

Artifacts and Personal Identity

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I shall never have a professional attitude or remember the exact dates of the Assyrian kings, but I do take an enormous interest in the personal aspects of what archaeology reveals.

—Agatha Christie

Introduction

Although historical archaeologists have generally neglected to apprehend the potent meanings of personal possessions, the field is stirring. All too often, personal artifacts have been subsumed into broader categories of artifacts, their meanings blurred or diminished. Personal artifacts have been assessed as subgroups classified by material, resulting in a muting of the individual significance of particular artifacts and a preference on the part of analysts to deal with objects recovered in large quantities. Personal artifacts have occasioned individual assessment sporadically, and interest in these artifacts has begun to shift from limited interpretation to more interpretive contextual approaches.

In this chapter, we trace the shifts in approach to personal artifacts and explore the ways that archaeologists scrutinize these small finds to understand identity construction. Three interrelated lines of inquiry and influence in archaeology have merged to bring about a shift to exploration of personal items and identity construction. First, the examination of the lives of enslaved African Americans

sparked intensive interest among historical archaeologists in examining race and ethnicity. Concurrently, archaeologists sought more effective and complex ways of examining gender in the archaeological record. These trends, as well as emerging interest in considering class, were part of a larger movement within the field—parallel to developments across other disciplines—in the examination of identity. A second important influence was a renewed interest in less commonly examined classes of artifacts, stimulated, in part, by a frustration with traditional modes of material culture analysis to engage with race, gender, and class. Third, historical archaeologists joined with cultural anthropologists in a dedicated interest in the examination of the body and the manifold ways in which embodiment can be examined through material culture. These three influential threads surface in current work in the exploration of identity through personal possessions.

Examining Identity

In recent years, identity has been taken up with great enthusiasm by archaeologists, and scholars have explored the topic in a variety of ways.

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Gender, race/ethnicity, status/class, and age have been pursued most rigorously by historical archaeologists, though additional forms of identity—nationality, sexual preference, religion, marital status, familial ties, and any other number of possible groupings—provide intriguing possibilities for investigation. Historical archaeologists have become more sophisticated in their understandings of the ways that such aspects of cultural identity are shaped and considered, as a corresponding critique of approaches to the analysis of identity has highlighted what has, at times, been a restrictive view of the construction and conceptualization of identity.

The concept of identity is complicated, paradoxical, and culturally situated in time, place, and society. Identity is at once both imposed by others and self-imposed, and is continuously asserted and reasserted in ways that are fluid and fixed. Identity can lie at the individual level and at the broadest of imaginable scales as it defines a person both as part of a group and as an individual.

Initial work on identity within the field of historical archaeology concentrated on single aspects of identity, most commonly ethnicity or gender. These pursuits were not framed as inquiries into identity per se, but rather as investigations of the lives of enslaved African Americans and women. This narrow focus allowed archaeologists and other scholars to make important inroads into the construction of gender and ethnic identity. The late 1980s and early 1990s exhibited important work, particularly in terms of raising the profile of the lives of African Americans in plantation contexts (Samford, 1996) and of women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century households (e.g., Seifert, 1991).

As more scholars approached topics of gender and race in archaeological contexts, the pursuit of these issues became more nuanced and shifted toward explorations of the ways in which gender, race, and class shaped *and were shaped by* individual lives. The percolation of post-processualism into American archaeology and the rise of interest in “interpretive” approaches to archaeology encouraged scholars to engage with issues of individual agency and shifted attention to the ways in which race/ethnicity, gender, class, etc., contributed to the construction of individual identity in the past (Hodder, 1986, 1989; Shanks and Tilley, 1987a, 1987b; Thomas, 1996; Tilley, 1990; Wobst, 1977).

The mid-1990s were characterized by an intensification of interest in the exploration of race, gender, and to a lesser degree, class, sparking many important contributions to an increased understanding of the activities and archaeological signatures of women and African Americans (see Paynter [2000b] for a detailed overview of developments in the analysis of race, class, gender, and state formation within historical archaeology). While these investigations still were not framed as investigations of “identity,” the pursuit of gender and race in the archaeological record was perceived as meriting extensive exploration. Two notable examples are Wall’s (1994) examination of gender in nineteenth-century New York and Ferguson’s (1992) influential volume on early African America. Both used archaeological materials to examine the lives of understudied groups, and each placed primacy on a single aspect of identity. Nevertheless, the relationship between gender, class, and race is implicit in each study.

The intensifying interest in aspects of gender, race, and class resulted in a parallel examination of the ways in which archaeologists investigate what was becoming known as “identity.” One important result of this self-examination was an increasing awareness by historical archaeologists of their tendency to focus on particular aspects of identity to the exclusion of others, as noted by Scott (1994), who stressed the importance of an expansive, multistranded perspective on race, class, and gender. Recent and current research demonstrates a trend toward more complex understandings of the intricacies of identity, as many archaeologists embrace multiple elements of identity, even if one aspect of identity is a main focus (Delle et al., 2000; Funari, 1999; Mullins, 1999; Orser, 2001; Rotman, 2005; Yentsch, 1994).

This work is beginning to broach the complexity and draw out the richness of such lines of archaeological inquiry, deepening understanding of how aspects of identity are woven together, and moving toward an incorporation of broader conceptions of identity construction than those based on a single, often externally imposed, aspect of identity. As Paynter (2000a:11) notes, “Increasingly, historical archaeologists are writing with a different ontology, one that embeds material culture within systems of meaning and action, one that gives objects an active voice in cultural practices.”

