

*Sherds of History: Domestic  
Life in Colonial Guadeloupe*

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Myriam Arcangeli's *Sherds of History* steps beyond the orthodox ceramic study to examine ceramic vessels in the motions of their everyday use. Addressing the domestic signatures of households from the 17th through the 19th century, Arcangeli's book combines historical and archaeological analysis to uncover the "ceramic culture" of colonial Guadeloupe. In six thematic chapters exploring different genres of vessels, the author investigates ceramic variation across the island's colonial population as a means to understand the society of ceramic users behind the objects.

*Sherds of History* begins by introducing a new interpretative approach, situated at the intersection of material culture studies, ethnohistory, and a contextually driven quantitative approach to the documentary record. As developed in the chapters to follow, the objective is clear—to understand the ceramic culture of colonial Guadeloupe through probate inventories and collections-based ceramic studies on four urban sites. Rather than single object studies, the author highlights variation of ceramic assemblages in different contexts as her interpretive avenue for understanding the range of roles ceramics played in domestic settings. This allows Arcangeli to shift the conventional focus of ceramic studies from

makers, buyers, and sellers to ceramic users, as she puts it, "to understand what ceramics did for Gaudeloupeans" (p. 6). Theoretically, the author pursues this by using the behavioral concept of *cadena*s, or chains, which serve to "map the relationships between a given object, other objects that come in contact with it, and people" (p. 4).

Chapter 2 provides a brief history of Guadeloupe, followed by descriptive information for the four sites through which the collections-based component of her study was conducted. In the second half of the chapter, the author uses her probate inventory sample to populate her study area with late 18th-century demographic reconstructions based on occupation, race, class, and gender. Together, this contextual information situates the four sites within a complex French Atlantic world, populated by the social particularities of Guadeloupe—a dynamic in large part revealed through material possessions.

In chapter 3, the author addresses one of these material items—ceramic water vessels—shared across a large cross section of society. Here, the seemingly utilitarian activities surrounding water management are revealed as differentiated in material practice. Specifically, the chapter highlights the unequal distribution of potable water, and the means through which it was channeled and stored in urban places, as a medium in the service of sustenance and status. The second half of the chapter shifts from ceramic users to handlers, examining the role of enslaved house domestics in the task of managing water to support the household. Significantly, Arcangeli highlights this as a subtle, yet vital task of enslaved women in

French colonial households. A major centerpiece of the larger book, this innovative chapter persuasively illustrates how ceramic vessels were put into motion to socialize the island's water.

Chapter 4 continues the theme of domestic service by focusing on a series of separate, yet related, tasks—the preparation and service of creole cuisine. As perhaps one of the more significant contributions of a “ceramic culture” approach, Arcangeli continues to expand upon the role of house domestics, particularly enslaved women, as “ceramic handlers.” This role, the author argues, “put them in the position of intermediaries between the larger ceramic market and what Guadeloupean buyers actually acquired” (p. 89). Framing the interpretive discourse that follows, this notion of ceramic handlers ultimately allows Arcangeli to illustrate the role and agency of the enslaved people in constructing a “ceramic culture” in a plantation society.

In chapter 5, “The Creole Art of Table,” Arcangeli advances the research program of gastrology through her use of probate records. True to the author's focus on ceramic users, contexts, and assemblages, the study considers the entire atmosphere of a room, or event, to situate the role of ceramics within the assortment of furniture, architecture, and cuisine of formal dining. Here, she evokes the anthropological literature on commensal feasting to understand the material record of creole dining, which, as with other forms of feasting, served to both codify and exclude along lines of race and class (pp. 141–142).

Chapter 6 shifts gears to examine ceramic objects associated with hygiene, health, medicine, and spirituality in the context of systems of knowledge and belief in colonial Guadeloupe. Concluding the scope of ceramic genres covered in this book, the chapter covers multiple contexts of use to, in part, uncover the way ceramic

forms occasionally escape their primary function through appropriation and reuse in multiple activities. Situating ceramic paraphernalia of health and hygiene within the changing epistemologies of the body, the chapter spans the 17th century through the present, revealing the continued position of ceramic vessels as objects of practical and social significance in Guadeloupean society.

The contribution of *Sherds of History* is both interpretive and methodological in scope. The book's primary body of evidence, 18th- and 19th-century probate inventories, will be familiar to most historical archaeologists, but Arcangeli's assemblage-, user-, and handler-based approach provides a new framework that many will find widely applicable and revealing. Moreover, as a scholar publishing in both English and French, the author connects the reader with a large body of scholarship through citations of French archaeological, historical, and ethnographic research. Breaking these language barriers allows Arcangeli to periodically compare her findings to Martinique and Quebec, among other colonies, and the metropole, Paris, to situate the ceramic culture of Guadeloupe within an extensive French colonial world.

Arcangeli's approach has both its strengths and weaknesses, though ultimately the former far exceed the latter. The book's greatest strength spans the mid-18th through mid-19th centuries, in part due to the availability of detailed probate records for this time. As such, those working in the French colonial world and beyond will find this volume an invaluable source for both interpretive insight and comparative reference for domestic ceramic signatures as varied by class, race, occupation, and economy. Through its organization each chapter can be read independently, though when brought together the volume illuminates a colonial society in

which ceramic vessels played a varied and vital role in daily life. From inventories, to collections, to early modern treatises on health, body, and cuisine, the reader will find the comprehensive

approach of Arcangeli a positive step in a new direction for probate-, collections-, and field-based research.

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