
Review Essay

Taking the Pulse of Emerging Modernity

Charles E. Orser Jr.¹

The archaeology of the development of modernity as it emerged out of the Middle Ages is potentially one of the most important and powerful areas of study that can be pursued today. A number of historical archaeologists in Europe have taken up the difficult task of examining this transition, and are currently providing insights into the shift from feudalism to mercantilism and capitalism. This topic is both important to the understanding of history and to providing tangible proof that historical archaeology has the potential to contribute to knowledge about the globalization process. Three recent books in particular are especially significant in this archaeological endeavor.

KEY WORDS: modernity; feudalism; historical archaeology in Europe.

Archaeologists have long known that one of the greatest strengths of their discipline is the ability to examine long periods of time and to investigate important transitional phases in cultural history. Several prehistorians have charted the ways in which ancient cultures have adapted to new environmental and social conditions, creating new ways of life in the process. Nowhere is the study of past transitions more important or potentially more intriguing, however, than in the archaeology of the modern world. I have argued for the past few years that historical archaeology can be more than simply an esoteric examination of early modern artifacts or a reaffirmation of the reliability of historical records (see, for example, Orser, 1996, 1999). I believe that historical archaeology has the potential to present startling new perspectives on the historical trajectories of our modern ways of life. By providing new information about the globalization process from its inception, historical archaeologists have the potential to contribute to a discussion that has vital significance for millions of men and women in the world today. Through this kind of research, historical archaeology may finally take its rightful place as a social science of extreme importance in today's world. Historical archaeology will

¹Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Campus Box 4660, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois 61790-4660.

no longer be relegated, rightly or wrongly, simply to the serene halls of academia or to the work-a-day world of cultural resource management.

Arguably one of the most significant developments of the feudalism/modern transition was the beginning of the consumer revolution. The mass production and marketing of consumer goods in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had a profound and lasting impact on men and women living both in Europe and far beyond it (see, for example, Axtell, 1992, pp. 125–151; Courtney, 1996; Funari *et al.*, 1999). Many researchers have demonstrated that the rise of the consumer market drastically altered the world's cultures, and created new contexts for social interaction. The decisive effects of global consumption have become a hallmark of the so-called "modern age," with the eventual outcome of these effects still very much in debate.

The study of the historical transition from the Middle Ages to modernity may indeed be an exciting and rewarding realm of inquiry, but the archaeology of this transition is remarkably difficult. Archaeologists must either be able to excavate a number of sites from different time periods, or have full command of a huge literature and know the material culture extremely well. As a result, substantial progress in untangling the complexities of the feudal/modern transition will take years of in-depth, concentrated research, and a fully informed archaeological picture of the changes will emerge only slowly. Progress, however, can and is being made, and archaeologists interested in this difficult area of study will be heartened by the publication of three books on the subject: *The Age of Transition: The Archaeology of English Culture, 1400–1600*, edited by David Gaimster and Paul Stamper (Oxbow Books, Oxford, 1997; \$68); *German Stoneware, 1200–1900: Archaeology and Cultural History* by David Gaimster (British Museum Press, London, 1997; £45); and *Maiolica in the North: The Archaeology of Tin-Glazed Earthenware in North-West Europe, c. 1500–1600*, edited by David Gaimster (British Museum Press, London, 1999; £25). Not only do these three books significantly advance the study of the transitional period, they also correlate extremely well with the mission of this journal.

The Age of Transition is the result of the first joint conference between the Society for Medieval Archaeology and the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, two respected, professional societies in Great Britain. Taken individually, each society's members generally focus their attention and their energies on their "own" time period, using the year 1500 CE as the somewhat arbitrary dividing line between them. The coming together of these societies in mid-November 1996 at the British Museum, however, provided optimism for those archaeologists who have no difficulty straddling the year 1500 and looking both forward and backward. The joint conference offered a wonderful opportunity for these scholars to discuss common themes, to chart a new course for future cooperation, to publicize both fields of study, and to promote the significance of investigating the transitional period.

