

# The Archaeology of Consumption

Paul R. Mullins

2011

*Annual Review of Anthropology*

Vol. 40, October

[Author's version. Final published version available from:  
[http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746](http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746)]

## Abstract

A vast range of archaeological studies could be construed as studies of consumption, so it is perhaps surprising that relatively few archaeologists have defined their scholarly focus as consumption. This review examines how archaeology can produce a distinctive picture of consumption that remains largely unaddressed in the rich interdisciplinary consumer scholarship. Archaeological research provides concrete evidence of everyday materiality that is not available in most documentary records or ethnographic resources, thus offering an exceptionally powerful mechanism to examine complicated consumption tactics. In a broad archaeological and anthropological context, consumption studies reflect the ways consumers negotiate, accept, and resist goods-dominant meanings within rich social, global, historical, and cultural contexts.

## Disclosure Statement

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
[http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746](http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746)

## ARCHAEOLOGIES OF CONSUMPTION

In 1995 Miller declared that consumption scholarship represented a fundamental transformation of anthropology, pronouncing the death rites for anthropology's "latent primitivism" and arguing that consumption research could reasonably reach into every corner of anthropology. Miller's edited collection bore witness to the interdisciplinary literature that had rapidly emerged since the 1970s, charting threads of longstanding interest in materiality and consumption while it stressed the genuine flood of consumption research (Miller 1995c). The rich anthropological scholarship and interdisciplinary study of consumption that have followed Miller's confident proclamation confirm that anthropology is among a wide range of disciplines that has embraced consumption as a conceptual framework.

Yet in the midst of this rich scholarship that has subsequently mushroomed in volume and breadth, archaeology has been strangely silent even as it has paradoxically produced rich material evidence of consumption patterns across time and space. Miller's thorough 1995 collection included virtually no references to archaeological research at all, which seems surprising given that archaeology marshals material data that reflect a breadth of consumption practices and impacts over millennia. It could simply reflect that archaeologists may have seen little that is novel in the turn toward consumption and material culture studies from the 1970s onward because archaeologists have long examined the concrete patterns left behind by consumption. Nevertheless, consumption has often loomed in archaeological thought as a logical and predictable end point for goods or for a straightforward relationship between supply and demand, rather than as the focus of analysis examining how agents shape the meaning of things and the social world. Archaeology can produce a distinctive picture of consumption that remains largely unaddressed in the rich interdisciplinary scholarship on consumption, yet much of the potential for an archaeological perspective on consumption remains largely untapped.

A vast range of archaeological studies could be construed as studies of consumption, but archaeologists have typically defined consumption rather narrowly. For many

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

archaeologists, consumption is simply a moment in the flow of goods throughout the social world, a discrete instance in a good's life that is isolable from its manufacture, marketing, and discard. The exact insights that such consumption moments provide vary among archaeologists, but they tend to revolve around two basic threads. On the one hand, some scholars focus on the structural, material, and ideological processes that deliver goods to consumers, such as marketing networks, state trade mechanisms, dominant ideologies, or underlying cultural and ethnic identities, all of which shape how certain things end up with specific people and are defined in particular ways. This structural focus tends to embed consumption in broader systemic influences and to examine how consumers get and define things in relatively consistent forms within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. On the other hand, many other archaeological definitions of consumption have focused on consumers' conscious symbolic agency, revolving around how people actively define the meaning of things, often in opposition to dominant ideology, the state, or broader economic interests. This attention to how people define material things mirrors earlier anthropological treatments of consumption that resisted economic determinism (e.g., Douglas & Isherwood 1979), and it remains a key thread in most interdisciplinary consumer scholarship.

This paper argues for adopting consumption as a conceptual framework that could encompass any archaeological scholarship that examines how people socialize material goods (compare Bourdieu 1984; Campbell 1987; Cook et al. 1996; Dietler 2010; Miller 1987, 1995b; Spencer-Wood 1987; Wurst & McGuire 1999). This conceptual framework embraces the agency of consumers and recognizes that goods assume meaning in a tension between structural and localized processes that cannot be described as being either wholly deterministic or disconnected from consumer symbolism. Consumption defined this way revolves around the acquisition of things to confirm, display, accent, mask, and imagine who we are and who we wish to be, which breaks from seeing consumption as a largely reflective process that instrumentally displays social status, evokes ethnicity, exhibits gender, or confirms other essential identities. Instead, consumption is a continual albeit

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

largely unexpressed process of self-definition and collective identification (Mullins 2004). Nevertheless, structural processes have a profound effect on consumption, and all consumer agency and symbolism are significantly influenced by dominant structural processes. That tension between widespread structural influences and consumer agency is perhaps the central element uniting a vast range of archaeological studies that might reasonably be called archaeologies of consumption.

