

Historical Archaeology in South Africa: Material Culture of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape

CARMEL SCHRIRE (EDITOR)

Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2014. 288 pp., 617 figs., apps., index. \$89.00 cloth + CDROM.

This compilation on the material culture excavated from Dutch East India Company (VOC) sites provides one of the best syntheses of Dutch colonial material culture currently available. Both readable and substantive, the volume is based on archaeological collections excavated in and near Cape Town, South Africa, in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2002 Carmel Schrire acquired control of the collections from the Castle of Good Hope for analysis and publication. She commenced on the most promising and relevant collections with a team consisting of Jane Klose, Stacey Jordan, and Adam Heinrich, later joined by Carolyn White and Jeffrey Durst. The main purpose of this book is to analyze and fully publish, in one volume, these key collections of materials that relate to VOC settlement, trade, provisioning, and other aspects of life at the Cape. Furthermore, the book offers not only a rich perspective on life under VOC rule, but also a substantial history and commentary on the state of historical archaeology in South Africa. The book is intended to provide a basis for future archaeological and comparative investigations of the colonial enterprise on a global scale, with a stated audience of archaeologists, historians, curators, and

collectors who study the material remains of mercantile capitalism. Included with the book is a CD with easily navigable PDF catalogs and high-quality color images of the collections, separated by chapter and site.

In chapter 1 Schrire provides contextual information for the reader, including introductions to the history, historiography, and archaeology of the VOC in South Africa and elsewhere around the world. She reviews the development of historical archaeology at the Cape since its establishment in the 1980s and comments on the current state of historical archaeology as a broader global project. In this commentary, she raises a haunting question: “[d]oes the cost of historical archaeology justify its constant and nagging trend to rediscover things that we already know?” (p. 18). She argues that despite the compelling aspects of special archaeological objects, they are simply not worth the costs of recovery unless they are part of well contextualized collections that allow us to craft broader visions of the past and to extend our understandings into places missed by historical texts.

In chapter 2 Schrire introduces the five 17th- to 18th-century VOC sites, whose collections form the core of the analysis in the following chapters. Three of these sites (Van der Stel Moat, Old Granary, and Donkergat) are at the Castle of Good Hope. While various parts of the castle have been excavated, Schrire chose to focus on these three particular collections based on their stratigraphic control, size, and relevance to archaeological literature. The other two sites,

Oudepost I, an outpost about 120 km up the coast at Saldanha Bay, and Elsenburg, a farm outside Stellenbosch, are elsewhere in the Western Cape. She provides historical context, architectural history, and accounts of the circumstances of archaeological investigation at each site. Particularly valuable are her analyses of the complex formation processes observed at several of these sites. For example, she turns a critical eye toward the previous interpretation of materials unearthed in the Old Granary as being directly associated with slave contexts, an interpretation that subsequently was incorporated into narratives of slave resistance at the Cape. Her reexamination of stratigraphy suggests that these were not occupation layers at all, rather they were fill from intermittent dumping.

Chapter 3, by Adam Robert Heinrich and Schrire, is based on Heinrich's 2010 doctoral dissertation. This chapter comparatively analyzes faunal collections from each site, providing numerous insights into foodways and animal husbandry practices at the Cape. Some data that were previously published have been reanalyzed and corrected. The collections provide a fascinating lens into the development and operation of the meat industry, the provisioning of passing ships, and long-term interactions with Khoekhoen that ultimately devastated their pastoral way of life. They examine the claim that VOC settler diet was primarily mutton and explain the lack of a substantial dairy industry until the late 18th century. They also critically examine the faunal remains excavated at the Old Granary site, furthering the argument offered in chapter 2 against the materials representing an *in situ* slave occupation.

Jane Klose and Schrire describe chapter 4 as "a work-in-progress and preliminary guide" (p. 102) to the Asian ceramics collections. This is a modest assessment of a very important chapter that may surprise archaeologists unfamiliar with the commonplace abundance of porcelain at Cape VOC sites. The Cape's position as a western node in the inter-Asiatic trade network allowed the VOC to cheaply provision itself with resilient and aesthetically pleasing Asian ceramics, resulting in the pervasive use of porcelain by even the lower strata of Cape society. Klose and Schrire divide the collections from the Van der Stel Moat, Old Granary, and Oudepost I sites into six provenance types: Chinese export porcelain, Japanese export porcelain, coarse porcelain ware, Islamic Persian fritware, Asian stoneware, and Asian earthenware. Using the color images and tables on the CD is useful for sifting through the collections, particularly to get a better sense of the colors of glaze and paste that cannot be seen in the gray-scale printed illustrations.