The book consists of 17 articles presented at the conference. All of the authors directly confront the feudal/modern transition with both theoretical perspectives and concrete, empirical data. The authors of the first four articles concentrate on some of the theoretical issues that involve the examination of the transition phase, and help to establish and legitimize the value of this archaeology. Some American readers may be surprised by the “historical” tone of the papers, the most striking of which is Helmut Hundsbichler’s “Sampling or Proving ‘Reality’? Co-ordinates for the Evaluation of Historical/Archaeological Research.” Hundsbichler perceives archaeology as an essentially historical pursuit that should be fashioned along the lines of the *Annales* school, a proposition well known to many American historical archaeologists. Historical archaeologists in the United States, however, seldom have the opportunity to learn about the state of research in German-speaking countries, and Hundsbichler, an Austrian, provides a rare glimpse inside the field. Hundsbichler notes that no systematic research on the study of “material culture and daily life”—precisely the purview of the *Annales* school—is underway in the German-language world. Rather, three groups of independent scholars are currently conducting research: folklife specialists, the staff of the Austrian Academy of Sciences—the unit for whom Hundsbichler works—and archaeologists. From the perspective of the history of the discipline, American historical archaeologists will find it enlightening that Hundsbichler’s attempts to link historical and archaeological research was viewed as “controversial” by a group of “narrow-minded” scholars as late as 1989. His comment that many in the German-speaking world do not view the disciplines of history and archaeology as related may explain why archaeologists outside the region know little of the work being pursued there. At the same time, Hundsbichler’s article—along with the others in the volume—demonstrates the revolutionary nature of their research.

Historical archaeologists will never forget that the transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age is inherently temporal in character. Playing on this simple reality, the authors of the various chapters adequately demonstrate how historians and archaeologists can collaborate to study the transition. Taken together, the articles provide a powerful statement for the necessity of such collaboration and thereby provide support for Hundsbichler’s “radical” position.

The remainder of the articles in the book are more empirical, focusing on sites and artifacts of the two centuries that archaeologists now view as transitional. Included are papers on rural settlement, architectural design, urban housing, ceramics, warfare, dress, heraldry, and the archaeobotany of the London diet. All of these articles are extremely intriguing by themselves, but taken together they constitute required reading for all archaeologists interested in the emergence of modernity in Europe.

German Stoneware, 1200–1900: Archaeology and Cultural History by David Gaimster is quite simply the definitive work on the subject. This massive, 400+ page book includes both a history of the German stoneware industry and a catalogue

of the collections housed in the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Museum of London. Gaimster is the primary author of the work, but also collaborating for various specialized sections are Robin Hildyard (history of research and collecting), John A. Goodall (amorials), Judy Rudoe (stoneware revival), Duncan R. Hook (neutron activation analysis), Ian C. Freestone (glaze technology), and Mike S. Tite (glaze technology). Gaimster has made a thorough, seemingly near-exhaustive examination of German stoneware, and has filled the book with historic images, pictures of archaeological and museum specimens, and even a catalogue of the armory blazons present on many of the vessels. Practicing archaeologists discovering German-made stoneware sherds at their sites will find the “typological charts” especially useful because all known vessel forms have been represented here. The book will thus rightly become a well-thumbed reference guide for historical archaeologists around the world who are conducting research on regions where German stonewares can be found.

The book is rich in black and white photographs (about 500), but as an added bonus Gaimster has included 32 color plates. These pictures vividly illustrate the beauty of the stoneware vessels in whole, or near whole, condition. In addition, several period paintings (in both black and white and color) show the use contexts of the vessels.

One should not get the impression, however, that *German Stoneware* is merely descriptive. On the contrary, Gaimster provides an intelligent, thoughtful investigation into the history and meaning of the stonewares. For example, his Chapter 5 is particularly engrossing in terms of the feudal/modern transition because he demonstrates how German stonewares—and by extension, other pieces of material culture—can be understood as having played active roles in the transition. Accordingly, he makes four pertinent points about German stoneware. First, he explains that the fifteenth-century development of woodblock printing and metal plate engraving had a major impact on many crafts, including ceramic production. The application of complex images in relief on the sides of stoneware vessels transformed the objects from mundane, utilitarian things into little pieces of art. Whereas artisans elsewhere in Europe had to paint the most expensive vessels individually, the manufacturers of German stonewares could place intricate designs on their vessels fairly rapidly and in bulk. The mass production of luxury pieces of art altered the nature of consumer demand, and German stonewares became a medium of social competition. The second interesting point Gaimster mentions concerns the potters’ use of complex printed designs as ornamentation on their stoneware vessels. Not only did the use of recognizable images on stonewares constitute another medium for the printers’ art, the vessels were also used to carry political and religious messages. His third point follows from the second in that stoneware also served as a medium for religious propaganda, particularly during the Lutheran Reformation. One fascinating example is a medallion stamped on a stoneware jug made between about 1550 and 1575. When right side up the medallion shows an image of the