Consumption scholarship typically focuses on commodity goods and documents increasing reliance on goods manufactured by others, but archaeologies of consumption are not necessarily restricted simply to a slice of the world in the last half millennium. Because consumption scholarship revolves around the agency of consumers and the ways people socialize goods, the archaeological implications inevitably reach outside narrowly defined modern commodity exchange; therefore, a consumption framework offers possible insights for scholars working in almost any period. Mass consumption was a staple of the classical Mediterranean world, for instance, and many complex societies have developed sophisticated systems for delivery of standardized goods across vast spaces. Yet for all the similarities between contemporary globalization and symbolic consumer agency across millennia, there remain some radical distinctions between such contexts and the contemporary world. The process of socializing goods and defining them in a range of contextually specific ways is the heart of consumption scholarship and may well be a pertinent framing mechanism for archaeologists working in almost any context, but archaeology provides a critical mechanism to recognize the profound commonalities as well as the wide variation in how goods have been consumed across time.

## **TRADE, ACCULTURATION, AND CONSUMER AGENCY**

A massive volume of twentieth-century archaeological scholarship examined trade patterns throughout the world. However, that work tended to focus on the methodological insights that could be culled from trade goods or the insight such goods provided into exchange

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

relationships between states or specific manufacturing locations, and little of this work examined how such goods were used when obtained (e.g., Adams 1976, Baugher-Perlin 1982, Bell 1947). During the time of World War II, for instance, American prehistorians began examining trade networks in regions such as the American Southeast. In 1947, Robert E. Bell (1947:181) surveyed artifacts excavated from the Spiro Mound site since 1916 and concluded that “widespread trade relationships existed,” but most of his analysis revolved around the sources of natural stone, shell, and copper and had nothing to say about the use of such goods. In 1954, Kenneth Kidd (1954) turned attention to European artifacts found on contact-period American sites, focusing on their methodological potential to date those contexts, but much as Bell had done in a prehistoric context Kidd did not examine indigenous consumption of European goods.

Kidd was followed by many more American archaeologists who viewed European trade goods primarily as mechanisms to date contact-period contexts. The most thorough of these studies was perhaps George Irving Quimby’s (1966) study of European trade goods in the Great Lakes region. Quimby devoted compulsively detailed attention to the evidence that could be used to date trade goods and outline chronologies for the Great Lakes over a broad swath of the historic period, and he provided exceptionally detailed descriptions of the range of objects in particular assemblages as well as primary documentary evidence. Quimby hoped to outline basic patterns in trade over more than 200 years and link those to cultural transformations, though his attention was on changes in indigenous cultures and not among Europeans. His analysis of the effect of indigenous consumption of European goods lent them considerable power over native consumers and tended not to contemplate indigenous peoples’ complicated symbolism for such things. Quimby painted a picture of indigenous consumers gradually discarding distinctive craft goods for European trade commodities, which rendered them a “Pan-Indian” culture by the late eighteenth century. For Quimby and many other scholars, consumption was not necessarily a research question because many fundamental dimensions of consumption research remained unanswered, including artifact identification, cultural chronologies, trade networks, and sociopolitical

---

Author’s version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

relationships. Yet they almost universally saw colonialism as having erased indigenous culture, so questions of consumer agency or the possible indigenous impact on Europeans' vision of materiality were never seriously contemplated.

The implication that indigenous peoples were more or less monolithically acculturated through the consumption of European goods was the explicit or implicit focus of most of this scholarship into the 1970s. In 1967, for instance, John Witthoft (1967) recognized that glass beads were especially sensitive dating mechanisms for fur trade--era sites in the eastern United States because the technologies and styles of beads changed relatively rapidly. He realized that many local contexts revealed distinctive consumption patterns that shed light on the complexities of the fur trade era throughout the American colonies. For example, around Jamestown, Virginia, he noted that local indigenous sites contained dense quantities of beads, yet nearly none were found in the European contexts in Jamestown itself, and he acknowledged that the ceramics and clay pipes that littered Jamestown were almost never found on local indigenous sites. Yet Witthoft painted the contact between Europeans and natives largely in terms of European expansion and conquest and indigenous disintegration and material dependency, failing to see indigenous agency or complicating colonial domination.

