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COULD BROKEN BONE COMBS HAVE HAD NEW LIVES?¹

Fine comb teeth that often broke were the weakest part of bone combs. There were two possibilities in the subsequent life of such a comb – it was either thrown away or repaired. If repaired the broken part could be replaced or the shape of the artefact modified. The chosen version might have depended on the skills of the repairer. In both cases, the biography of the comb would continue within the same function and meaning sphere as before breaking. Sometimes it was not possible to repair the comb in the way that it could be used for combing again. Artefacts do not have biographies without people. Is it possible to find out who tried to give a new life to a broken artefact and why?

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Introduction

The idea that objects, like people, have biographies was first suggested by Igor Kopytoff (1986). Since that time the biographical approach has been quite widely used in archaeology (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987, 126; Lubar & Kingery 1993; Rawson 1993; Shanks 1998; Gosden & Marshall 1999). In Estonian archaeology this topic has been tackled by Andres Tvaari (2001, 165 ff.; 2002, 276 ff.) and Kristiina Johanson (2006, 100). In the biographical approach, according to Chris Caple, the object is treated as part of a production and use sequence, in which materials are transformed into products, using skills of craftsmen who, in turn, use the available tools and facilities (Caple 2000, 76; 2006, 13 ff., fig. 3.1). Besides “biography” and “life history”, the term “use life” has been employed (Gosden & Marshall 1999, 170). Linda Hurcombe stresses that the use life of an object can outlast its maker (e.g. Choyke 2006, 2007), objects could have been used in different ways and have meant different things; she presents these object–people interactions through time as spirals (Hurcombe 2007, 22 ff., fig. 2.3). But although the biographical approach has successfully dealt with the

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births and deaths of objects, it is often difficult to say something about their lives between their birth and death (Joy & Armstrong Oma 2008).

In the present article I discuss biographies of artefacts analyzing their possibilities for a “new life” through mending or modifying. Artefacts do not have biographies without people. Both the birth and death of an artefact, but also its life, are connected with people. As Julian Thomas (2007, 17) puts it, “we might wish to say that artefacts too have a past, but only by virtue of their engagement and involvement in a human world”.

Perhaps in the case of a repaired or recycled object it would be possible to trace more persons who might have had some connection with that artefact. What could we find out about these people? Is it possible to find out who tried to give a new life to the broken artefact, and why? How many persons were connected with the “new life” of an artefact? Was it just one person, the owner, who repaired it and used it again? Or was there a craftsman involved in the process of giving a new life to it? Or maybe the owner discarded it and someone else found it and repaired, recycled or reused it?

People made decisions whether to discard the artefact or whether to repair it. Why were some artefacts discarded after breaking and others were repaired or recycled (Choyke & Daróczy-Szabó in print; Choyke & Kováts in print)? Were practical reasons most important – maybe it was not easy to get a new one? Were only valuable things repaired? What was the value? Did the artefact need to be expensive or imported or maybe it had to have some sentimental value or some meaning because of which the artefact was seen as worthy of a new life? Or could it sometimes happen just by chance? In the present article I try to find answers to these questions using the biographies of combs from different periods as case studies.

Different possibilities for a broken comb

Fine comb teeth that often broke were the weakest part of bone combs (e.g. Luik 1998, pls I–IV). There were two possibilities in the subsequent life of such a comb – it was either thrown away or repaired. If repaired, the broken part could be replaced or the shape of the artefact was modified. The possibility chosen might have depended on the skills of the repairer. In both cases, the biography of the comb would continue having the same function and meaning as before breaking. Sometimes it was not possible to repair the comb so that it could be used for combing again.

Mending a comb – retention of the previous function

One way to mend a comb would be through replacing the broken part. There are different possibilities concerning which parts and to which extent they were replaced. On some combs a tooth plate with broken teeth was replaced by a new one. Sometimes, for example on a comb from Haithabu, a single tooth was

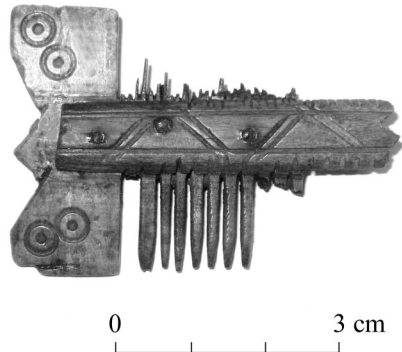


Fig. 1. Comb from Viljandi, Pikk Street (VM 10534: 175/28: 4). Photo by Heidi Luik.

