and into the bark of this it is the custom, from time immemorial, for everyone who goes there to insert with a hammer a copper coin, as a sort of offering to the saint who lived there in the eighth century…We hammered some pennies into the tree, to the branches of which there are also rags and ribbons tied. (Duff 1968: 332-333)

By 1898, the tree was being referred to by Muddock as 'the money tree' (1898: 437), and in 1927, it was described by Colonel Edington, a visiting doctor from Glasgow, as 'studded with pennies driven in edge on…the effect is that the tree for about eight or nine feet up from the ground is covered with metallic scales' (1927, cited in McPherson 1929 [2003]: 75). The original rag-tree had subsequently become a coin-tree – possibly Britain's first.[1]

There are a number of other coin-trees which boast similarly lengthy biographies throughout the British Isles: a coin-tree in Ardboe, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland, which has been removed since its fall in 1997 (Grimes 1999); another near Clonenagh, Co. Laois, the Republic of Ireland (Roe 1939: 27; Morton 2004: 195; Harbison 1991: 231; Simon 2000: 28); and another in Argyll, Scotland (Rodger et al. 2003: 87). These coin-trees have been in existence since the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, and have undergone many years of ritual appropriation. However, of the 34 coin-tree sites catalogued thus far across the British Isles, the majority are relatively recent in origin, having been created during the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s (Fig. 2).

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have therefore witnessed a contemporary renaissance of the coin-tree custom, with many people today participating in the coin-tree custom. I have spoken with over 200 of these modern-day participants in informal interviews conducted at coin-tree sites. Their demographics varied considerably: there were family groups with children; couples, both young and elderly; and groups of friends. They were largely white British, although not exclusively; roughly 10% were international tourists, hailing from Germany, France, Spain, North America, Australia, and China. In fact, the word 'tourist' is their only common factor: the vast majority of participants were tourists, either international or domestic, rather than local residents. Some were at the site on daytrips; others were in the area on holiday, but all had been spending their leisure time recreationally walking when they had come across a coin-tree – more often than not, by chance rather than

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[1] For theories concerning the rise of the coin as predominant offering, see Houlbrook 2014a, 2014b, and forthcoming a.

by design. In the majority of cases, participants had not seen or heard of the coin-tree custom before that day. However, they are still inclined to participate and subsequently add their coins to these growing accumulations, often using a nearby rock as a tool of percussion.

The custom of inserting coins into the bark of trees may have altered little *physically* since the nineteenth century, but the stated reasons behind participation have, unsurprisingly, changed considerably. The earlier coin-trees appear to have been employed for folk-medicinal reasons. However, of the 200 plus modern-day participants I have interviewed, not a single person claimed to have been seeking a folk-remedy. This is hardly surprising; illness and premature death were a much greater concern in the past than they are today (Vyse 1997: 12ff), and scientific developments have meant that most people in the British Isles are more likely to visit a medical centre than participate in a folkloric custom if concerned for their health (Hamilton 1981: 102).

Today, instead of participating in this custom for folk-remedial purposes, some modern-day practitioners claim that the purpose of a coin-tree is luck or wish-fulfilment, drawing on analogies with wishing-wells or the concept of the 'lucky penny'. Coins are therefore sometimes surrendered to coin-trees in exchange for good luck, future fortune, or the fulfilment of the depositor's wish (Houlbrook 2014a, 2014b), whilst in other cases the custom is likened to graffiti: a person wishes to leave something of themselves behind.[2] However, by far the most popular contemporary reason given for participation is that which is outlined above: imitation.

Diffusion through Imitation

Imitation is how innovations are diffused (Bandura 1977); it is how the custom of the coin-tree appears to have spread across the British Isles, despite the fact that many of its participants admit to not knowing the 'purpose' of the custom. Few practitioners of the custom have prior knowledge of the presence of coin-trees; only 17% of the participants I spoke with had come across other coin-trees before that day. Several participants had heard about coin-trees from other people, and two women had researched the custom on the Internet. However, other than these examples, the majority of participants had not been aware of the phenomenon before their first encounter with a coin-tree, and it is clear that the insertion of a coin is rarely a planned ritual.

In the vast majority of cases, therefore, people come across these coin-trees by chance rather than by design. This is evidenced by the lack of planning and preparation involved in this practice. For example, I witnessed over 200 people insert coins into these trees, and not a single one had come prepared with a hammer in order to make the insertion of coins easier. Instead, they either inserted coins into pre-existing cracks or employed handy objects as makeshift tools of percussion: most often nearby rocks, but I have also witnessed a pocket-knife and the sole of a shoe employed for such a purpose.