Archaeologies of colonial encounter continue to examine the ways in which indigenous and European materialities reflect the dramatic social, economic, and political transformations accompanying cultural contact. Increasingly, however, these studies of colonial contact press for a clear focus on indigenous agency, and that mission is often addressed through analyzing the ways local consumers actively negotiate the material and social transformations championed by colonizers. For instance, Dietler's (2005) study of the early Iron Age Western Mediterranean examines consumption as a mechanism to illuminate how "structures of colonial dependency and domination were gradually created," focusing on the "role of material objects in this process" (pp. 61—62). European commodities have long been viewed as mechanisms of colonial domination, but Dietler joins a host of scholars who acknowledge the indigenous influence on colonizers and stress the socially,

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

historically, and culturally specific contexts that shape consumption. Dietler (2005) advocates “abandoning teleological assumptions of inevitability that have underlain previous approaches” to colonization, hoping to stress that colonization was “an active process of creative appropriation, manipulation, and transformation played out by individuals and social groups with a variety of competing interests and strategies of action embedded in local political relations, cultural perceptions, and cosmologies” (pp. 62—63). Dietler argues that scholars examining colonialism’s social and cultural entanglements should focus on the concrete processes through which some material goods and practices were accepted by indigenous peoples and others turned into points of contestation. For Early Iron Age western Europe, Dietler argues that local communities were discriminating against consumers who embraced some goods of Greek colonizers, typically consuming massive quantities of wine and drinking material goods but rejecting many other goods. Dietler (2005, p. 57) indicates that the indigenous demand for imported Mediterranean trade goods was quite regionally distinctive, a conclusion that underscores the shortcomings of mechanistic models of colonization that distinguish between cores and peripheries and hazard ignoring all the cultural and historical contingencies of colonization. Increasingly more archaeological studies are examining colonization and the concrete processes of transformation across a wide range of colonial contacts, and Dietler advocates a focus on four fundamental elements: context of consumption (i.e., where objects are found, the contexts in which they are recovered); patterns of association (i.e., goods associated with each other); relative quantitative representation within sites and across regions; and spatial distribution of specific goods (examining their distribution patterns across space.

Schucany (2005) examines such a contact moment in Late Iron Age Switzerland, assessing the changes in foodways material goods and practices introduced by the Romans. In the post-Roman period, the regional ceramics assemblages included a range of Roman forms not found in earlier assemblages, but earlier forms did not disappear. The process of Romanization occurred in different degrees depending on the particular vessel form, and Schucany indicates that some indigenous vessel forms actually increased in quantities after

---

Author’s version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

a period of initial consumption of comparable Roman forms. She concludes that the selective integration of Roman forms reveals that Romans made an effort to set local tables with a ceramic assemblage much like that found in contemporary Italy, but some local foodways were retained or persisted using Roman vessels. Much as Dietler argues, documenting the specific ways in which such colonial material and social practices were adopted is one of the key contributions of an archaeology of colonization and consumption.

Scaramelli & Scaramelli (2005) examine similar processes of indigenous appropriation of Western material goods in colonial Venezuela, probing how the introduction of commodities into existing social practices created significant transformations in those practices. Scaramelli & Scaramelli focus on how indigenous peoples used European goods, painting a picture that is incorporative even as such consumption simultaneously reproduced and perhaps accentuated existing cultural practices. They examine the ways gift-giving worked in the Middle Orinoco region of Venezuela, where missionaries hoped to secure indigenous alliances by providing goods for which they perceived a native demand. One class of goods missionaries provided was alcohol, which was used commonly in feasts and ritual contexts, but interjecting externally produced alcohol unseated existing production and consumption systems. Prior to colonization, drink had been produced by indigenous domestic units to enhance a family's prestige, but the introduction of imported spirits compelled hosts to obtain them through exchange, which forced increasing reliance on the production of cash crops and increased debt among indigenous consumers. This shift rendered drink "a commodity---a product that had to be bought, rather than produced," so even though European alcohol was consumed within existing consumer contexts it led to dependency and exploitation (Scaramelli & Scaramelli 2005, p. 150). However, they argue that the consumption of European beads and bodily adornment did not lead to similar consequences. Much as with drink, missionaries rapidly introduced beads and dress to indigenous peoples as colonizing mechanisms, but Scaramelli & Scaramelli argue that European dress instead built on existing systems of adornment and at least initially enhanced those traditional values. Archaeological evidence reveals that indigenous

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>



consumers rapidly incorporated European beads into native social life, adding to as well as replacing precontact bead forms and appearing in greater quantities than any other European goods. Scaramelli & Scaramelli (2005, p. 157) suggest that beads were one class of goods that continued and embellished indigenous value systems that stressed the powers embedded in shiny objects such as quartz crystals, and the European use of beads in items such as rosaries may have reinforced their powers in the eyes of indigenous people. Scaramelli & Scaramelli (2005, p. 157) argue that colonization was “a period of interaction in which indigenous values dictated the adoption of foreign goods, which were incorporated alongside more traditional means of expressing value” (p. 157).