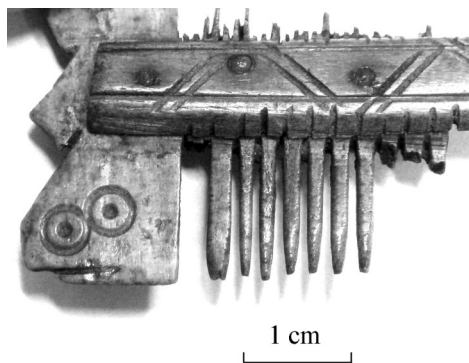


Fig. 2. The saw marks on the connecting plate of the comb from Viljandi differ slightly of gaps between teeth. Photo by Heidi Luik.

carefully replaced (Ulbricht 1978, 66, pl. 33: 3). Sometimes the end plate or connecting plate were replaced, as suggested by a different ornament or shape, or sometimes even different material (e.g. a bone plate on a comb, which otherwise is made of antler). For example, one comb from Schleswig has different end plates: one straight and the other with a convex edge (Ulbricht 1984, pl. 31: 3). Usually both ends of a comb had similar edges. Moreover, the fine teeth of the curved end plate are not sharpened while the teeth of the other plates are. The comb from Viljandi has different ornaments on the end plate and the connecting plates (Fig. 1), although usually a comb with end plates decorated with dots and circles also has the same pattern on connecting plates (e.g. Luik 1998, figs 74 ff.). It should be mentioned as well that the end plate seems to be made more carelessly than the connecting plates. That this comb had been mended is also suggested by the fact that the saw marks on the connecting plate differ slightly in terms of the gaps between teeth (Fig. 2). It appears that the tooth plates were moved a little during replacement of some detail(s). It is

possible that one of the tooth plates was also replaced, since the teeth of one tooth plate are very regular and equal, while on the other their proportions vary (Fig. 2).

The other possibility is changing the shape of a comb. On such occasions the broken part was cut off, trying to give the comb a better look or more convenient shape (e.g. Roes 1963, 10, pl. II: 6). For instance, when the teeth of a double simple comb broke only on one side, the broken side was cut off, thus making a single comb. Examples of such repair work have been found in Schleswig (Ulbricht 1984, pl. 23: 7, 10) and Novgorod (Smirnova 2005, 106, fig. 4.1). A large single comb was found at the hill fort of Rõuge in Estonia, one side of which was cut off, probably because it was broken. The cut surface was carefully smoothed so that the comb could be used again (Fig. 3; Luik 1998, 25, fig. 11, pl. I: 3). Here, one more example could be given, a find from the Dome Church of Tartu, discovered in summer 2008 (Malve 2008). It is not a comb, but a brush

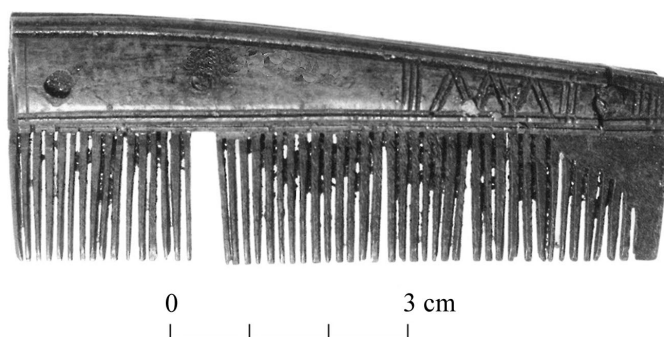


Fig. 3. Comb from Rõuge hill fort (AI 4040: 4586). Photo by Enno Väljal.

with bone back. A side or sides of the brush were probably broken, after which both sides were cut smooth again (Fig. 4). Although the result was a narrow object with only two rows of bristles, it was evidently still possible to use it as a brush.

Substantial modification of the object – does the new shape also mean a new meaning?