pope, but when it is turned upside down, the image of the devil emerges. Another example, made during the same period, contains an image that looks like a cardinal when viewed one way and a jester or fool when seen upside down. The final point Gaimster stresses is that German stonewares could serve as vehicles for political messages. Coats of arms, images of triumphant rulers and important regal personages, and political slogans could be frozen in time on a side of a jug or mug, and when transported to another region could promote the political beliefs of the vessel's home region. Viewed in broad terms, the significance of this chapter is that it demonstrates that modern-era ceramics can be more than merely functional objects. Historical archaeologists in other parts of the world have illustrated how ceramics could be used to foster cultural cohesion and to promote a sense of peoplehood in the face of full-blown assimilationist pressures. Gaimster can thus be applauded for making a valuable contribution to global historical archaeology by providing another example of how physical objects embody multi-layered meanings.

The third book, *Maiolica in the North*, edited by David Gaimster, focuses exclusively on the tin-glazed earthenwares produced in northwestern Europe during the sixteenth century. Like *The Age of Transition*, this book is the result of a colloquium. Held in March 1997, also at the British Museum, this conference brought together several scholars investigating the maiolica industry, and 18 papers are presented here. The individual authors explore such topics as the Italian maiolica industry, and the exportation and regional marketing of the wares, as well as detailed studies of specific collections. The book contains many excellent illustrations, including pictures of both museum and archaeological specimens. Five pages of color plates beautifully portray the brilliant color schemes potters applied to sixteenth century, tin-glazed dishes and tiles.

The book also provides important insights into the emerging modern age, in that the authors collectively show how tin-glazed maiolicas were on the front lines of the developing global marketplace. As someone particularly interested in the history of globalization, I found these papers to provide a strong empirical basis for further study. The distribution of Italian and Spanish maiolicas in the Low Countries, England, and Ireland, and the spread of Dutch-made wares throughout northwestern Europe provide tangible testimony to the magnitude of this trade. Importantly, the evidence shows that not only were the actual objects transferred from place to place, but also that potters themselves migrated. The maiolica industry can therefore be used to illustrate the movement of both objects and people, and provides further proof for the often multi-cultural nature of "national" industries. Overall, this book provides a powerful, empirical statement about the appeal of globalized marketing during the initial years of Europe's early modern, economic expansion.

Each of the three books are important and interesting in their own right, and historical archaeologists in Europe will undoubtedly find much in their pages to interest them. I do not wish to give the impression, though, that these three

books are *only* useful within the limits of Europe. On the contrary, historical archaeologists everywhere who are interested in globalization, the development of international marketing practices, the transference of material culture from one locale to another, the introduction of foreign objects into traditional cultures, and other topics of broad cultural and sociological import would do well to read these books. Though all three of the works address broad issues, each one also provides important, specific information about objects made and used during the early modern period. These books may initially interest those archaeologists who claim to have no interest in the broader topics of world history or those who continue to believe that archaeology is only about the local and the empirical. It is likely that the books will gain a wide audience, one that is composed of theoretically diverse scholars from around the world.

Those archaeologists who choose not to look beyond the confines of their sites will be drawn to these books for the important empirical information they contain. And it is among this group that they may indeed have the greatest impact. The readers of the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* should congratulate David Gaimster for his willingness to bring the topics of globalization to an audience that may not believe it is, or should be, interested in such things. His packaging of globally significant topics around a framework that appears at first so empirical and specific can serve as a guide to the rest of us who seek to show the broad relevance of a truly international historical archaeology. These three books are a great success and deserve to be widely read by all thinking historical archaeologists.

REFERENCES CITED

- Axtell, J. (1992). *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Courtney, P. (1996). In small things forgotten: The Georgian world view, material culture, and the consumer revolution. *Rural History* 7: 87–95.
- Funari, P. P. A., Jones, S., and Hall, M. (1999). Introduction: Archaeology in history. In Funari, P. P. A., Hall, M., and Jones, S. (eds.), *Historical Archaeology: Back From the Edge*, Routledge, New York, pp. 1–20.
- Orser, C. E., Jr. (1996). *A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World*, Plenum, New York.
- Orser, C. E., Jr. (1999). Negotiating our 'Familiar' Pasts. In Tarlow, S., and West, S. (eds.), *The Familiar Past? Archaeologies of Later Historical Britain*, Routledge, London, pp. 273–285.