Many recent consumption studies paint complex pictures of cultural transformation and the ways local peoples define mass-produced things in opposition to colonizers. For instance, Harrison’s (2007) study of culture contact in northwest Australia acknowledges that many Aboriginal people quite widely embraced European material culture after the region’s relatively late contact in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Harrison argues that on the one hand Aboriginal laborers and White pastoralists living alongside them on the Australian frontier did share very similar material assemblages; on the other hand, such apparent similarities were accented by sporadic White racist violence, and Aboriginal assemblages often contained goods that Harrison argues reflected rebellion against White domination. For instance, Harrison notes that porcelain insulators were sometimes flintknapped in open defiance of laws against using the telegraph line insulators for such purposes. Harrison argues that flintknapping the insulators and depositing debitage in public view was one modest but meaningful indication that apparent material similarities concealed complex tensions. Harrison suggests that assemblages are generally quite similar, but the idiosyncratic artifacts such as the insulators reveal ambiguities within a complicated relationship.

Much of the archaeological study of consumption has focused on the relationship between broader systemic influences and local indigenous consumption, probing globalization in the classical and prehistoric worlds and illuminating the tension between

---

Author’s version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

local and systemic materialities. Vives-Fernandez (2008), for instance, examines the relationship between Phoenicians and indigenous Iberians between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C. to outline the hybridization of cultural practice between local communities and colonial societies. Vives-Fernandez argues that material culture reveals local systems of significance, focusing on how local consumers selected and exchanged Phoenician import goods on the basis of local social, political, and material conditions. In northern Iberia, for instance, Vives-Fernandez argues that imported items such as wine were highly desired because of the social advantages that their possession, exchange, and consumption provided to certain indigenous groups. The Phoenician wine was consumed in hand-modeled indigenous vessels, so in many ways the imported wine was, in Vives-Fernandez's (2008:256) view, "no longer Phoenician." He concludes that people's world visions are rarely unseated by the mere presence of colonial goods and that different imported and indigenous goods alike were defined in particular ways that reflect the unique circumstances of the local context.

Much of the recent archaeological analysis of consumption has focused on foodways, which are culturally distinctive performances of status and social relations, and food is closely linked to consumers' agency over the symbolism of their own bodies. Miracle & Milner's (2002:4) collection ambitiously tackles the "sociality of food," which they define as focusing on the "social contexts and processes and food preparation, storage, eating, and disposal." The case studies in their collection span a vast range of temporal and cultural contexts and consciously aim to reach outside complex societies alone. One central thread of their picture of food consumption revolves around the relationship between status, power, social hierarchies, and food. Grant (2002), for instance, examines the relationship between meat consumption and status hierarchies in the absence of written records. Using zooarchaeological data from Britain, Grant argues that pork consumption is related to high status across a wide span of time from prehistory through the medieval period on the basis of the correlation of pork remains with imported luxury goods and large structures. In the

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

medieval period, deer consumption was more closely associated with status because access to deer hunting was regulated by the aristocracy.

McCormick (2002) raises the question of how early societies dealt with the distribution and consumption of large animals, which produced significant amounts of perishable meat that would need to be rapidly consumed or preserved. Retail markets can distribute vast amounts of meat from freshly slaughtered animals, but in the absence of such markets larger animals require quite distinctive distribution techniques. McCormick argues that in medieval Ireland early cattle likely produced nearly 400 pounds of edible meat, but the cost of salt curing such a large amount of meat would have been prohibitively expensive, and there are no references to smoking meats in period documentary sources. Consequently, McCormick argues that the medieval Irish would have eaten most meat fresh and required some systematic social mechanisms for distributing large amounts of meat for consumption. Formal communal feasting was one mechanism through which a community of vassals entertained their lord and neighbors in seasonal feasts that fell when excess livestock were slaughtered. McCormick argues that cuts of meat were distributed hierarchically, with choice cuts being formally distributed to people of highest status. Archaeological assemblages make it very difficult to identify feasting outside of unusual pit features. McCormick examined an island noble site reaching back to the eighth century, hypothesizing that this isolated elite context should contain only higher status cuts because lower-status neighbors would not have been on the island. However, because he found a full range of elements represented in the archaeological assemblage, McCormick concludes that the site indicates people of different statuses came to the island, probably to consume food in cross-status feasts. McCormick argues that in a hierarchical society communities establish structural mechanisms to consume such foods, with the medieval Irish creating a system of “enforced hospitality” feasting across status lines.

The archaeological evidence for feast consumption has been the focus of scholars in other regions as well. For example, a mound at the Mississippian center Cahokia is interpreted as evidence of public ritual and feasting by Kelly (2001, p. 351) on the basis of low taxonomic

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

diversity, high-yield meat species, bulk cuts and preparation, and the absence of butchering discards. Such feasts moved tribute goods including food to a center such as Cahokia, where chiefs hosted subjects and redistributed the tribute goods. Prominent lineages likely consolidated their statuses through the repetition of such feasts over time, and tribute groups shared in the redistribution of goods, serving a socially integrative function.