As a case study, an open-work antler pendant from the Viking Age Rõuge hill fort is presented. At first sight, it does not appear to be a comb at all (Fig. 5). However, several comb-shaped pendants with open-work upper part have been found in Rõuge as well as elsewhere in south-eastern Estonia and comparing their ornamentation with the object under study here reveals that in its first life this object must have been a comb-shaped pendant with open-work upper part (Fig. 6; Luik 1999, figs 2–4). It was probably because of the fragile open-work upper

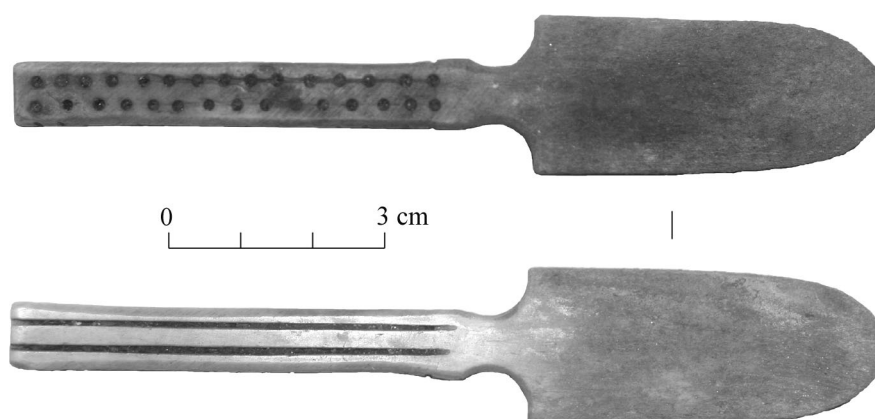


Fig. 4. Brush with bone back from Dome Church of Tartu. Photo by Martin Malve.



Fig. 5. Open-work pendant from Rõuge hill fort (AI 4040: 4695). Photo by Heidi Luik.

section that many of these pendants were broken. Other pendants, however, were no longer used after they broke. Nevertheless, the broken side of this comb-shaped pendant was cut smooth and it was probably used as a pendant again. The question arises whether the modified pendant had the same meaning as the original comb-shaped pendant or whether it changed after acquiring a new shape?

An object with quite a different function and meaning – gambling with a comb

Sometimes it may happen that all teeth of a double comb, or most of them, are broken so that it was really impossible to use it as a comb (Fig. 7).

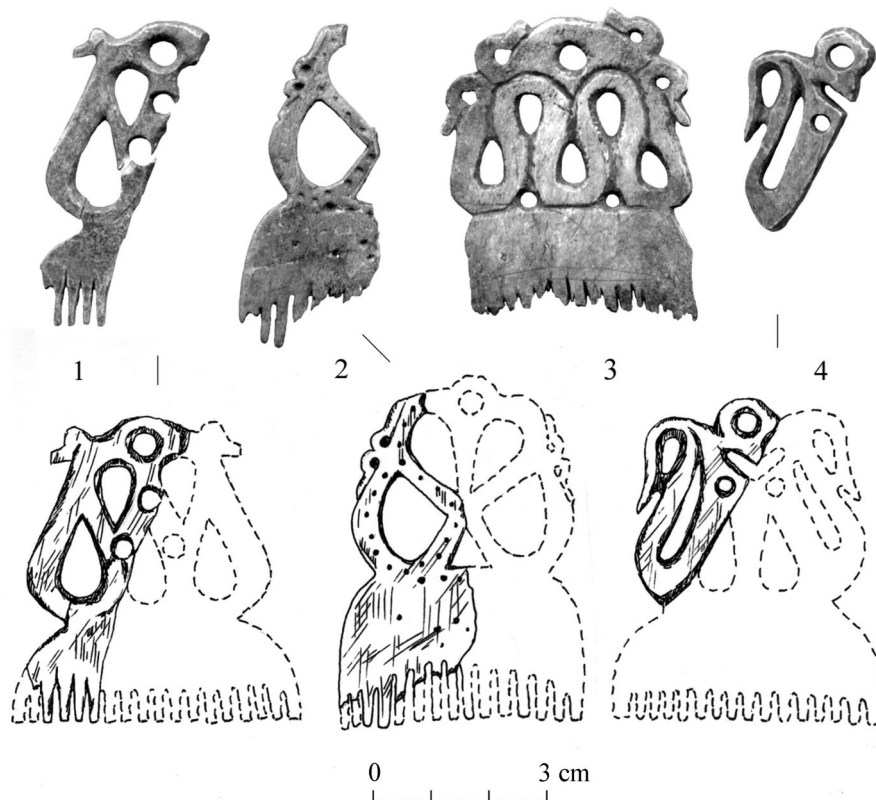


Fig. 6. Comb-shaped pendants with open-work upper part from Rõuge hill fort (AI 4040: 4563, 3394, 3384, 4695). Photos and drawings by Heidi Luik.