Material Culture

While archaeologists are keen to obtain new technical and temporal information about the artifacts they recover, artifact analysis is most commonly a means toward interpreting archaeological sites on a broad scale rather than an explicit vehicle for examining identity. In the 1980s and 1990s, as archaeologists considered expansive questions of the making and meanings of landscapes and contemplated cultural changes within and across households, analytical approaches to artifact assemblages emphasized typology, identification, and chronology over interpretive approaches (Cochran and Beaudry, 2006). By and large, archaeologists looked to artifacts as indexes of, for example, household change, feature dating, and other broadly stroked interpretations of a structure, property, or landscape. In seeking ways to generalize about the activities on archaeological sites, archaeologists have grouped individually meaningful artifacts under broad categories, diminishing their potential to help us understand the meanings of these compelling material sources (Beaudry, 2002; Loren and Beaudry, 2006).

Glass and ceramics, recovered in large quantities, have commanded the preponderance of archaeologists' attention. Analysis of other artifacts has generally relied on a few comprehensive archaeological guides (Deagan, 1987, 2002; Noël Hume, 1969), works by scholars from other fields (e.g., art historians, curators, and collectors), and on a small number of artifact studies (Brauner, 2000; Karklins, 2000; Noël Hume et al., 1973).

As the archaeological probe of identity construction has grown—in terms of the numbers of scholars engaged and the increasing globalization of identity as a component of research agendas—archaeologists have developed innovative approaches to interpreting the archaeological record, including the incorporation of marginal categories of material culture, particularly “small things” (see Cochran and Beaudry, 2006; Loren and Beaudry, 2006). It has taken some time for archaeologists to employ certain types of artifacts to engage aspects of gender, race, ethnicity, and age and to develop new approaches to material culture analysis. Attention to personal artifacts in particular was sparked by interest in various threads of

identity and by a burgeoning interest in the anthropological examination of the body.

The notion of material culture as integral to human action has fueled this interest, as archaeologists and other scholars have recognized the recursive nature of the relationships between objects and people. Studies of object biographies, emphasizing the accumulated meanings imbued in and imparted to objects and the multidirectional transformation of objects and people as both subjects and agents bound to one another, have fostered interpretive approaches to material culture (Gosden and Marshall, 1999:169, 177; Kopytoff, 1986). Further, the ability of historical archaeology to work at varying levels of scale, on a global level as well as on a small or microscale, has encouraged innovative uses of material culture (Gilchrist, 2005), identity construction being one of the main venues for small-scale, detailed studies.

An initiative of the Museum of London, “Biographies of London Life,” has established a series of research goals based on “the archaeology of Londoners and their things” (Hicks and Jeffries, 2004; Nixon et al., 2002). One of the areas that archaeologists seek to examine through the archive of collections and documents from sites in London is identity, particularly in relation to ethnicity and social status (Nixon et al., 2002:85). Jeffries, in his study of ceramics from Spitalfields in East London, where in the late seventeenth century Huguenots formed a community centered around the silk-weaving industry, sought to answer the question “how important would it have been to these newly displaced people to use a French-made and decorated dish, rather than an English dish?” Apart from a very few vessels that might have had symbolic value in Huguenot society, ceramics from Huguenot household deposits throughout Spitalfields did not contain French pottery. Jeffries surmises that “the community reflected its cultural identity not through its possessions, but in other, more socially visible ways (such as language, religion, cuisine and dress)” (Jeffries, 2001:61). Thus, Jeffries concludes, given that the concept of ethnic identity is difficult to define because it is complex, multifaceted, and not fixed, the usual paths followed by archaeologists may not suffice; other sorts of evidence—of the sort, for instance, that

might permit the archaeologist to delineate distinctive culinary practice, if it exists—must be recovered, recognized, and interpreted (Jeffries, 2001:62).

Looking at the Body and the Presentation of Self

The body has become a focal point across multiple disciplines, including archaeology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, feminist theory, fashion theory, and social theory. Scholars interested in gender and sexuality have been particularly active in the analysis of the body (Farnell, 1999). A wave of publications in archaeology from a broad spectrum of culture areas and time periods attests to the body as a topic of specific inquiry (Fisher and Loren, 2003; Hamilakis et al., 1998; Lindman and Tarter, 2001; Montserrat, 1998; Rautman, 2000). Archaeological examinations of the body typically consider it either as a scene of display or as an artifact. Both of these approaches relate directly to the construction of identity, though the former is certainly more common (Meskell, 1999:42).

Examination of the body and the presentation of self are critical constituents in the pursuit of the construction of identity through personal artifacts. The body is the common locale for individuation, as identity is enacted on the surface of the body and through bodily action (Butler, 1990). The body, and more generally, embodiment, is a touchpoint for multiple aspects of the archaeological past. As Meskell has outlined, materiality—*vis à vis* the ways that people eat, sleep, move about, and so on—is part of embodiment, and the ways that cultural contexts create corporeal style and constitute bodies are a critical part of embodiment. This sort of appreciation of life on an individual scale, what it is like to be in one's own body, to live and act as an individual being, and in turn, of how individual ideas of the self are reflected through material culture, are important elements in the examination of personal artifacts and their relationship to identity construction. Aspects of sex and gender, as well as other components of identity, are critical components of embodiment (Meskell, 1999:37).