## CONSUMPTION AND THE GEORGIAN REVOLUTION

Historical archaeologists have closely studied the dramatic shifts in Anglo-American material consumption that occurred in the eighteenth century, a transformation that Deetz (1996) referred to as the Georgian Revolution. The focus on the degree to which mass-produced goods were effectively incorporative is debated in historical archaeology in terms similar to those found in classical and prehistoric consumption studies that probe the agency of indigenous consumers. Some historical archaeologists have painted newly emergent commodities as ideological mechanisms distinguishing elite from the masses. For instance, in his study of consumption in Annapolis, Maryland, Shackel (1992) argues that during “economic crises---in particular the 1720s, 1760s, and 1770s---the elite in Annapolis altered their consumption patterns and began to acquire new and different types of goods to symbolically differentiate themselves from the lower groups” (p. 73). Shackel (1993) argues that when elite were threatened in some way they used novel material culture to demonstrate their power publicly in new forms that would reestablish gentry dominance (compare Goodwin 1999). This perspective views Georgian materialism as an instrumental mechanism that the gentry wielded to solidify and rationalize their position because it distanced them from their middling neighbors. Shackel (1992) focused on material goods that “segment and create a disciplined behavior” (p. 78), including cutlery sets, matching ceramics, formal dining items (e.g., tureens), and bodily maintenance goods (e.g., hair brushes). These material forms were part of what Shackel characterizes as a new modern “discipline,” sets of rules that standardized behaviors. Shackel found that such goods

---

Author’s version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

appeared in the probate inventories of modest and affluent Annapolitan households alike, but the wealthiest Annapolitans had significantly higher percentages of these goods (compare Martin 1989). In Shackel's (1992) analysis, Georgian material culture was a mechanism the gentry used to eradicate "medieval community social values" and to foster "a new form of social discipline and material culture" that would "create social differences between themselves and the lower classes" (p. 81).

Martin's (1996) analysis of the transition toward eighteenth-century mass consumption examines behavioral disciplines linked to new commodities, especially teawares. Martin suggests that practices such as tea drinking or table disciplines involved behavioral knowledge as well as the economic ability to acquire specific material forms, so they distinguished gentry consumers who knew such rules. Nevertheless, those dominant practices were negotiated in distinctive ways in specific contexts, and tea drinking rapidly became a cross-class phenomenon in rural and urban settings alike. Martin (1994) argues for a basic divide between rural and urban ceramic marketing and consumption, indicating that "the urban life-style---great dinners, teas, and card parties---placed a greater emphasis on entertaining and social display" (p. 180). In the case of rural Virginians, Martin found some favor for durable goods such as pewter over breakables such as ceramic vessels, even among rural gentry. Urban elite, in contrast, devoted more expense to ceramic purchases, which probably reflects the consumption of matching sets. However, by the 1770s, teaware was available in an extensive range of prices, so the formerly exclusive tea ceremony did not capture the many settings in which tea was being consumed across a wide range of class and regional divides. Cups and saucers were the most common vessel forms sold by American marketers, which made it possible for consumers to purchase individual vessels and assemble sets of various sizes.

Martin's divide between country and city consumers is supported by a wealth of historical archaeology that erodes facile distinctions between backward rural consumers and stylish urbanites and complicates easy class divisions. For instance, Crass and colleagues (1999) argue that colonial Carolina backcountry households rapidly embraced most of the

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

materiality of gentility and were not markedly different from consumers in Charleston, which was among the most stylish American cities. Chinese porcelain occurred more commonly on the Charleston site examined by this study, but it was nevertheless present on backcountry sites dating to the early 1750s, indicating that “farm families invested in enough tea equipage to signal their knowledge to visitors of the refined ways” (Crass et al. 1999, p. 23). Crass et al. suggest that backcountry households acknowledged social and material distinctions between themselves and their urban peers, but they believe that backcountry consumers were still aware of fashions in major American cities and London itself. They conclude that “notions of refinement began almost immediately to affect Backcountry material culture starting in the early to mid-eighteenth century” as “yeoman farmers and their families tried to create a familiar world on the edge of an imperial system that was itself undergoing rapid and irreversible change” (Crass et al. 1999, pp. 27--28).