Evidently the life of such an artefact has come to an end and its probable fate is to be cast away. Still, it may happen that a new function can be found even for such an object. The example of such possibility is a double comb from medieval Viljandi (Fig. 8; Haak 2005, 73, fig. 3: 2). It appears that it was intended to make a gaming piece from this comb – i.e. an object with quite a different function and meaning.

Discussion: who and why?

Is it possible, regarding combs, to draw any conclusions about who has mended or reused them, and why?

As for mended combs with replaced parts, it is important to observe the level of workmanship used to manufacture it to assess whether the work was carried out by a professional craftsman (who might be the person who made the comb, as well as somebody else). For instance, for replacing a plate a person who undertook it must have been able to rivet the missing detail to its place, to saw sufficiently thin teeth, and, sometimes, to ornament it. For all these tasks, special tools were evidently required, tools possessed only by masters of this craft. Why were artefacts mended? Usually it has been presumed that only valuable and precious objects were mended (Christophersen 1980, 228, 230; Choyke et al. 2004, 185; Caple 2006, 189). With combs it can be observed that mended specimens are more numerous among the earlier, Viking Age combs, which were abundantly decorated. These were time-consuming handicraft products, evidently specially made for a certain customer. With later combs, cheaper and less labour-consuming, made for a wider market and anonymous customers, mending occurred less frequently (Christophersen 1980, 228). In the case of the Viljandi comb (Figs 1–2) it seems that the person who repaired the comb was less skilled than the craftsman who had originally made it.

Concerning the other possibility – changing the shape of an artefact – it seems more likely that the owner of the artefact tried to make it usable. Considering the small number of Viking Age combs found in Estonia, as well as the complete

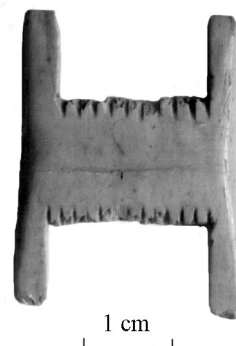


Fig. 7. Small one-piece double comb from Hanseatic quarter in Tartu (TM A116: 18852). Photo by Erki Russow.

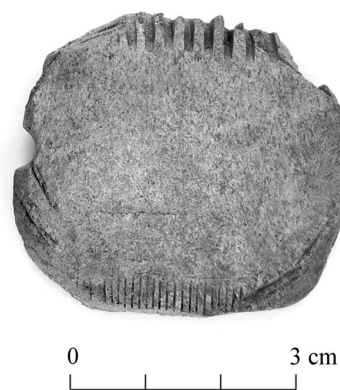


Fig. 8. Broken comb from the suburb in front of the Tartu Gate, Viljandi; probably it was intended to make a gaming piece from this comb (VM 10872: 360). Photo by Herki Helves.

absence of production refuse typical to manufacturing such combs, it seems plausible that the half of a comb found at Rõuge hill fort (Fig. 3) was an imported object which could have been considered valuable. Most likely there was no master in the neighbourhood at that time who was able to mend such a comb and therefore the broken part was just cut off and the surface smoothed (Luik 1998, 139 ff.; 2005, 87–88, 103).

The modified comb-shaped pendant from Rõuge (Fig. 5) was also most likely adjusted for use by its owner. Maybe as an amulet this pendant possessed a very special (maybe very personal or sentimental) meaning for its wearer, and that was the reason the artefact was not thrown away when it broke. The symbolic meaning of comb-shaped pendants can be related to combing and to hair, to which magic meaning has often been attributed (Luik 1999, 151–152; 2005, 114). From folklore it is known that the ritual combing of the bride's hair before wedding was connected with fertility magic, where the comb teeth imitated rain. The custom of dipping the comb in honey or wine before combing was also related to watering and fecundity (Kondrat'eva 1999, 84). The ritual combing of the bride's hair has been also mentioned in Karelian, Vepsian and Estonian folklore; for example Setu folk songs contain instances where combing the bride's hair was meant to make her livestock and grains crops fertile (Salve 2000, 89 ff.). Could the symbolic meaning related to combing hair have survived even though the artefact was modified? I suppose it could, because the person who knew its original shape. For example, written sources from the 16th–17th centuries in Russia show that comb was one of the gifts brought to a bride, and in the Volga region comb pendants were part of the bridal costume, having the function of protective magic and symbolizing social status – maturity (Kondrat'eva 1999, 85). Such an object could certainly possess sentimental value for its owner, so that a desire to preserve and use the broken object is understandable.