Manipulation of the body through voluntary and involuntary measures occurs through assorted means, described as inscription (for a detailed discussion, see Grosz [1994, 1995]), and many of the manipulations occur on the surface of the body. Aspects of bodily manipulation and inscription such as lifestyle, habits, postures, and the decoration and elaboration of the body have archaeological correlates that can be examined (Grosz, 1994). Personal adornment is the recoverable evidence of the act of inscription, of the act of inscribing and manipulating the body (White, 2005:4).

Fisher and Loren explore the relationship between the body and identity, noting that through “dress, ornamentation, posture, gesture and representation, an individual has the ability to ‘put on a social skin,’ allowing self-identification as a member of a larger or different social or interest group” (Fisher and Loren, 2003:225). They underscore the importance of the concept of embodiment, and the importance of contextualizing the body within the experience of the individual. The ways that individuals experience and occupy social and physical landscapes is as critical to the development of identity as what one wears on his or her body (Fisher and Loren, 2003:229).

Personal Artifacts and Identity

As a class of material culture, personal artifacts hold great potential for examining individual lives, particularly along lines of gender, ethnicity, class, age, though aspects of nationalism and regional identities have been explored as well. When people engage in various activities, their actions reflect individual choice as well as the norms and expectations of the broader society. The set of choices is restricted by the available materials and by the assessed set of options for an individual, which, in turn, is constrained by diverse lines of identity, such as gender, ethnicity/race, class/status, and so on. The physical action, whether clothing one's body, taking up a needle and thread, engraving initials on a spoon, or washing clothing, is undertaken in a manner that lies somewhere on a continuum of enacted intertwined social identities. As Butler

(1990:33) has described, gender identity is something that is performed; it is enacted through “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” The repeated acts are characterized as the mundane sorts of activities, such as bodily gestures, styles of assorted kinds, as well as movement, as the means by which gender identity is enacted to “constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1990:140).

As archaeologists, we have access to a limited number of bodily acts and gestures though the analysis of personal artifacts, as those objects are the remnants of mundane and repeated acts. Personal adornment, tools of needlework, inscribed objects, food preparation and serving vessels, along with many other artifacts, are the physical remains of such acts undertaken as part of the performance of identity.

We extend the concept of performance to multiple lines of identity, and the value of the performance analogy holds as a mode of expression and maintenance of ethnicity, status, class, age, nationality, and others (see White, 2005:5–7). As noted, these various lines must be examined as commingled aspects of identity that may be present in any number of combinations depending on the individual or group under examination (see Fisher and Loren, 2003). As Butler (1990:3) states, “it is impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.” This underscores the social, physical, and temporal specificity of identity and the mandate to examine the construction of gender within time and space with care. Because intertwined lines of identity are engaged through individual personal artifacts, it is critical to consider the use of such artifacts along expected modes of performance as well as use in contravention of expected social norms. Such differences in expected uses of personal artifacts can be points for rich exploration of difference (see Hall, 1999:193; Stahl, 1993:33, 251, 2001:33), an endeavor at the heart of the examination of identity.

Historical archaeologists sometimes recover evidence of identity constructed through a person’s voluntary affiliation with a group constituted around common interests, a shared sense of purpose

aimed at social change, ethnicity, or religious association (Anderson, 1971; Smith and Freedman, 1972). Anthropologists and sociologists refer to such groups as voluntary associations, a phrase that encompasses secret societies, religious associations, activist organizations like labor unions, environmentalist groups, and temperance societies, sewing circles, historical societies, and gun clubs. Recent scholarship examines voluntary associations as arenas of praxis, seeing group membership as a discursive strategy used in identity construction; an individual’s participation in group activities serves as “a projection of the self as one who cares” at the same time that it justifies particular practices and courses of action (Aspraki, 2004:165). Voluntary associations, then, are entities through which imageries, symbols, and ideologies are projected and negotiated (Aspraki, 2004:137, 165); that people join and play active roles in such associations serves to underscore the point that identities are not about “‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’ so much, as what we might become” (Hall, 1997:4).

What Artifacts Are Personal?

Examinations of personal identity and artifacts have drawn on an array of materials, but the most common are those that were associated with individuals. Sewing items, personal adornment, decorated clay pipes, and inscribed artifacts have received considerable attention. As noted above, it is the “small things” that often offer the greatest promise for understanding the multifaceted aspects of identity bound up with a person’s actions and appearance (Deagan, 2002:4; Loren and Beaudry, 2006:257). Many of the objects with potential for nuanced interpretation are those worn on the body or used in conjunction with a person’s physicality, those objects invoked in the performance of identity.

Personal artifacts may include any or all objects used by a restricted group, regardless of the way that group is defined. Another class of personal artifact is those used by an individual, belonging to one person and used exclusively by that individual over the course of the artifact’s use-life or person’s lifetime. Within this category of artifacts are

objects used by individuals and passed on to others through heredity—objects that see multiple, successive owners. Finally, the most narrowly defined kind of personal artifacts are those that are exclusively associated with the bodies of individual people—artifacts worn or used by a single person on or about their body. Personal artifacts can be defined in broad and narrow terms, and here we discuss items that fall across a spectrum.

Worn Objects and Identity

Personal Adornment

Archaeological evidence of personal adornment consists of elements of a person's clothing and accessories, and permits a reading, while fragmentary, of the ways that people physically constructed and constituted themselves through performance and inscription of identity (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994, 1995). Fashion, clothing, and dress are widely understood to be part of a system of communication, and personal adornment conveys individual and group affiliation across the fluid and changing constructions of gender, age, class, ethnicity, and other modes of identity (Barthes, 1983; Crane, 2000; Entwistle, 2000; Kuchler and Miller, 2005; Lurie, 2000; McCracken, 1988; Rubenstein, 1995). As Entwistle (2000:7) remarks, "dress or adornment is one means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity."

