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Artifact Classification: A Conceptual and Methodological Approach

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Book Review

Dwight W. Read. *Artifact Classification: A Conceptual and Methodological Approach*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2007. 364 pp., 61 figs., 31 tabs., index. ISBN 9781598741025.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by James G. Gibb, Ph.D., Annapolis, MD.

Artifact Classification poses one problem domain, that of "meaning" that author Dwight Read examines from complementary perspectives: what attributes did a people consider in the making and using of an artifact, and how can archaeologists identify those meaningful qualities? The analyst, Read tells us, confronts a double-bind. Developing a culturally salient classification, which he deems paramount, presupposes the very knowledge sought through classification and analysis. Read offers a recursive method to circumvent the double-bind, combining intuitive sorting with mathematical analysis. Normal distribution of a measured variable within an intuitively derived taxon represents a culturally salient attribute, with raw material choices and errors in execution contributing to variance. Distinct modal distributions indicate culturally meaningful subtypes, while non-normal patterns point to an attribute that may be meaningful to the analyst, but not to the people who made and used the objects.

The first seven chapters of this volume are largely conceptual and provide foundation for Read's method. He reviews processual archaeology literature on classification, professing indebtedness to the work of Irving Rouse and his experiences with James Sackett, Lewis Binford, and Sally Binford, and later with Fred Plog and James Hill. He examines the strengths and weaknesses of numerical approaches, particularly cluster analysis, and of some of the prevailing concepts dominating the field through the 1980s. Many historical archaeologists will find the mathematical discussions in the final three chapters demanding in that mathematics applied to taxonomy and mathematics in general have not played as prominent roles in historical archaeology as they have in prehistory. Read's examples are all drawn from prehistoric sites, but in most cases they clearly illustrate concepts and method: projectile points from a Paleoindian site in California; pots from a Swiss Neolithic site; and end scrapers from the two Aurignacian sites in France.

Read considers classification from the perspective of artifact producers, or assumes a close relationship between makers and users. This perspective becomes problematic when the relationship between maker, or manufacturer, and user, or consumer, is impersonal and indirect, the situation historical archaeologists typically encounter. The abstract snowflakes or stars on a pearlware bowl may make those bowls, or fragments of bowls, suitable for activities undreamt of by the makers. Matched sets may have had important meanings for Western consumers, but may have been irrelevant or even sacrilegious in their seeming perfection for non-Western peoples. How those objects were used and which attributes were culturally salient may best be seen in how those objects were used. Context and use-



wear, then, become important dimensions in the classification of artifacts. A recursive method not only is appropriate for such circumstances, it might even be indispensable.

Although Read's examples illustrate concepts and methods well, they treat artifacts as essentially two dimensional with only nominal consideration of thickness or edge angle on stone tools and no regard for the volumes of pots. Artifacts appear throughout the book, and especially in the several poor quality illustrations, as simple shapes rather than as shaped volumes. Perhaps this is a modern Western bias, or more precisely, the bias of the Western academic community that privileges numbers and texts over the feel of a sound, well-turned shovel handle. Similarly, concepts (e.g., projectile point) that divide the world into definable, mutually exclusive categories seem very dated and Western, especially in light of the recent literature on lithic technologies which recognizes the multiple uses of tools, not only in terms of specific tasks but as source material for new tools. The possibility that hafted projectile points might have been used, unreflectively, as knives or scrapers, or that bifaces might have been used strategically as cores, raises the possibility that the search for culturally salient categories is a chimerical pursuit: the very notion of such categories might be anachronistic and Western-bound. Not, perhaps, a welcome thought among archaeologists, but certainly one that has crossed the mind of many an ethnographer.

Seemingly implied throughout *Artifact Classification* is the notion that groups are well-defined, or at least definable, in time and space. But in the Middle Atlantic and the Northeastern United States, the ethnographic and historical literature is replete with examples of different peoples, often speaking mutually unintelligible languages, thrown together by force or circumstance: Africans and aborigines from several regions in Africa and the New World forced into slave quarters, and various Algonquian and Iroquoian speakers coalescing into small communities in the face of massive depopulation and displacement from warfare and epidemics. The porous boundaries documented for the Haudenosaunee during the 17th and 18th centuries surely have parallels in other times and places, as has Early Modern period slavery. Read's reliance on normal distributions as evidence of culturally salient traits seems simplistic in this light.

Artifact Classification is a challenging read, largely because of the complexity of the subject, but a strong editorial hand would have made it less so and possibly have rendered the work more accessible to a wider audience; e.g., upper level undergraduates. Inelegant phrasing, passive voice, and frequent use of the 'royal we' produced many unnecessarily complex sentences. But, weaknesses aside, this is a thought-provoking book and the proposed method could be adapted to address attributes that go beyond the shapes of objects by considering volume, context, and use-wear as aspects of artifact classification. In no part of archaeology is this more important than in historical archaeology where impersonal forces provided manufactured goods to global markets, including to those people with systems of meaning entirely different from those of the dominating classes.