Concerning the “gambling comb” from Viljandi (Fig. 8), I would suggest that the person who tried to modify the artefact was probably not its former owner. Sometimes stones or potsherds, which have been cut round, just like the comb from Viljandi, were used as gaming pieces (e.g. Heege 2002, 320, fig. 694). Hence, it was something that was available at that moment, a piece of worked bone which could be re-used relatively easily. I suppose that the Viljandi comb, having become utterly unusable, was thrown away by its owner and incidentally picked up by somebody who just needed material for a gaming piece. Thus, the artefact got an opportunity for a new and completely different life.

Summary

The fact thus was that some broken bone combs were given the chance for a new life. The number of such artefacts, however, was rather small. Repaired or curated artefacts certainly occur among other objects as well, and such artefacts made from a variety of different materials and with different functions definitely

offer a number of possibilities for following the life histories of artefacts. The reasons why some of the broken objects were given a new “lease on life” may vary but it is certain that a person was behind each of these opportunities – an individual who gave another opportunity to the artefact. Undoubtedly this person was an important factor in the biography of the artefact, but sometimes the mended and reused artefact may have been also important for the person who did not have the heart to throw it away. As Daniel Miller (1987, 85 ff.) stresses, the relationship between the human subject and the material object is a dialectical one, in which artefacts make people, just as people make artefacts (Thomas 2007, 18).

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Heidi Luik

KAS PURUNENUD LUUKAMMIL OLI VÕIMALUSI UUEKS ELUKS?

Resümee

On arutletud esemete eluloo üle, analüüsid nende võimalusi “uuele elule” nende parandamise ja muutmisega. Esemetel pole aga elulugu ilma inimesteta. Kas parandatud või muudetud eseme puhul saab jälgida rohkem isikuid, kellel võis vaadeldava esemega mingi suhe olla? Kas on võimalik välja selgitada, kes ja miks püüdis purunenud esemele uut elu anda?

Purunenud kammi elus oli järgnevalt kaks võimalust: see kas visati ära või püüti seda parandada. Parandamise puhul võidi katki läinud osa asendada või muuta purunenud eseme kuju, valitud võimalus sõltus ilmselt parandaja oskustest. Mõlemal juhul jätkus kammi elulugu siiski samas funktsioonis ja tähenduses, nagu sel oli olnud enne purunemist. Purunenud osa asendamisel oli eri võimalusi, kuidas ja millises ulatuses seda tehti. Näiteks kammi otsa- või ühendusplaatide väljavahetamisele võivad viidata teistsugune materjal, muster või kuju. Viljandist leitud kammi otsa- ja ühendusplaatidel on erinev muster (joon 1), tavaliselt on aga silmakestega kaunistatud otsaplaatidega kammil ka ühendusplaadi ornamendiks silmakesed. Lisaks on eseme eri osad valmistatud erineva meisterlikkusega ja piide vahetavad ning ühendusplaadile piide saagimisel tekkinud jäljed ei sobi omavahel täpselt kokku (joon 2). Kammi kuju muutmise puhul on purunenud osa eemaldatud, püüdes anda esemele käepärasemat kuju. Näiteks võib kahepoolsest kammist, mille piid on ühel küljel murdunud, teha ühe piireaga kammi. Rõuge linnamäe ühepoolsest kammil on purunenud pool ära lõigatud ja lõikepind hoolikalt silutud, et kammi saaks uuesti kasutada (joon 3). Tartu toomkirikust leitud luust seljaosaga harjal on arvatavasti külg või küljed katki läinud ja uuesti siledaks lõigatud (joon 4). Vaid kahe harjastereaga kitsast eset oli ilmselt siiski võimalik harjana edasi kasutada. Mõnikord on aga eset sedavõrd muudetud, et selle esialgsed kuju ei pruugigi kohe ära tunda, selliseks näiteks on ažuurne ripats Rõuge linnamäelt (joon 5). Kuid Rõugest jm Kagu-Eestist leitud ažuurse ülaosaga kammi-kujuliste ripatsite ornamendi võrdlemisel vaadeldava ripatsiga selgub, et oma alguses elus oli seegi ese ilmselt ažuurse ülaosaga kammripats (joon 6). Ripatsi katkine külg töödeldi siledaks ja seda kasutati edasi ripatsina. Juhul kui kahepoolsest kammil on kõik või suurem osa piidest murdunud, ei ole selle kasutamine kammina enam kuidagi mõeldav (joon 7). Arvatavasti jõudis sellise eseme elutee lõpule ja tõenäoliselt visati see lihtsalt ära. Siiski leiti vahel ka niisugusele esemele uus kasutusala. Näiteks Viljandi kahepoolsest üheosalisest kammist taheti ilmselt teha mängunappu – seega hoopis teistsuguse kasutusala (joon 8).