Several works have kindled increasing attention to personal artifacts. Deagan's (2002) volume on personal possessions addresses artifacts from Spanish and Caribbean sites. Deagan's approach to personal artifacts is encyclopedic; she briefly examines a wide range of objects including religious items, clothing artifacts, firearms, and coins, among other categories. Ziesing's examination of personal adornment from the Boott Mills boardinghouses in Lowell, Massachusetts, identified recovered buttons, studs, beads, brooches, pins, combs, hair ornaments, and leather, and she explored the significance of their excavated contexts from an interpretive framework centered on gender (Ziesing, 1989). While her analysis did not focus on identity per se, she employed the materials to describe the circumstances of the boardinghouse residents,

particularly their purchasing power and consumer behavior. In the United Kingdom, a variety of publications on post-medieval personal adornment catalog large collections of artifacts excavated in London and Norwich, providing descriptive analyses and fine illustrations (Crowfoot et al., 2001; Egan, 2005; Egan and Pritchard, 1991; Margeson, 1993).

Archaeologists have begun to explore the archaeological evidence of clothing and adornment intensively, viewing these small finds as highly charged with meaning and offering immense potential for exploring identity (Loren, 2001; White, 2004b): "Rather than simply dressing one's body, presentation of the body through dress and adornment offers one of the most visual manifestations of one's identity and self" (Loren and Beaudry, 2006:263). Personal adornment affords glimpses of the ways individuals manipulated and appeared in their bodies, and permits visualization of individuals in the past.

The act of dressing is a preparation of the body for presentation and observation in the world. When an individual dresses, he or she clothes the body in a manner that is appropriate, respectable, and desirable (Entwistle, 2000:7). Personal adornment artifacts were worn by single individuals, and thus indicate individual appearance, though linkage with a single individual is often impossible. Personal adornment suggests the clothing and accessories worn by one person, and reflects the construction of physical appearance on an individual scale (see Meskell [1999] for further discussion of scale in this sense). The interpretation of personal adornment at the scale of the individual reflects the choices people made in terms of clothing and accessories, as aesthetic choices, as reflections of individual preferences, and as sumptuary norms.

White examined individual sites and the community of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in terms of clothing and accessories worn in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and examined how residents visually constructed and constituted themselves across gender, class, and age boundaries (White, 2002, 2004b). Clothing fasteners and jewelry recovered at the Richard Hart site reflect intertwined class and gender identities. The assemblage is composed mainly of expensive artifacts that would have communicated socioeconomic status, particularly when worn in the larger context of a clothing ensemble that communicated elite class

status. The kinds of clothing suggested by the artifacts can be associated with men and women. Artifacts such as a gold earring, which reflects the construction of female gender, and a stock buckle and large shoe buckles, which relate to the construction of male gender, are particularly illuminating in regard to the commingled aspects of gender and class (Fig. 1). These artifacts reveal the *particular means* through which individuals performed expected gender and class identities via everyday and fancy dress (White, 2004a).

To stimulate the accurate identification and interpretation of personal adornment, White (2005) has compiled a guide to personal adornment artifacts that gathers technical and temporal

information relating to clothing fasteners, jewelry, hair accessories, and miscellaneous accessories to dress in order to aid both in identification and interpretation of these potent artifacts, particularly with an eye toward understanding gender, class, age, and ethnicity. The guide presents personal adornment artifacts and outlines the potential of this class of artifacts for understanding the ways that these remnants of physical appearance communicated identities through performance and inscription.

Loren has explored the role of personal adornment and clothing in a number of eighteenth-century French and Spanish colonial contexts. At the site of Los Adaes, Texas, Loren has highlighted the close relationship between class and ethnicity in dress as



Fig. 1 Personal adornment artifacts from the Richard Hart site, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: (a) gold top and drop earring; (b) copper alloy stock buckle; (c) man's silver

Artois-style shoe buckle; (d) man's copper alloy Artois-style shoe buckle with molded nailhead designs (photograph by Carolyn L. White)

well as the ways that personal appearance was manipulated for individual gain (Loren, 2000; Loren and Beaudry, 2006:265). Loren challenges the narrow interpretations of religious objects such as saint medals and crucifixes, asserting the need for archaeologists to be aware of the limitations of functional categories and the possibility of the adoption of Christian symbols not simply as a sign of conversion to Christianity, but that wearing these items in combination with other indigenous items allowed natives “to negotiate self in the mission world” (Loren and Beaudry, 2006:264). Loren explored hybrid fashions worn by Spanish and mixed blood inhabitants of Los Adaes, as indicated by the mix of European and Native American artifacts of personal adornment found at the site. Similarly, sites in French Louisiana provide evidence of a blend of colonial fashions in which buckles, buttons, beads, cuff links, tinkler cones, gun parts, and knives—items that are parts of clothing as well as items worn over clothing—suggest a fusion of styles of dress. In all of these colonial contexts, the *mélange* of dressing styles is a measure of the emergence of new identities on the colonial frontier (Loren, 2003:235; Loren and Beaudry, 2006:267). Loren views the mixed fashions as evidence of how people negotiated and resisted imposed differences by visually constituting political identities (Loren, 2003:236).