Numerous archaeological studies focus on consumer agency that actively negotiates dominant material styles. For example, Hodge’s (2007) study of a circa 1720--1775 site in Newport, Rhode Island, complicates status by examining how “middling” households selectively appropriated genteel material practices. She avoids defining status boundaries between collectives, instead favoring a highly contextual notion of consumer tastes that are not reliant on or reacting against dominant notions of material style. For instance, Hodge found that her assemblage included no matching ceramics or vessels associated with entertaining, instead favoring colorfully decorated tin-glazed earthenwares alongside pewter (Hodge 2007, p. 438). This did not reproduce Georgian dining styles, but the household embraced other Georgian forms, including punch and tea drinking. Hodge argues that this finding reflects a taste for “fashionable drinking” over formal dining, suggesting that this piecemeal adoption of dominant practices illustrates consumer agency that did not simply reproduce gentry materialism.

## CONSUMPTION ALONG THE COLOR LINE

---

Author’s version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

Recent archaeological scholarship focused on groups such as the overseas Chinese and African Americans has acknowledged the complicated effects of commodity consumption across lines of difference and probed the ways various groups embraced as well as resisted consumer culture. Overseas Chinese archaeologists have focused on the material distinctions of Chinese immigrant assemblages, which often include many Chinese material goods, so the material record appears to paint Chinese immigrants as excluding themselves from consumer culture. In 1980, for instance, Langenwalter examined a circa 1860--1885 Chinese store assemblage from California and found that it was composed almost entirely of Chinese ceramics and dominated by foods prepared using traditional Chinese butchery and cooking techniques. Sounding a note on acculturation found in many other pre-1980s studies of consumption, Langenwalter (1980) concluded that “relatively little assimilation of culture traits can be seen in the subsistence and table ware refuse” (p. 109). Greenwood (1980) likewise found that about three-quarters of the artifacts from a California site were of Chinese origin, and the presence of Chinese rice bowls and brown stoneware vessels indicated that the residents were maintaining their Chinese foodways. She concluded that most artifacts “support the proposition that... adults maintained the traditional, homeland patterns in the choice, preparation, and service of food, use of opium and herbal medicinals, and native games” (p. 115).

Subsequent studies have focused more on the complex negotiations in consumer patterns. Praetzellis & Praetzellis (2001, p. 649) examine the life of overseas immigrant Yee Ah Tye to illustrate how overseas Chinese negotiated mainstream social codes, reproduced cultural traditions, and actively manipulated both. Yee arrived in California in 1852 and became a Sacramento entrepreneur before moving to gold-mining country in the Sierra Nevada in the 1890s. The goods he sold to Chinese miners were almost universally of Asian manufacture, but Yee himself consumed typical genteel commodities. From the miners’ perspective, the Asian goods may have maintained cultural traditions; for Yee, the miners’ distinctions would have accented his suitability to be admitted to genteel circles that normally excluded the Chinese.

---

Author’s version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

A variety of material goods and consumption patterns reproduced a rich range of ethnic identities. For instance, Praetzellis (2004) documents a novel material good that blurred the ideological boundary between Orient and Occident in ways that were attractive to many non-Chinese consumers. A circa 1900 assemblage from an Irish-American household included a Rockingham-glazed teapot with a Rebekah at the Well motif, a popular design that invoked the biblical story of Rebekah to portray Victorians' ideological notion of "true womanhood" (p. 258). However, the Oakland teapot featured a Chinese man in place of the biblical Rebekah, breaking from conventional gender and racial ideologies. The same assemblage also included Asian ceramics that suggest it was intentionally invoking Oriental symbolism. One 1890s White West Oakland assemblage included five Japanese porcelain vessels alongside a Chinese porcelain vessel and an Oriental motif ware that was likely from an art pottery, and the absence of wear on the Japanese vessels suggests they were being displayed (Mullins 2001, p. 173). Such display of exotic goods was common in Victorian homes in which these alien objects tapped into cultural difference, symbolized American imperialism, and criticized mass production by displaying the craft products of colonized peoples.

Many archaeological studies examine how consumers negotiated broad inequality through distinctive material tactics. For example, a late-nineteenth-century Annapolis, Maryland, assemblage reflects that some African American households consumed brand goods to circumvent such local racism (Mullins 1999a). Around 1892, the household of Maria Maynard filled a small cellar with household refuse that included 79 bottles, and every embossed bottle was from a nationally advertised brand and did not include any local marketers (Mullins 1999b, p. 25). The assemblage included multiple vessels of several brands, suggesting the household favored brands and had allegiance to particular brands. This allegiance to goods sealed outside the control of local White marketers and priced by national producers evaded local marketplace racism (compare Cohen 2003). Some African American brand allegiances reflected their commitment to securing genteel standing because much African American material culture reproduced Victorian material codes.

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>



After Maria's husband John had died in 1875, a probate inventory of their home included stylish decorative furnishings such as mahogany chairs in a room decorated with chromolithographs and figurines (Mullins 1999b, p. 29).

