The Importance of British Material Culture to Historical Archaeologies of the Nineteenth Century

ALASDAIR BROOKS (EDITOR)

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It seems inconceivable that historical archaeology could ignore the flood of British material culture unleashed during the Industrial Revolution. Historical archaeologists inevitably must have some fundamental understanding of British material culture, but archaeological attention to British goods routinely focuses on stylistic chronologies and marketing patterns. There has been little systematic scholarship on the symbolism of this material culture in Britain itself, and there has been a curious absence of comparative archaeology of 18th- and 19th-century British sites.

Alasdair Brooks's edited collection *The Importance of British Material Culture to Historical Archaeologies of the Nineteenth Century* aspires to fashion a framework for British 19th-century archaeology that is based on rigorous comparative analysis of global British materiality. The data-rich collection marches across a host of 10 British case studies, focusing its attention on objects including wig curlers, mass-produced ceramics, mortuary material culture, and miniature goods. Yet beyond this focus on British material things the collection's grander ambition is to underscore how such goods might be conceptualized within global comparative analysis that examines the breadth of meanings for British material culture. Inevitably those case studies illuminate the reach of British mass production and raise the complicated question of precisely what defines "British-ness" in both Britain and abroad.

In Brooks's hands the 19th century is a nearly 200-year social and material period traversing the outset of the Industrial Revolution to World War II. Between about 1750 and 1940, he argues, mass material production of goods such as ceramics and glass emerged and became part of a global trade that did not collapse until the end of British manufacturing domination was confirmed by World War II. Framing the study's focus as the 19th century is perhaps a rhetorical maneuver, alluding to a chronological period that is often ignored in postmedieval archaeology and invoking the collection's fundamental interest in British industrial mass production. On one hand, this focus on the goods produced by British industry documents the ways mass production transformed the British everyday world in quotidian ways that are not especially well-documented. Where Britain's domestic mass-produced material culture has been quite thoroughly studied internationally, it was long ignored in Britain itself, so the book establishes a foothold for a comparative British historical archaeology. On the other hand, Brooks is wary that outside Britain those goods seem to be viewed by archaeologists as empty vessels bearing little or no meaningful expression of or connection with their British origins. Consequently, another goal of the study is to

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encourage international historical archaeologists to acknowledge the British dimensions of global consumption.

Perhaps no British goods are more familiar to historical archaeologists than ceramics. Brooks's own chapter with Aileen Connor and Rachel Clarke is the clearest illustration of the study's ambition to compare British case studies to international contexts. The paper analyzes a ceramic assemblage from Huntingdon, ambitiously comparing consumption patterns in east England across a breadth of five continents in which British ceramics were being consumed. The analysis of these patterns after 1800 indicates that transfer-printed wares were much more common in Huntingdon (and possibly broader Britain) than North America. In a closely argued paper the authors circumspectly pose international distinctions in ceramic consumption, and while those patterns may well be complicated by subsequent site-specific research, the authors' fundamental point is that there are substantive distinctions in ceramic consumption in the legion of contexts that contain British ceramics. Chris Jarrett, Morag Cross, and Alistair Robertson contribute a complementary paper on export ceramics manufactured by the Caledonian Pottery in Glasgow after 1800. The Glasgow study does not compare international and domestic consumer contexts, but wasters included ceramics marked expressly for markets in Glasgow and Scotland as well as international regions including Argentina, Brazil, and India. In many ways, the rigorous comparative analyses that Brooks hopes to foster are implicit in this volume, but studies such as the Caledonian Pottery paper should press global historical archaeologists to refer to British scholarship and collections.

Carolyn L. White and Ralph Mills each contribute studies of British material goods that are rarely seen as especially meaningful, let alone as British. White analyzes 1,829 hair curlers from a 19th-century refuse assemblage in London, using the curlers to examine hairstyle and fashion. Sounding a note familiar throughout the book, White laments that the curlers were part of a postmedieval assemblage whose interpretive potential has been largely untapped. However, she also emphasizes that her analysis was based on a museum curated assemblage, and some similarly rich British collections simply await scholarly analysis. Mills examines miniatures, a class of things ranging from figurines to toys. Mills provides one of the most systematic studies of the distinctive British dimensions of a universe of objects, analyzing how miniature styles explicitly invoked stereotypical notions of cottages, dogs, castles, and historical figures that were consumed as British both within Britain and beyond. Mass-produced things may loom in many archaeological studies as reflections of global market networks, but Mills accepts Brooks's challenge to examine how seemingly quotidian things materialized British culture globally.

Mills's symbolically ambiguous miniatures illuminate the compelling yet complicated question of exactly how things manufactured in Britain assumed distinctive meanings in a vast range of places. James Symonds's epilogue to the volume emphasizes that mass-produced British goods inevitably assumed a complex range of regional, period, and stylistic imaginations of "British-ness." Symonds embraces Brooks's call for an analysis of how British consumers defined the mass-produced things in their own midst, but he also suggests that in many ways those goods were

relatively dynamic symbols that could evoke "British-ness" in enormously fluid ways—and, in some cases even in Britain, perhaps not at all. The collection's call for a global historical archaeology will be compelling for many scholars, and there is enormous potential for a systematic comparative scholarship of British materiality. As Symonds concludes, such creative comparative archaeology can illuminate myriad local experiences of British material things in Britain and global marketplaces alike.

Paul R. Mullins
Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis
Cavanaugh Hall 413E
Indianapolis, IN 46202