Personal artifacts worn on the body have been taken up by scholars examining African American sites in the southeastern United States and interpreted in a variety of ways. Beads are seen as evidence of African American individual expression (Yentsch, 1995), and blue beads have been correlated with African American presence on archaeological sites (Stine et al., 1996). Cowrie shells have been posited as personal emblems linking the wearer to West Africa (Samford, 1996:101). Buttons are recovered in relatively large quantities on slave sites and are interpreted as evidence of quilting and sewing or alternative materials for musical instruments (Kelso, 1986:34; Samford, 1996:111), as well as evidence of personal appearance and individual women’s work.

Heath (1999:50) has examined clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles through personal adornment at Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson’s Bedford County plantation in Virginia, to explore personal identity, social display, attitudes toward bondage, and the formation of African American ethnicity. The multiple

factors that controlled individual access to personal adornment “resulted in patterns of choices that ultimately came to be seen as African American” (Heath, 1999:64). Galle’s analysis of several slave dwellings at the Hermitage, Andrew Jackson’s residence in Tennessee, focuses on the access that individuals had to goods, particularly clothing items (Galle, 2005). Galle examines adornment and artifacts relating to hygiene and appearance and concludes that one household occupant was able to translate a seamstress’ skills into capital to trade with others in the community, increasing her household’s economic and social status. Thomas and Thomas (2005:120) also explored personal adornment from slave dwelling contexts at the Hermitage as a means of explicitly exploring gender and ethnic identity, interpreting how “personal appearance . . . helped to reflect and structure social identity,” with gender playing a central role. Beads, hand charms, buttons, brooches, and cane tips were interpreted as evidence that the slaves had “considerable discretion in . . . how they presented themselves.” These studies share an interest in the analysis of personal artifacts to bring out individual agency and the multifaceted aspects of gendered behavior within a broader African American context.

Jordan (2005) examines buttons, buckles, and beads recovered from the banks of the Platteklip Stream in Cape Town, South Africa, a site of laundering activities. Among the identified items were large quantities of buttons, as well as other personal items identified as personal belongings unrelated to washing activities. Jordan critiques previous research on personal adornment in the context of slavery, arguing that there is a failure to interpret buttons, buckles, and beads as something other than personal adornment, producing a failure to gain insight into the material culture of enslaved women and homogenizing their experience. Her insightful interpretations of the multiple meanings of mundane objects reinforce the importance of paying attention to archaeological contexts and using appropriate recovery techniques.

Mortuary analysis from six cemeteries in the southeastern United States reveals distinctive gender and age differences in the use of personal adornment, particularly jewelry (Wilson and Cabak, 2005). Jewelry was found almost exclusively in women’s burials; a single finger ring was identified

in a male burial. Jewelry appeared more frequently in the burials of young women, and beads were found with older women and children. Some of the jewelry was interpreted as corresponding with folk medicinal beliefs, e.g., regarding the curative properties of different sorts of beads and copper rings.

Recent work has also examined the role of raw materials used to fashion worn objects. Saunders (1999:247) explores the shifting meanings of pearls during the contact period in North America and the ways “recontextualization of indigenous shiny objects created new identities and relationships between Amerindians and between Amerindians and Europeans.” For Native Americans, pearls were one type of brilliant matter among many. For Europeans, the value of pearls derived from their “availability, flawlessness, colour, and symbolic use as fashion items through which elites displayed (and through sumptuary laws reinforced) their social status, competing with each other and advertising their colonial possessions” (Saunders, 1999:253). The willingness of Native populations to trade items valued so highly by Europeans reinforced their image of Native groups as gullible and naïve (Saunders, 1999:249). Saunders considers the implications of the multivalent meanings of pearls not only as individual objects but also as items that fueled tensions between Native populations and colonizing Europeans.

Shoes and Textiles

Shoes and textiles have commanded limited attention from historical archaeologists; they are studied primarily to understand details of the construction and appearance of clothing and shoes. Textiles in seventeenth-century Native American cemeteries have yielded information about the use of European textiles by Native Americans in the contact period (Welters et al., 1996). Textiles from a seventeenth-century Boston privy have provided information about the form and construction of a number of Puritan garments, most specifically providing details about their trims, edges, and tailoring (Ordoñez and Welters, 1998). Butterworth’s (1998) analysis of shoes

from Boston privies elucidated features of everyday footwear in that city during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

A shoe’s form supplies insight into visual appearance, fashion, and identity construction across an assortment of affiliations; wear patterns and repair episodes reveal aspects of the wearer’s health, physicality, and social status (White, 2006). Shoes hold information not just about the exterior presentation of the body, but also about the physical nature of the body itself.

Excavations at the Mill Creek site in Boston, Massachusetts, revealed a cache of late-eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century shoes. Worn by ordinary, likely working-class individuals, the shoes exhibit a degree of conservatism in a stylistic sense that is consistent with clothing and other components of dress made for and worn by individuals of little means. These were shoes that were valued for their function and utility—shoes made to withstand daily and demanding wear.

The Mill Creek shoes also are highly personal objects. Although the shoes rarely are individually differentiated in terms of fashion or design, they do convey aspects of individual identity. They retain the impressions of those individuals not only as reflections of their manner of dress, but also they reflect the physical health and well-being, the socioeconomic status, the age, and gender of their wearers. These aspects of identity are readable through the material, form, and size of the shoes (Fig. 2). The Mill Creek shoes show the wear and subsequent repair incurred in daily tasks by individual working-class Bostonians, and the general lack of elaboration reflects the subdued appearance of single people and of a community.