Indeed, the deposits themselves testify to the ad-hoc nature of this custom. Coins have been a highly common ritual deposit in Britain since the Roman period, with caches discovered containing hundreds – some even thousands, such as at Lydney, Gloucestershire; Hallaton, southeast Leicestershire; and the sacred spring at Bath – of votive coins (Lewis 1966: 47;

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[2] For a comparison between the coin-tree custom and graffiti, and for a consideration of the coin as personalised deposit, see Houlbrook forthcoming b.

Woodward 1992: 66; Dowden 2000: 176; Priest et al. 2003; Williams 2003; Score 2006, 2011; Leins 2007). The coin was also an object regularly deposited in springs and lakes, as offerings to deities (Dowden 2000: 51) or as propitiatory 'sacrifices' to malignant water spirits (Tuleja 1991: 409). The question of why coins constituted such popular ritual deposits is beyond the scope and remit of this paper to answer, their popularity having been attributed to a vast number of reasons, ranging from their 'amuletic quality', as outlined by Hall (2012: 79), to their monetary value and consequent suitability in rituals of 'sacred exchange' (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 24). However, I believe there is a primary reason behind their rise to the fore-front of ritual deposition in contemporary customs such as the coin-tree: their convenience.

Over the last century coins became more commonplace to the point where the majority of people usually have some coins in their possession. Therefore, if a person wishes to participate in a ritual which necessitates the 'sacrificing' of an object, a coin is the most convenient object for that purpose; coming across a coin-tree by chance, a person need only reach for their purse or into their pocket and withdraw some loose change. As one participant in the coin-tree custom at High Force, County Durham, speculated, when asked why he believed people chose to insert coins into the tree: 'maybe because they're just convenient'; whilst an American participant at the coin-tree site of Tarn Hows, Cumbria (Fig. 2), opined that 'it might just be because coins are pretty handy, aren't they? You've always got some'.

The unplanned nature of participation in the coin-tree custom engenders the question: why would somebody choose to participate at all? Imitation constitutes a large part of the answer. An individual may observe a group congregating around a coin-tree, which immediately piques their curiosity. They then witness other individuals insert coins and so, taking their cue from their peers and submitting to the 'emotional contagion' of their environment (Hartfield et al. 1994: 2), they imitate and insert a coin themselves, despite not really knowing why they have done so. Thus is the nature of accumulation, which Gamble describes as having a 'magnetic-like effect' (2007: 122); deposits attract more deposits, often at an exponential rate.

As evident as imitation is at the coin-tree sites, I do not propose this theory based solely on my observations; many of the custom's participants admitted to imitation being their primary motivation for participation. A high proportion of individuals who inserted coins explained that they had only done so 'because other people have done it'. At the site of a coin-tree at Tarn Hows, Cumbria (Fig. 2), an American couple holidaying in the area claimed that they had seen another group insert coins and had 'wanted to know what all the fuss was about', an answer identical to one given by a man at a coin-tree in Dovedale, Derbyshire. One man, also at Tarn Hows, believed that the participants are 'just copying, adding to it...I don't think there's any deeper reason than that', a sentiment shared by many other participants, while another man termed this process of imitation 'the queue mentality', explaining that if 'you see enough people doing something then you join in, and you don't really ask why'.