## ARCHAEOLOGIES OF CONSUMPTION

In the face of a vast range of scholars examining consumption and materiality, archaeologists may wonder how to stake a distinctive contribution to consumption scholarship. Majewski & Schiffer (2009) champion a rigorously interdisciplinary and ambitious archaeology of consumption that recognizes archaeology's methodological sophistication and well-established techniques for interpreting material things in specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. Majewski & Schiffer (2009, p. 192) advocate a modern material culture studies that focuses on "consumerism" and reaches beyond consumption alone to "all aspects of consumer societies--political, religious, educational, legal, leisure, economic, aesthetic, and so on" (p. 192). Although such a consumerist scholarship would likely focus on the wide range of ways consumer societies have developed since the eighteenth century, Majewski & Schiffer suggest such a scholarship has no especially concrete temporal or spatial boundaries. They see archaeology's essential insight to be its attention to comparative evidence of consumption across space and time, and they recognize that archaeology provides consumption scholars with methodological rigor to examine concrete material objects, which are surprisingly ignored in consumer research. Indeed, that attention to concrete material things may be the odd lacuna in consumption scholarship, which revolves around materiality yet counterintuitively ignores the rigorous and fine-grained attention to material things that is archaeology's focus. A rigorously interdisciplinary and ambitious archaeology of consumption provides the intellectual and methodological insight to document concrete consumer patterns, embed those in broader structural and cultural influences, and underscore the rich range of ways consumers negotiate dominant influences and socialize goods in distinctive ways.

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

## LITERATURE CITED

- Adams WH. 1976. Trade networks and interaction spheres---a view from Silcott. *Hist. Archaeol.* 10(1):99--112
- Baugher-Perlin S. 1982. Analyzing glass bottles for chronology, function, and trade networks. In *Archaeology of Urban America: The Search for Pattern and Process*, ed. RS Dickens Jr, pp. 259--90. New York: Academic
- Bell RE. 1947. Trade materials at Spiro Mound as indicated by artifacts. *Am. Antiq.* 12(3):181--84
- Bourdieu P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Transl. R Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Campbell C. 1987. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. New York: Basil Blackwell
- Cohen L. 2003. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Vintage
- Cook LJ, Yamin R, McCarthy JP. 1996. Shopping as meaningful action: toward a redefinition of consumption in historical archaeology. *Hist. Archaeol.* 30(4):50--65
- Crass DC, Penner BR, Forehand TR. 1999. Gentility and material culture on the Carolina frontier. *Hist. Archaeol.* 33(3):14--31
- Deetz J. 1996 [1977]. In *Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor. 2nd ed.
- Dietler M. 2005. The archaeology of colonization and the colonization of archaeology: theoretical challenges from an ancient Mediterranean colonial encounter. In *The Archaeology of Colonial Encounters: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. GJ Stein, pp. 33--68. Santa Fe, NM: Sch. Am. Res. Press
- Dietler M. 2010. Consumption. In *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed. D Hicks, M Beaudry, pp. 207--26. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press
- Douglas M, Isherwood B. 1979. *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. New York: Norton

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

- Goodwin LBR. 1999. *An Archaeology of Manners: The Polite World of the Merchant Elite of Colonial Massachusetts*. New York: Kluwer/Plenum
- Grant A. 2002. Food, status, and social hierarchy. See Miracle & Milner 2002, pp. 17--23
- Greenwood RS. 1980. The Chinese on main street. See Schuyler 1980, pp. 113--23
- Harrison R. 2007. Materiality, “ambiguity” and the unfamiliar in the archaeology of inter-societal confrontations: a case study from Northwest Australia. In *Encounters, Materialities, Confrontations: Archaeologies of Social Space and Interaction*, ed. P Cornell, F Fahlander, pp. 42--57. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars
- Hodge CJ. 2007. *A middling gentility: taste, status, and material culture at the eighteenth-century wood lot, Wanton-Lyman-Hazard site, Newport, Rhode Island*. PhD diss., Boston Univ.
- Kelly LS. 2001. A case of ritual feasting at the Cahokia Site. In *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power*, ed. M Dietler, B Hayden, pp. 334--67. Washington, DC: Smithsonian. Inst. Press
- Kidd KE. 1954. Trade goods research techniques. *Am. Antiq.* 20(1):1--8
- Langenwalter PE II. 1980. The archaeology of nineteenth century Chinese subsistence at the lower China store, Madera county, California. See Schuyler 1980, pp. 102--12
- Majewski T, Schiffer MB. 2009. Beyond consumption: toward an archaeology of consumerism. In *The International Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, ed. T Majewski, D Gaimster, pp. 191--207. New York: Springer
- Martin AS. 1989. The role of pewter as missing artifact: consumer attitudes toward tablewares in late eighteenth century Virginia. *Hist. Archaeol.* 23(2):1--27
- Martin AS. 1994. Fashionable sugar dishes, latest fashion ware: the creamware revolution in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. In *Historical Archaeology of the Chesapeake*, ed. PA Shackel, BJ Little, pp. 169--88. Washington, DC: Smithsonian. Inst. Press
- Martin AS. 1996. Frontier boys and country cousins: the context for choice in eighteenth-century consumerism. In *Historical Archaeology and the Study of American Culture*, ed. L De Cunzo, BL Herman, pp. 71--102. Knoxville: Univ. Tenn. Press

