

Design, function and use-wear in spoons: reconstructing everyday Roman social practice

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Recent theoretical approaches to artefacts include object biography, post-colonial theory, globalization, and consumption.¹ Using approaches such as consumption theory, the social function of artefacts as possessions and commodities, drawing on the appearance and decorative style of artefacts, has been studied within both archaeology and anthropology.² Yet the current emphasis on meaning through appearance has meant that the non-functional aspects of artefacts — those which can vary without affecting function, and which are important, for instance, in communicating identity — have been privileged above practical features; as noted by E. Shove,³ the acquisition, rather than the utilisation, of artefacts has dominated theoretical studies.

Where utilitarian artefacts have been considered, students have looked mostly at reconstruction of the artefacts themselves and of assemblages of artefacts that relate to various aspects of daily living.⁴ Driven by contextual studies, there has also been an emphasis on the ways in which artefacts may be used differently to their intended function, particularly in their end-use — for instance, considerations of ritual deposition — and artefact biography.⁵ Both types of studies have enhanced our understanding of relationships between people and artefacts, yet the emphasis on contingent uses has meant that the purpose for which an artefact was originally designed, and its subsequent quotidian uses, have not received the same depth of treatment. Even somewhat older considerations of the craft and design of Roman artefacts, which one might expect to consider questions of use, have tended to focus on production techniques.⁶

An important source of evidence for the use of objects in everyday life is the formal design of an artefact or its appearance as evolved through craft practice, and how this relates to its practical use. Design theory uses a particular term, “affordance”, to describe the perceived properties of an artefact that make possible, and incline people towards, specific uses.⁷ Many studies of artefacts intuitively make use of this in order to reconstruct possible functions.⁸ The relationship between form and function has been problematized in anthropological work which has studied daily practice. It has been shown, for instance, that differentiations between vessel forms need not imply different contents, that features such as rim design are not always efficient adaptations for use, and that vessels of particular forms are sometimes used rather counterintuitively, ignoring the prescriptions of design.⁹ Yet in some cases the design properties of an artefact may indeed be important in understanding its intended, and even its actual, uses.

1 C. Tilley *et al.* (edd.), *Handbook of material culture* (London 2006).

2 E.g., D. Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption* (Oxford 1991).

3 E. Shove, *The design of everyday life* (Oxford 2007) 14.

4 E.g., L. Allason-Jones, *Daily life in Roman Britain* (Westport, CT 2008).

5 See, e.g., B. J. Mills and W. H. Walker, *Memory work: archaeologies of material practices* (Santa Fe, NM 2008).

6 E.g., D. E. Strong and D. Brown, *Roman crafts* (London 1976).

7 D. A. Norman, *The design of everyday things* (New York 2002).

8 See most recently the chapters in L. Allason-Jones (ed.), *Artefacts in Roman Britain: their purpose and use* (Cambridge 2011).

9 D. Miller, *Artefacts as categories: a study of ceramic variability in India* (Cambridge 1985) 51-74.