It may be argued that every custom requires an instigator; in the case of the coin-tree custom there must have been an individual who, at one point in time, decided to insert the first coin into the first coin-tree. At every coin-tree site, in fact, there must have been one person or group who decided to insert a coin into a tree when nobody else had. The questions of what motivated their desire to instigate this practice and why they chose the particular tree they selected for the custom cannot be answered without speaking with the instigators themselves. However, even these instigators were probably inspired to act through imitation.
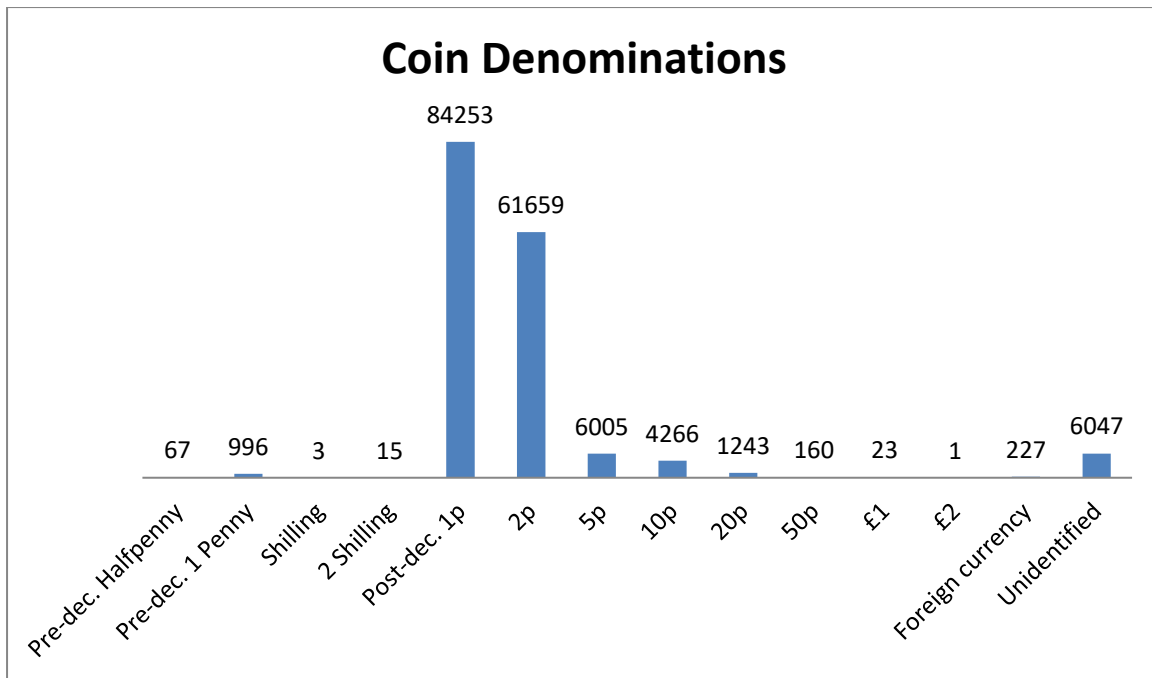
As all scholars of culture will know, nothing emerges 'out of the blue'; customs do not simply spring forth from a vacuum. It is unlikely that there was an original instigator whose creation of the first coin-tree was an entirely isolated or random incident. People probably originally began inserting coins in order to adhere to – and *imitate* – the similar predecessor custom of inserting metal objects into trees (see above). Subsequently, once the custom of coin insertion had become established, it may have spread from one site to another through imitation; a person sees a coin-tree at one site and instigates the custom at another site, thus is the nature of dissemination. In the case of the coin-tree, therefore, even creation proves to be mimetic.

Participation through Imitation

This inclination to imitate not only engenders the creation of coin-trees and encourages individuals to participate in the custom, but it also influences *how* they participate. I outlined above that of the people I witnessed inserting coins, none of them had come prepared with a hammer; instead, some participants have lodged coins into pre-existing fissures in the bark whilst others have sourced handy rocks nearby to use as tools of percussion. And what they decide to do largely depends on what they have witnessed others doing before them. They will imitate the method of insertion employed by the preceding group. Most interestingly, if that method involved a rock employed as a hammer then they will, more than likely, utilise the specific rock they have witnessed others using, even if there are others readily available.

Imitation also influences which coins are selected for deposition. For example, a female participant at Tarn Hows, Cumbria (Fig. 2), was reluctant to insert a ten pence piece, despite it being her only coin, because she believed all of the other coins were copper and did not want to 'ruin the pattern'. It was only once her husband had pointed out several other silver coins that she relented. Likewise, another woman at Tarn Hows chose to insert a penny because she 'didn't want to spoil the pattern', and at Dovedale, Derbyshire, and Ingleton, Yorkshire (Fig. 2), several groups claimed that they had chosen to insert specifically copper coins because the majority of other people had done so.

The statistics are equally indicative of imitation. At every active coin-tree site – with the notable exception of Isle Maree, explored below – the vast majority of coins were one penny pieces and (slightly less) two pence pieces (Graph 1). The use of the one penny piece for this custom has no doubt reached critical mass; such a high proportion of past participants have chosen to insert that particular coin that the growth of this proportion will continue to grow at an accelerating rate due to future participants' desires to imitate.

Coin Denominations

Denomination	Count
Pre-dec. Halfpenny	67
Pre-dec. 1 Penny	996
Shilling	3
2 Shilling	15
Post-dec. 1p	84253
2p	61659
5p	6005
10p	4266
20p	1243
50p	160
£1	23
£2	1
Foreign currency	227
Unidentified	6047

Graph 1 – The denominations of all coins catalogued by author in the coin-trees across the British Isles.