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

- McCormick F. 2002. The distribution of meat in a hierarchical society: the Irish evidence. See Miracle & Milner 2002, pp. 25--33
- Miller D. 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. New York: Basil Blackwell
- Miller D, ed. 1995a. *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*. New York: Routledge
- Miller D. 1995b. Consumption as the vanguard of history: apolemic by way of an introduction. See Miller 1995a, pp. 1--57
- Miller D. 1995c. Consumption studies as the transformation of anthropology. See Miller 1995a, pp. 264--95
- Miracle P, Milner N, eds. 2002. *Consuming Passions and Patterns of Consumption*. Cambridge, UK: Univ. Cambridge
- Mullins PR. 1999a. *Race and Affluence: An Archaeology of African America and Consumer Culture*. New York: Kluwer/Plenum
- Mullins PR. 1999b. Race and the genteel consumer: class and African-American consumption, 1850--1930. *Hist. Archaeol.* 33(1):22--38
- Mullins PR. 2001. Racializing the parlor: race and victorian bric-a-brac consumption. In *Race and the Archaeology of Identity*, ed. CE Orser Jr, pp. 158--76. Salt Lake City: Univ. Utah Press
- Mullins PR. 2004. Ideology, power, and capitalism: the historical archaeology of consumption. In *A Companion to Social Archaeology*, ed. L Meskell, RW Preucel, pp. 195--211. Malden, MA: Blackwell
- Praetzellis A, Praetzellis M. 2001. Mangling symbols of gentility in the wild West: case studies in interpretive archaeology. *Am. Anthropol.* 103(3):645--54
- Praetzellis M. 2004. Chinese Oaklanders: overcoming the odds. In *Putting the "There" There: Historical Archaeologies of West Oakland, I-880 Cypress Freeway Replacement Project*, ed. M Praetzellis, A Praetzellis, pp. 237--60. Rohnert Park, CA: Anthropol. Stud. Cent., Dep. Transp., Sonoma State Univ. Calif.

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>

- Quimby GI. 1966. *Indian Culture and European Trade Goods: The Archaeology of the Historic Period in the Western Great Lakes Region*. Madison: Univ. Wisc. Press
- Scaramelli F, de Scaramelli KT. 2005. The roles of material culture in the colonization of the Orinoco, Venezuela. *J. Soc. Archaeol.* 5(1):135--68
- Schucany C. 2005. Cooking like a native, dining like a Roman: food preparation and consumption in Roman Switzerland. In *Consuming Passions: Dining from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. M Carroll, DM Hadley, H Wilmott, pp. 39--48. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus
- Schuyler RL, ed. 1980. *Archaeological Perspectives on Ethnicity in America: Afro-American and Asian American Culture History*. Farmingdale, NY: Baywood
- Shackel PA. 1992. Modern discipline: its historical context in the colonial chesapeake. *Hist. Archaeol.* 26(3):73--84
- Shackel PA. 1993. *Personal Discipline and Material Culture: An Archaeology of Annapolis, Maryland, 1695--1870*. Knoxville: Univ. Tenn. Press
- Spencer-Wood SM, ed. 1987. *Consumer Choice in Historical Archaeology*. New York: Plenum
- Vives-Fernandez J. 2008. Negotiating colonial encounters: hybrid practices and consumption in Eastern Iberia 9th-6th centuries BC. *J. Mediterr. Archaeol.* 21(2):241--72
- Witthoft J. 1967. Archaeology as a key to the colonial fur trade. In *Aspects of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the 1965 North American Fur Trade Conference*, ed. RR Gilman, pp. 55--61. St. Paul: Minn. Hist. Soc.
- Wurst L, McGuire RH. 1999. Immaculate consumption: a critique of the "shop till you drop" school of human behavior. *Int. J. Hist. Archaeol.* 3(3):191--99

---

Author's version. Final version published as:

Mullins, P.R. (2011, October). The archaeology of consumption. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 133-144.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145746>