Fig. 2 A child’s shoe from the Mill Creek site, Boston, Massachusetts, with heavy wear at the toe and heel (photograph by Carolyn L. White)

Inscribed Objects

Lucas (2004:186) notes that “an archaeology of colonial identity is largely a study of how . . . subjectivities are constituted in the context of colonialism in terms of quotidian practice and the role material culture plays—through landscapes, buildings, and everyday domestic objects.” One of the ways in which everyday domestic objects have been deployed in discourses of personal identity in colonial and other contexts is through inscription or marking.

Object inscriptions vary in nature, import, and intended uses. Ferguson (1992:110–113) studied marks on Colonoware bowls from sites in South Carolina, noting that “most of these marks were simple crosses or ‘Xs.’ In some cases a circle or rectangle enclosed the cross; in others, ‘arms’ extended counterclockwise from the ends of the cross.” Ferguson discarded initial interpretations of the crosses as makers’ or owners’ marks, suggesting that they were similar enough to West African Bakongo cosmograms to link the bowls to early African American religious practices, practices that involved use of marked bowls in the preparation and administration of traditional sacred medicines (*minkisi*) or charms. He concluded that the evidence pointed to “an interpretation of the bowls as receptacles for *minkisi* or for use in a ritual similar to those involving *minkisi*” (Ferguson, 1992:155). Metal spoons found at sites occupied by enslaved Africans and African Americans throughout the American South bear markings that some interpret as cosmograms; others interpret them more broadly as evidence of African American ethnic identity, while still others note that the symbols inscribed on spoons or bowls could have held different meanings for different people (Ferguson, 1992:117; Heath, 1999; Leone and Fry, 1999; Wall, 2000; Walsh, 2001).

At its most basic level, the inscription upon everyday objects of names or initials signals ownership, marking an object as the possession of a specific individual. Examples of this form of inscription are often found on items excavated from shipwrecks—mess tags, spoons, and cutlery, for instance—a member of a ship’s crew needed to personalize items that might otherwise have

been appropriated by his mates (Carter and Kenchington, 1985; Switzer, 1978). Marked vessels have been identified in Overseas Chinese communities as well, e.g., in excavations of the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose, California. Marking possessions is a Chinese practice, pecked marks and characters signifying ownership as well as blessings and luck (Michaels, 2005:132; Voss, 2005). Ownership marks also represent attempts to fix identity; the monogram or name of an individual inscribed on an object creates a relationship between a person and an object that allows a person both to fabricate and to perform his or her identity as if it were stable and coherent, while in fact it is “an enacted fantasy or incorporation” (Butler, 1990:136).

Wine bottle seals are evocative as emblems of identity in post-1650 contexts. Pope discusses a seal bearing the name “Peter Fewling,” a man who traded between Biddeford, England, and Ferryland, Newfoundland, around 1700. Because wine was shipped in casks, not bottles, the seal suggests the presence of the man as well as of his bottle and distinguishes Fewling from others in the colony who could not afford to drink their wine or brandy from bottles, much less from ones bearing a personal seal (Pope, 1990).¹ Cook (1995) interprets bottle seals as among the most legible symbols of identity; he points to two distinct seals bearing the name of John Carnes recovered from excavations at his home and workshop in Boston, Massachusetts. Bottles sealed with Carnes’s name would have been used during formal dinners at which servants poured wine from the specially marked bottles into the glasses of Carnes’s guests. Cook surmises that Carnes, a metalworker, made his own dies for the seals used on his bottles and that they might represent his identity as an artisan in pre-Revolutionary Boston as much as they did his wealth and status. He notes that wine bottle seals embossed with the full names of their owners are rarer than those bearing merely initials or ciphers and thus may have carried special import in discourses over identity in colonial contexts. It is difficult, however, to impute different forms of intentionality, different

¹ Pope (2004:273) notes there are “numerous initialed wine bottle seals, almost all of which can be identified with planners or shipmasters,” each of which asserted ownership as well as literacy and power (see also Wicks, 1998).

motives, from similar objects (cf. Russell, 2004). Isaac Royall, Sr., of Medford, Massachusetts, in the mid-eighteenth century served costly wine to his guests from chamfered liquor bottles adorned with seals with the family coat of arms ringed by the legend “THE HON ISAAC ROYALL ESQ ●● PECTORE PURO” (Pure of Heart, the Royall family motto). The seal and the symbols it bears testify to Royall’s unabashed self-assurance: “Such symbols were not lightly used. The allusions were purposeful and significant. They would have been understood and accepted as self-evident among the Royalls’ colleagues and peers, who were finely tuned and trained to read such subtleties and nuances” (Chan, 2003:260). Isaac Royall surely went one better over Peter Fowlings and John Carnes who used wine bottle seals bearing their full names: Royall displayed his full title, his family crest, and through the family motto attributed to himself qualities that others may or may not have readily recognized in the man. All of these seals operated within discourses over identity—masculine, patriarchal identity—among English colonials.²

While relatively rare finds, bodkins—used for lacing up clothing and featuring an elongated eye through which lacing or cord can be threaded (Beaudry, 2006; Egan and Pritchard, 1991:379; Sullivan, 2004:74–75)—were often inscribed with the initials or name of their owner. Several examples from Virginia—three silver and four copper alloy bodkins from Jamestown, a silver bodkin from the Sandys site, and a copper alloy bodkin from Jordan’s Journey—have been identified as headdress pins and classified as artifacts reflecting social status (APVA, 2005; Mallios, 2000:45, Fig. 51; Mouer and McLearn, 1991). Silver bodkins were found in a trash deposit at the site of a well-to-do household at the seventeenth-century Colony of Avalon; one has an ear scoop at one end and is inscribed with the initials “SK.” It is likely that this bodkin belonged to Lady Sara Kirke, who as a widow maintained

control of the profitable fishing plantation at Ferryland (Pope, 2004:273–274).