The prevalence of one penny pieces may be due to the participants not wishing to part with any higher denominations (as participants themselves have admitted). However, there is an exception to this one-penny-piece 'fashion' which is also highly indicative of imitation. At Isle Maree (Fig. 1), the majority of post-decimalisation coins to be inserted are two pence pieces (461 two pence pieces in contrast to the 166 one penny pieces). However, this anomaly can be explained by imitation. The vast majority of coins at Isle Maree are *pre-decimalisation* one pennies, which, given their sizes (31mm in diameter), look much more like two pence pieces (25.9mm in diameter) than one penny pieces (20.3mm in diameter). The participants at Isle Maree, therefore, were – either consciously or subconsciously – basing their imitations on the appearance of the coins rather than on their actual denominations.

The coins inserted into the coin-tree at Corfe Castle, Dorset, also testify to imitation motivating the selection of denominations, rather than a consideration of value. 136 five pence pieces were inserted, compared to a meagre 33 two pence pieces. The question of why five pence pieces were initially popular at this particular coin-tree is impossible to answer, but imitation is probably the reason behind its continued popularity. As with the one penny piece, the five pence piece appears to have reached critical mass at this site, meaning that its use will grow at an accelerating rate. Future depositors will observe the high proportion of the small, silver-coloured coins – in contrast to the lower proportion of large, copper-coloured coins – and this will influence which coin they choose to insert.

What the deposited coins look like is, therefore, clearly of some importance to the depositors. Whether a person deposits a copper-coloured coin or a silver-coloured coin may be dependent upon denomination, but it may equally be a matter of 'following/not ruining the pattern', and this leads us to a consideration of the aesthetics of imitation.

The Aesthetics of Imitation

So far, I have catalogued 164,665 coins inserted into 236 trees across the British Isles. As most participants deposit only one coin each, it is safe to assume that over 100,000 people have participated in the coin-tree custom between the nineteenth century and the present day. These people are not an organised group; they come from different times and different places. Most of them do not know each other and they will never meet. Their participation in the coin-tree custom is not orchestrated, but adventitious and random. However, the aesthetics of the coin-trees themselves do not testify to this; instead, they appear to speak of deliberate organisation.

In most cases, the placement of a coin is not random. In many of the coin-trees, a repetitive pattern of coins is clearly visible; most often in longitudinal distributions, the coins appearing to form neat rows following the grain of the wood (Figs. 3-4). This could be due to pre-existing longitudinal cracks and fissures in the bark, and the ease with which a coin can be inserted into them. However, in many cases, a coin can easily be inserted into the bark in any direction. Additionally, many other patterns are also evident: patterns whereby the coins spread from the centre of a stump in radial, sunburst-like formations (Fig. 5), or they form rings within rings in neat annular arrangements. Patterns whereby the coins flow across the surface of a bole in waves or ripples, or they wrap themselves around a log diagonally (Fig. 6), each coin regimentally placed to follow the prominent pattern. In fact, the arrangement of the coins is often so uniform that many people have assumed the coin-trees to be official art installations; the product of a single artist's work rather than the culmination of hundreds – sometimes thousands – of strangers making their individual deposits.

The aesthetics of the coin-trees therefore testify to the prominence of imitation in the motivations behind participation. People – whether consciously or subconsciously – are inclined to adhere and contribute to a larger design; many have admitted to participation simply because they had wanted to 'follow the pattern'. Whether that pattern is longitudinal, radial, annular, wave-like, or diagonal, they wish to maintain it. This illustrates that complete strangers, separated by time, can participate in an entirely un-orchestrated act and yet still produce a structure that conversely testifies to uniformity and harmony of purpose.

Imitation and Captivation

The striking regularity of the coins in a coin-tree does more than reveal the centrality of imitation to this custom; it also plays a primary role in attracting participants in the first place. It draws people in, enticing them. Gell terms this process 'captivation' (1998: 68ff), using the Trobriand Islanders' utilisations of their elaborately adorned canoe prow-boards as 'psychological weapons', alongside his own reaction to Vermeer's *Lacemaker*, as examples of the 'bewitching effect' a piece of art can have on us (1998: 71ff). From my observations, the coin-trees do appear to have such a 'bewitching effect' on those who pass by, the majority of whom stop in their tracks at first sight of the trees and approach to examine them, making exclamations such as 'how fabulous' and 'bizarre'.

What is it, however, that causes this captivation? Gell, asserting that the causes are deeper than simple aesthetic pleasure, writes of the 'technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology' (1999: 167), maintaining that it is an observer's failure to understand the

technical processes of an object's manufacture – what he terms 'cognitive stickiness' (1998: 85-86) – that reels the observer in. Simply put, we are attracted to objects that we do not understand; it is 'their becoming rather than their being' that entices and confuses us (Gell 1999: 166). Gell believes, therefore, that the elaborately designed prow-boards of the Trobriand Islanders' canoes are designed to be impressive not (entirely) for their aesthetics, but because of the magical skill that is believed to have crafted them (1999: 166). Art historian Baker is in agreement, opining that observers of a piece of art are 'lured by the narratives of making' (2005: 199).