Kes ja miks esemeid parandas või muul moel taaskasutas? Kui kammi on parandatud osade asendamise teel, on oluline, kuivõrd meisterlikult seda tehti – selle põhjal võib oletada, kas parandaja oli professionaalne meister. Miks esemeid

parandati? Enamasti arvatakse, et parandati hinnalisi ja väärtuslikuks peetud esemeid. Parandatud esemeid on rohkem viikingiaegsete rikkalikult kaunistatud kammide hulgas, mis olid konkreetsele tellijale tehtud aeganõudvad käsitööesemed. Hilisemate, turule ja anonüümsele ostjale tehtud odavamate ning vähem töömahukate kammide puhul esineb parandamist harvem. Esemekuju muutmise puhul näib tõenäolisem, et eset püüdis kasutamiskõlblikuks teha selle omanik. Arvestades viikingiaegsete kammide vähesust Eestis ja nende valmistamisele iseloomulike tootmisjäätmete puudumist, tundub, et Rõugest leitud pooliku kammi puhul oli tegu väärtusliku importesemega. Tõenäoliselt ei olnud ümbruskonnas sel ajal meistreid, kes oleksid sellist kammi parandada osanud, ja seetõttu on katkine osa lihtsalt ära lõigatud ning lõikepind silutud. Ka Rõuge kammripatsi kohendas kasutuskõlblikuks tõenäoliselt selle omanik. Võib-olla oli sel ripatsil oma kandja jaoks mingi väga eriline tähendus, mille tõttu ei tahetud katkist eset ära visata. Folkloorist on teada, et pruudi juuste kammimine enne pulmi oli seotud viljakusmaagiaga. Venemaa 16.–17. sajandi kirjalikud allikad mainivad kamme pruudile toodud kingituste hulgas. Volga piirkonnas oli kammripats pruudi rõivastuse osaks, sellel oli kaitsemaagiline tähendus ja see tähistas uut sotsiaalset staatust – täisealiseks saamist. Seesuguse eseme puhul võib ehk tõesti oletada sentimentaalset väärtust omaniku jaoks ja soovi purunenud eset säilitada ning edasi kasutada. Viljandi kamm-mängunupu puhul oletan, et esemele uue kuju andnud inimene ei olnudki ehk selle endine omanik. Mõnikord on mängunuppudena kasutatud ka lihtsalt kivikesi või ümaraks lõigatud savinõukilde – seega on tegu lihtsalt hetkel kättesattunud materjaliga, mida sai hõlpsasti ära kasutada. Viljandi kammi, mis oli täielikult kasutuskõlbmatuks muutunud, võis endine omanik lihtsalt ära visata. Ära visatud eseme korjas juhuslikult üles keegi, kes vajab parajasti mängunupu jaoks materjali, ja nõnda sai see uue ning hoopis teistsuguse elu.

Niisiis said mõned katki läinud luukamid võimaluse uueks eluks, selliste juhtumite arv purunenud kammide hulgas on siiski küllaltki väike. Põhjused, miks mõne eseme elulugu jätkuda võis, olid ilmselt erinevad, kuid kindlasti on iga sellise võimaluse taga olnud keegi – inimene, kes esemele selle võimaluse andis. Kahtlemata oli see isik eseme eluloos oluliseks teguriks, kuid ka parandatud ja taaskasutatud ese võis mingil põhjusel olla oluline inimese elus, kes seda ära visata ei raatsinud.