

The social distribution of Roman artefacts: the case of nail-cleaners and brooches in Britain

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Material culture, consumption and identity

Understanding the consumption of artefacts is central to any archaeological analysis of social and cultural identity. This is not just because objects form one of the main sources of evidence in archaeology, but also because it is now widely recognised that the use and consumption of material culture is both reflective and formative of identity. The last 20 years have seen a great interest within the social sciences in the relationship between identity and consumption. These theoretical developments have significant implications for Roman archaeology, which deals with a finds-rich period and possesses comparatively detailed contextual information. However, Roman archaeology has been quite slow to take up this theoretical challenge and is only just beginning to promote itself as an area with such potential.¹

Interest in more explicitly theoretical approaches to material culture has been strengthened by the emergence of identity as a key concept in Roman archaeology.² This new focus is arguably part of a broader analytical shift from an emphasis on Romanisation (often viewed in terms of a native/Roman dichotomy) with an empire-wide uniformity, to an emphasis on diversity, discrepant experiences and creolisation.³

These more complex models of identity and consumption require more complex theoretical and methodological approaches to small finds, as well as renewed efforts to compile theoretically informed corpora. I will argue that research on Roman artefacts needs to move from a focus on the chronological and spatial distribution of artefacts to a focus on the social distribution of material culture. Such a study will concentrate on the contexts of consumption and aim to analyse systematically how groups of objects were used in the Roman provinces. I hope to illustrate the potential of social distribution studies by using a variety of small finds as case-studies, although, given the quality of the available contextual data, this is merely a pilot study, to highlight the potential of such an approach, and not a fully developed methodology.

I begin by reviewing the theoretical background and current state of the study of Romano-British small finds, and then present some recent data on toilet instruments and brooches.

'In small (Roman) things forgotten'

It is not my purpose here to provide an exhaustive review of the theoretical literature on consumption and identity, particularly as much of this research is summarized in recent studies both in sociology⁴ and anthropology.⁵ Archaeologists have developed many of these ideas, case-studies from the 'data-rich' historical periods⁶ being especially powerful.⁷

Consumption ('consumption' is defined as the "selection, purchase, use, maintenance and disposal of any product"⁸) has become a major research area in the social sciences, arguably due to the rôle it plays in contemporary society, but that raises serious issues about the applicability of much of this theory to past societies, especially if we argue, with C. Campbell

1 Cf. Hill 2001, 18.

2 Cf. James and Millett 2001; Laurence and Berry 1998.

3 Mattingly 1997; Webster and Cooper 1996; Webster 2001; Mattingly 2004.

4 E.g., Dant 1999; Mackay 1997; Riggins 1994; Lury 1996; Friedman 1994.

5 Douglas and Isherwood 1980; Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987, 1995 and 1998.

6 E.g., Deetz 1996; Weatherill 1988.

7 Allason-Jones 2001.

8 Campbell 1995, 104.