The placements of the coins, often appearing to follow geometric patterns, contribute greatly to the coin-tree's enigmatic narrative of making. Gell writes that '[p]atterns by their multiplicity and the difficulty we have in grasping their mathematical or geometrical basis by mere visual inspection' causes what he terms 'unfinished business' (1998: 80), slowing perception down so that the observer can never fully grasp the observed. Upon seeing a coin-tree for the first time, many people are awed by the sheer volume of coins which have been moulded into vast, repetitive patterns. Numerous people have commented on the patterning of the coins, thinking erroneously that the 'symmetrical' distribution and the uniformity of the 'neat rows' of coins indicate that the coin-trees are products of single artists, at first not quite able to believe that each individual coin may represent an individual depositor.

In many cases, this 'cognitive stickiness' and 'unfinished business' reel the observer in, enticing them to engage with the structure of the coin-tree; to approach it, examine it, touch it, photograph it, and discuss it with their companions. Often, this engagement leads the observer to transition into participant, by depositing their own coin and subsequently contributing to the broader pattern. In more than one way, therefore, do the processes and results of imitation precipitate the continuation, dissemination, and creation of coin-trees.

However, just as creation proves to be mimetic, the opposite is also true: imitation can be creative (Ingold 2007). Simulation, contrary to the word's definition, forges something new; a depositor not only imitates, they contribute. Every time a coin is added to a coin-tree, no matter how imitatively done, it alters that coin-tree. Every contribution supplements and changes, causing patterns to form; and every attempt to maintain a pattern causes it to grow, spread, and transform. The aesthetics of the coin-tree, therefore, testifies to the creative capacity of imitation.

Conclusion: Archaeological Implications

At this stage, it hopefully cannot be doubted that imitation, or – to use a participant's expression – the 'queue mentality', plays a large role in the coin-tree custom. It can engender the creation of a coin-tree. It can inspire participation, thus ensuring the continuation of the custom. It can influence how a person participates: which coin they choose to insert, how they insert it, and where they insert it. This demonstration of imitation's central role reveals much about the 'how's and the 'why's of the coin-tree custom; however, it also has far broader archaeological implications. Interpreting the contemporary coin-tree, which is essentially an accumulation of deposits, may make us re-evaluate archaeological interpretations of non-contemporary accumulations.

For example, as outlined above, the uniform distributions of coins in many of the coin-trees suggest that the depositors worked together to produce a recognisable pattern. The material testimony of the coin-trees may therefore be interpreted as evidence of a single orchestrated

act of deposition, when in fact deposition occurred over time, with the vast majority of depositors never meeting, their only interaction with each other being through the deposits themselves. This demonstrates that material evidence for unity does not necessarily constitute evidence for *temporal* unity, and that the processes of imitation over time can easily account for deliberate patterning.

Additionally, the contemporary coin-tree leads to a consideration of ritual interpretation with regards to coin hoards and accumulations. Unsurprisingly, academic interpretation of ritual deposits often assumes ritualistic motivations. Anthropologist Don Handelman, for example, defines ritual as an event which 'makes recourse to paranatural, mystical powers' (1990: 5), whilst Edward Shils describes ritual as 'a pattern of symbolic actions for renewing contact with the sacred' (1966: 447). It is often assumed that participation in a ritual indicates the desire for something in return (protection, wish-fulfilment, healing, etc.), usually achieved through contact with some form of preternatural power.

However, the contemporary coin-tree may precipitate a re-evaluation of such an assumption of motivation. As outlined above, modern-day participants of the coin-tree custom do not participate for folk-remedial purposes, as their 'predecessors' did, and while some allege to have made their deposit in exchange for luck or wish-fulfilment, the majority claimed that they had participated because others had done so and because they had wanted to contribute to 'the pattern'. Imitation was the primary motivating factor behind participation – could it, therefore, not also have been the reason behind participation in historic and pre-historic deposition?

It is certainly not the intention of this paper to counter every ritual interpretation of archaeological remains, nor is it to propose a re-definition of the term 'ritual' – this has, after all, already been done (cf. Goody 1961; Moore & Myerhoff 1997; Insoll 2004; Brück 2006). Instead, my aim has been to demonstrate the centrality of imitation in actions of deposition that can easily be viewed as ritualistic, and to recommend that archaeologists consider this when making their interpretations. As is demonstrated in Author 2014, each depositor will be motivated to participate by different factors, but many of them will do so for one primary reason: 'because other people have done it'.

Word count: 5,309

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