Bodkins were important and highly charged personal possessions, and they were not all hair pins (Holme, 1688; Sullivan, 2004:74).³ What is more, not all bodkins were, as a class of object, equally suited to social display. Utilitarian base metal bodkins were used for lacing and dunning-in purposes and would have lacked *caché* as hair ornaments, while silver bodkins, especially those inscribed with the initials or names of their owners, were very special objects that in the seventeenth century were employed in the construction and performance of feminine identities.

As noted, excavated seventeenth-century silver bodkins at times bear the initials or name of their former owners, in most cases not engraved by a silversmith but inscribed or scratched into them by inexpert hands. Inscriptions or monograms were “small affirmations of literacy” asserting ownership at a time when literacy was rare, as Peter Pope (2004:272–273) notes, proclaiming “‘I am literate,’ and, therefore, in the context of the time and place, ‘I have power.’”

Artifacts like marked pots, wine bottle seals, and bodkins are among the many types of objects through which discourses about self-identity and personhood were enacted. Such objects were invested with special meanings and with power and played important roles in the construction of identity.

Constructing the Self Through the Group

If we conceive of group membership as a strategy for “becoming,” we have a means of interpreting the materialization of identity through the symbols and imagery a group’s members use to represent themselves and their shared ideology. As described elsewhere, “materialization is the transformation of ideas, values, stories, myths, and the like, into a physical reality” (DeMarrais et al., 1996: 16). One

² Zierden found an eighteenth-century wine bottle with a seal marked “Mbrewton” near the home of wealthy Charleston, South Carolina, merchant Miles Brewton, in rubbish that originated in a locale used by Brewton’s slaves for informal gatherings; the context of the find forces a reading of the seal that links the final use and disposal of the bottle not with its owners but with enslaved African Americans (Zierden, 2001).

³ Sullivan (2004:72) reproduces a painting by a follower of Ludoph de Jonge of a woman sewing by candlelight (1650–1655) with a bodkin tucked under her cap serving temporarily as a hair needle.

particularly rich vein of symbols deployed on items of everyday material culture that archaeologists recover with some regularity is those of Freemasonry (Béresniak, 2003; Hamilton, 1994). White ball clay smoking pipes molded with Masonic emblems have been found around the world at a range of sites, including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic contexts in New York (Dallal, 2000), an eighteenth-century domestic privy in Newport, Rhode Island (James Garman, personal communication, 2001), fur trade posts in the Northwest, Northern Plains, and Upper Midwest (Pfeiffer, 1998), and at the Tasmanian Aboriginal settlement at Wybalenna, Flinders Island, Australia (Birmingham, 1992). Pipes decorated with Masonic emblems were manufactured in Glasgow, Scotland, as well as in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where in 1990 archaeologist N. F. Brannon excavated quantities of wasters, many with emblems such as crossed compass and square with plumb bob,⁴ at the documented site of the Ulster Pipe Works on Winetavern Street (Ponsford, 1991:161).

Britain exported huge quantities of pipes all over the world, but “there has been little attempt to characterize the different export styles produced for different markets” (Higgins, 1996:319), so we cannot state with certainty that only Freemasons had access to Masonic pipes. But we consider it likely that such pipes would be of greater significance to smokers for whom the symbols they bore had meaning (for a synopsis of Masonic symbols commonly found on clay pipes, see Dallal [2000:119–121]).

At times it is possible to link Masonic pipes with site occupants or users who may have been members of this widespread fraternal order (Dallal, 1994, 2000:128–129). Despite its image as the exclusive province of elite males motivated solely by self-interest, Freemasonry was characterized by a “striking degree of cultural pluralism” (Clawson, 1989:131). In America there were many ethnic lodges, including exclusively African American and Irish ones, and despite the segregation of lodges by race or ethnicity, membership in the “brotherhood” served “as an integrative mechanism which

helped to pull all of these disparate groups into a cohesive nation” (Dallal, 2000:128).

Masonic ceramics other than clay pipes sometimes show up on archaeological sites. In New York, archaeologists found a creamware salt cellar and an overglaze-transfer-printed jug decorated with Masonic symbols in late-eighteenth- or early-nineteenth-century privy deposits at the Assay Site (Diane Dallal, personal communication, 2001). At the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury, Massachusetts, a small plate or saucer decorated exuberantly if inexpertly with Masonic motifs was found in the construction trench of a privy built in the first decade of the nineteenth century (Fig. 3).

