Material Culture in London in an Age of Transition: Tudor and Stuart Period Finds c. 1450–c. 1700 from Excavations at Riverside Sites in Southwark

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The contact period in North America brought fishers, explorers, and traders from a number of late medieval European polities into diverse relationships with peoples representing a wide range of indigenous societies. By the 1600s, a vast array of goods was being produced throughout Europe specifically for trade with discriminating and sophisticated Native American consumers. The immigrants and traders also brought with them a variety of personal goods as well as the skills and technologies intended to help them replicate their familiar lifestyles. Recent finds of numerous post-in-ground structures, built by these newcomers before they erected the more elaborate buildings that suited their images of themselves as masters of their New World, reveal much about the late medieval societies of which these immigrants were a part.

Metallurgical and weaving technologies in a few parts of the Americas were extremely sophisticated by A.D. 1500, but even the pyrotechnical abilities of the Inka could not produce iron or glass. No weaving industry had emerged. Metals were in considerable demand by native consumers throughout the Americas, and cloth may have been an even more important item of trade to Native Americans. Historical archaeologists concerned with indigenous societies at contact find that the low survival rates of native-produced goods are a major factor in distorting recognition of the richness of traditional material cultures. Furthermore, in much of North America in the 1600s, native artifact assemblages remained unchanged from those produced earlier in the Late Woodland period. Perforce researchers rely on European produced items, mostly in ceramics, metal, or glass, to provide dates for native sites as well as for indications of changes in the material cultures of indigenous peoples. Changes in the use of European goods, reflecting technological adaptations, unfortunately, are often mistaken for changes in the more basic aspects of individual native cultures.

Geoff Egan and his colleagues have generated an important series of volumes documenting the material culture of medieval London, providing essential references for scholars of that period. Egan’s latest volume reveals a great deal about the material culture of English immigrants to North America. Egan’s examination of specific parts of the rich material culture recovered from one area of London focuses on the 250 years after A.D. 1450, a period that spans most of the colonial era in the Western hemisphere. The find sites of the objects in this volume all lie within the Southwark district in London, along the south bank of the Thames just downstream of the Tower Bridge. The waterlogged soils of this area preserved an impressive array of fabrics, leather goods, items of horn and bone, as well as the usual ceramics, metals, and glass. Egan’s descriptions of these finds from London enhance scholars’ abilities to understand the functions of many of the more unusual artifacts recovered from English and other settlements in the Americas. His work also enables scholars to date these items more precisely, thus helping to reconstruct the evolving social structure of these rapidly growing communities.

This volume specifically excludes the considerable textile finds from the area excavated. Silk and other fabrics that are attached to, or preserved by, metal finds (p. 194, 196) are noted but are not included in this compendium. Clay tobacco pipes and lead seals for cloth found in these London excavations, categories of artifacts important to dating American excavations of the early contact period, also will be published later (but, see item 1027). Many seals were affixed to each woven unit as a kind of hallmark, with bales of 10 cloth units labeled differently. These seals enabled native consumers to judge the quality of their purchases in the same ways as merchants. Given the rarity of cloth seals from North

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American sites, it is assumed that the vast majority of these items were converted into shot.

Egan’s succinct and elegantly written introduction to this volume is followed by a brief analysis of trends that relates these finds to their historical contexts. Here the author clearly notes categories of items not found at these sites but which are known from other parts of the socially diverse city of London. Egan contextualizes these cataloged items with specific references to objects that arrived in London through trade (p. 12–13), as well as carefully citing parallel examples that have been found elsewhere. Of particular importance is the considerable evidence for extensive Continental trade during this period, plus a number of (elephant?) ivory combs that may reflect African sources (p. 12) but that may be linked to the early trade with India for cottons and other products. Readers interested in the economics of trade from London will note that only one of Thomas Stuart Willan’s many important volumes on “rates” (taxes on goods, costs of goods, etc.) is cited, and only The rates of marchandizes (1609) has been referenced from among the dozens of early listings that are available in print or microform. Most of these volumes focus on the English woolen and textile trade, the economic powerhouse during this period. The considerable Native American market for cloth and clothing, items rarely preserved in archaeological contexts but abundantly noted in the documents, may have been but a small part of English exports (Becker, 2005, “Matchcoats,” Ethnohistory 52[4]: 689–726).

Egan offers concise reviews of what these data reveal about changes that took place during the Reformation and how medieval styles of ornament persisted into the Renaissance in England (p. 15–16). Most of this volume, or more than 200 pages, is an outstanding catalog of more than 1,200 artifacts, far from all of those recovered. A great many outstanding photographs, excellent drawings at 1:1 scale, supplementary section drawings and X-rays, plus drawings of comparative examples with references to their publications broaden the scope of this impressive work from that of a catalog to an essential reference volume. Egan’s presentation is brilliantly enhanced by the inclusion of a number of illustrations taken from the works of Pieter Breugel the Elder from the 1550s and 1560s. These provide detailed views of the cataloged objects as they were used by ordinary folk. Other period illustrations (Fig. 178) depict the use of valuable or elite items represented in Egan’s catalog. The 17 topical chapters include “Items of Dress” and “Dress Accessories,” plus others that range from “Knives” and “Kitchen Equipment, Serving and Display Vessels” through “Arms and Armour” and “Religious Objects.” The many spoons recovered are listed in their own chapter, oddly titled “Cutlery.” Quantitative analyses of 122 of these varied artifacts, using energy-dispersive X-ray studies, are presented in chapter 20 (by David Dungworth, pp. 227–238). The nearly complete absence of silver objects in this collection is notable. Before 1700, Londoners of lower status simply may not have been able to afford items fashioned from precious metals.

With this compendium, Egan builds on his own important research as well as recent and related studies that help understanding of the lives that are reflected in this extensive assemblage of artifacts. His references to materials from other European and North American sites such as Jamestown, Virginia, and Fort Michilimackinac reflect the world trade system that emerged by 1500. The internal cross-referencing and superior index provide readers with a very satisfying scholarly experience. The excellent production level matches Egan’s expertise. The high quality paper and efficient binding of this bargain-priced book will stand up to frequent consultations. This work will serve as an essential reference for anyone working with English colonial sites and will be useful to archaeologists and historians concerned with Dutch, French, and other sites of this period.

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