

Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things II

JULIE M. SCHABLITSKY AND MARK P. LEONE (EDITORS)

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In 1977 Leland Ferguson edited *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*. The special issue volume of the Society for Historical Archaeology was a reader containing works from a proverbial assortment of “who’s who” during the important adolescent years of the discipline. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s historical archaeology was attempting to distinguish itself from the temporal and topical ranges of prehistoric archaeology, and the theoretical and methodological spectra of historians. Ferguson’s *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things* offered the budding discipline a foundational text from which to expand its horizons.

In 2012 Julie M. Schablitsky and Mark P. Leone (one of the contributors to the first book) continued the themes of Ferguson’s reader with their edited volume, *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things II*. As with the first reader, Schablitsky and Leone brought together 10 authors who represented the breadth of contemporary research, theory, and methods in historical archaeology. Visiting a diverse number of regions, including the Solomon Islands (Martin Gibbs), South Africa (Adam

Heinrich and Carmel Schrire), and Idaho (Stacey Lynn Camp), the volume highlights the ways in which historical archaeology has expanded from a predominantly Anglo-American discipline into a global endeavor for the study of the recent past. The volume also touches upon a vast range of thematic and theoretical frameworks, with everything from the archaeological record of West African belief systems (Schablitsky) and the dispersion of English culture in the Atlantic world (Matthew H. Johnson) to the racial color line embodied in everyday objects (Paul R. Mullins) and public spaces (Christopher N. Matthews). Truly, the volume continues its predecessor’s excellence in defining the scope of scholarship in contemporary historical archaeology.

Central to the work is the contributors’ ability to convey the complexity of the archaeological record into an easily accessible, often jargon-free reading that makes the book an invaluable addition to both the professional archaeologist’s bookshelf and the academic’s course readings. Specifically, the book would help students understand the importance of material things as not simply reflections of the past, but as constructors and modifiers of the beliefs, practices, and ideologies of past people. This concept of the active disposition of material things is a central theme in historical archaeology and a perspective that is well stated throughout the book. Specifically, Mullins’s chapter, “The Importance of Innocuous Things: Prosaic Materiality, Everyday Life, and Historical Archaeology,”

underscores the dynamic role of bric-a-brac consumption along the color line. Mullins asserts that bric-a-brac mass-produced display objects (figurines, plates, ceramics, etc.), have often been considered by historical archaeologists as simply inexpensive reflections of a burgeoning 19th-century consumer culture. Through a mixture of contemporary written documents, including social etiquette literature, and artifact analysis, Mullins weaves a contextual framework to expose the importance of bric-a-brac in the everyday lives of African Americans. Mullins contends that African Americans used bric-a-brac as a means to both reflect and construct individual desire. While inexpensive, bric-a-brac offered a dynamic medium for many impoverished African Americans to project their own genteel refinement onto the public realm. In the same regard, bric-a-brac was also used by African Americans to construct social and political ideologies for themselves. This conceptual framework moves discussions of the materiality of prosaic artifacts beyond simple reflections of societal behaviors and patterns into an important analysis on the ways that things construct (and modify) social ideologies. While more of a theoretical work with limited specifics on individual artifacts, Mullins's contribution offers an insightful approach for archaeologists conducting research on the development of consumer culture. This chapter, as well as Johnson's "English Culture in the Atlantic World" and Schablitsky's "Meanings and Motivations Behind the Use of West

African Spirit Practices," emphasizes the importance of understanding artifacts as active social agents in peoples' lives.

A significant contribution is Camp's chapter, "Utility of Comparative Research in Historical Archaeology," in which she details her work at the World War II Amache Internment Camp for Japanese Americans in Idaho. The importance of this work is not only its discourse on the institutional racism and repression endured by American citizens, but its ability to transition the material meanings of objects from the past to the present with an expansive discussion on migrant worker housing at the former site of the Amache Internment Camp. Camp argues that, "[a]lthough the conditions of the Mexican immigrants are not necessarily synonymous with the experiences of the Japanese American internees, the source of the isolation and invisibility of both modern and historic labor forces remains the same: the assumption that these two groups are racially and biologically inferior to the prototypical Anglo-American citizen, an ideology that arose out of European imperialism and capitalism" (p. 14). Camp's work offers exemplary examples of the importance of historical archaeology in highlighting the fluidity of the past and in present ideologies, as well as a means of offering social commentary on marginalization.

In the 35 years since Ferguson's *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, historical archaeology has grown into a global discipline that encompasses a wide range of temporal and spatial topics

through a diverse corpus of methodologies and theories. While Ferguson's reader helped to provide a foundation to build the framework for historical archaeology, Schablitsky and Leone's *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things II* offers readers a fresh perspective from which to gaze at the colorful spectrum that field

has become. Let's just hope that readers do not have to wait another 35 years for the 3rd edition!

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