Other finds include a small brooch in the form of the Masonic compass and square from the Rider-Wood Site in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and sleeve or cuff links adorned with Masonic images in a probable tavern context at the late-eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century Fort Vengeance Monument Site in Pittsfield, Vermont (Christopher Borstel, personal communication 2001). A black plastic button with crescent moon and star motif was found during excavations at the site of the African American Masonic lodge, in use from 1881 to 1950, in Arrow Rock, Missouri (Baumann, 2001:267–269). A trove of Masonic materials was found during renovations to the historical-period buildings around the Pueblo/Plaza of old Los Angeles, hidden in basement foundations. Among them was a box containing 11 embroidered aprons and collars and other ceremonial regalia (Roberta S. Greenwood, personal communication, 2001). Surely the items of ritual apparel were not the sort of thing Freemasons would have worn in public; they would have been reserved for the secret ceremonies held within the confines of the lodge. It seems likely, however, that buttons and cuff links, as well as pipes and ceramic vessels, most found in contexts far removed from the secretive lodges, might serve in contexts outside of fraternal meetings to signal membership in the brotherhood.

Other emblems of membership in voluntary associations are likely to have been worn openly, with a measure of pride. One such object is a celluloid pin-back button bearing the legend “United Mine Workers, Local 1515, Dixonville,

⁴ These symbols were also meaningful to Orangemen. Therefore, in Northern Ireland, the market for such pipes could have been Masons or Orangemen, or both.

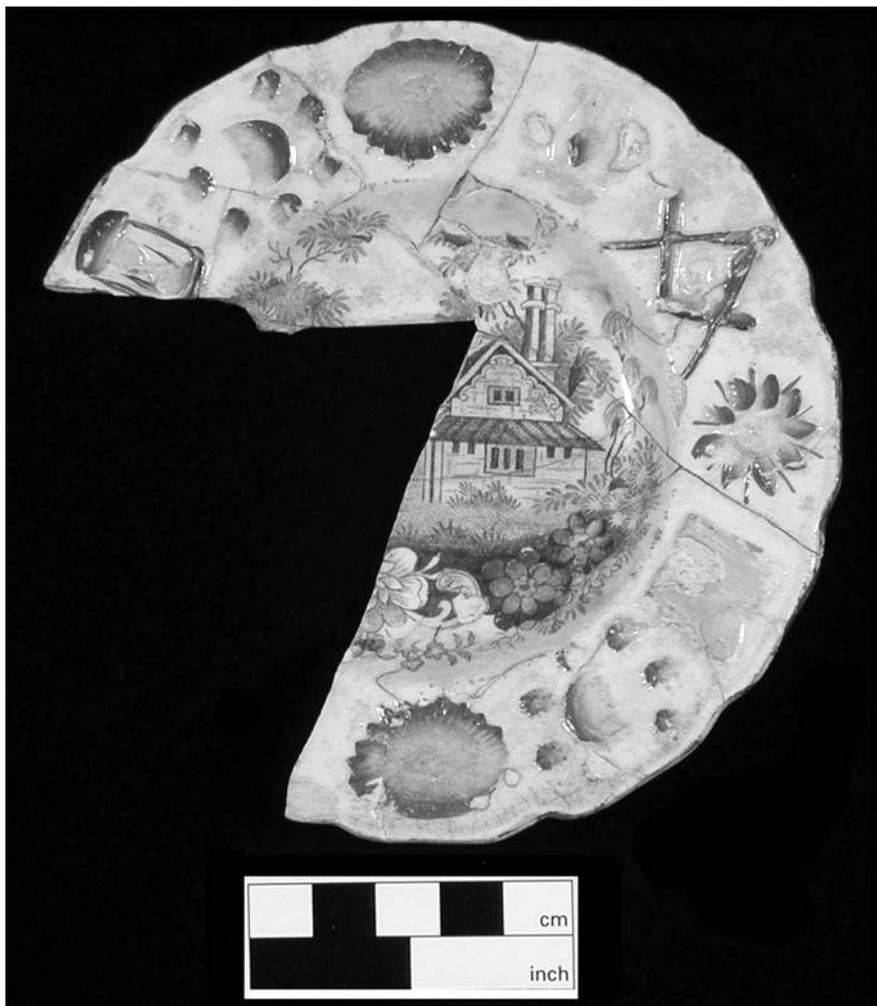


Fig. 3 A transfer-printed and overglaze-enameled white earthenware plate from the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, Newbury, Massachusetts; the farm's late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century owners were Masons. Ranged around the

rim are molded symbols associated with Freemasonry: hour glass; crescent moon and stars; sunburst or rose; open palm; crossed compass and square enclosing a "G"; acacia or rose; and the sacred book (photograph by Michael Hamilton)

Pennsylvania." The pin belonged to Alexander (Sandy) Maughan, whose family lived in a miner's doublehouse in the coal town of Helvetia, from the late 1920s to 1951. It was found at the rear entry of the west unit, in a transitional space between work and home. The pin postdates the recognition of the union by the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company in 1933 (Metheny, 2006). Maughan wore his union button to signal his solidarity with his coworkers and their constant struggle with the mine owners for fair pay and safe working conditions.

These few examples of artifacts that signal participation in voluntary associations remind us that individuals construct identities through differing forms of self-actualization and practice. Joining a voluntary association and taking part in its rituals or its organized activities is an avenue taken by many an individual seeking to become the person that he or she wishes to be.

The growth of identity studies in historical archaeology vividly demonstrates writing with a different ontology (Paynter, 2000a:11), one that allows exploration of large issues such as identity, beginning

with an initial pinpoint focus on the individual, on personhood, then widening the scale to encompass fluid aspects of assigned, ascribed, and assumed identity along multiple, intersecting variables of age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class. Identity studies grounded in social theory provide fertile ground for dialogues among historians, material culture specialists, and archaeologists.

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