In chapters 5 and 6 Stacey C. Jordan discusses the collections of coarse earthenwares and European stonewares found at VOC sites at the Cape. Historical records indicate that locally produced earthenwares were made by VOC potters of European origin at the Cape during the 17th century. Jordan's analysis is therefore extremely valuable for distinguishing between imported and locally produced coarse earthenware. This is immediately useful for archaeologists not only at the Cape and other VOC sites, but it also speaks to larger discussions of coarse earthenware production in colonial contexts. Unlike coarse earthenwares, stonewares were not locally produced at the Cape, so the

presence of stoneware is primarily attributable to the VOC's trading linkages with Germany; Rhenish (including *bartmannen* jugs) and Westerwald stonewares form the vast majority of the collection. The discussion of the *bartmannen* jugs is usefully compared to examples found in contemporary Dutch shipwrecks.

Chapter 7 is a brief chapter that analyzes the small amount of tin-glazed and refined earthenwares found at these VOC sites. The scant amount of refined earthenwares may surprise archaeologists accustomed to working in North American, Caribbean, and West African contexts where such wares are more common. It is logical, however, given the intermediary position of the Cape between the Atlantic world and the east, where superior porcelains were cheap and accessible.

In chapter 8 Schrire analyzes glass from the Van der Stel Moat, Old Granary, and Oudepost I sites. The Van der Stel Moat collection is the largest, although Schrire notes that the Oudepost I site has been heavily picked over by collectors. Throughout the chapter, Schrire provides useful references to comparable examples of glassware in other collections. Glassware offers perspective not only on trading linkages of the VOC, but also on the rampant abuse of alcohol at the Cape, for "clearly the company was willing to pay the price, dependence and control being the rewards of enforced alcoholism" (p. 201).

In chapter 9 Carolyn L. White examines decorative personal objects recovered from the Van der Stel Moat and Oudepost I sites. The collection of analyzed artifacts from the latter site includes buttons, aglets, buckles, finger rings, and a small link of chain, per-

haps for a watch. The Van der Stel Moat collection consists solely of buttons; the other artifact categories were perhaps misplaced in storage. The analyzed materials suggest similarity in form and appearance of adornment objects, which may reflect similarity in dress for the majority of low-status VOC men.

Schrire analyzes a wide variety of non-ferrous artifacts of copper, brass, bronze, tin, pewter, and lead recovered from Oudepost I in chapter 10. She also examines fragments of stone molds that smelting remains indicate were used for the production of shot at the site. The identifiable artifacts indicate not only dining, hunting, fishing, and repair activities, they also suggest the presence of literate soldiers, as evidenced by copper and brass book clasps, hinges, and slate pencils. Perhaps the most important category of copper artifacts is the small fragments that compose the majority of the collection, which may reflect the ongoing trade relationship between those stationed at the VOC outpost and the Khoekhoen pastoralists.

In chapter 11 Jeffrey J. Durst examines gunflints from the Van der Stel Moat, Old Granary, and Oudepost I collections. Durst sorts the gunflints by type (spall or blade), size, and distribution and attempts to establish the country of manufacture through scientifically verifiable means. The broader goal here is to gain insight into VOC provisioning strategies for their remote outposts. Inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry was used to compare the archaeologically recovered samples with flint sources in Europe. This is a welcome attempt at moving away from the intuitive approach to sourcing gunflints.

Schrire concludes the book in chapter 12, in which she recapitulates the insights gained by the analyses of the collections in previous chapters and charts the way forward for historical archaeology at the Cape. She paints a trajectory of the discipline's rise as an ally to political change toward the end of apartheid and laments archaeology's somewhat diminished status today—evidenced by the public hostility toward excavation of the Prestwich Street burial ground and the commercial, rather than research, focus of work being conducted by the University of Cape Town.

This volume not only provides a vast collection of new data, it also offers important corrections and critiques of previously published material. The inclusion of artifact catalogs and images ensures this volume will remain an important reference for future research. The work of Schrire and her collaborators in producing this book is all the more impressive because much of it is based on the excavated materials, photographs, and

field notes of projects conducted decades ago by other researchers.

The importance and relevance of this book extend far beyond South Africa. Especially for researchers working under the paradigm of the “Atlantic world,” Schrire's volume offers excellent comparative material from sites that bridged the Atlantic world with the east. Schrire and her collaborators have succeeded in crafting a foundational text for the future of Cape archaeology with great significance for the discipline of historical archaeology as a whole. The archaeology of the VOC at the Cape, where refined earthenwares are rare and porcelain does not signify wealth, should serve to remind all historical archaeologists of the necessity of maintaining a global perspective for comparative work.

SEAN HAMILTON REID
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
209 MAXWELL HALL
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
SYRACUSE, NY 13244-1090