

The Role of Material Culture in Australasian Archaeology

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Material culture has been a growing area of research in recent years and a considerable body of literature has emerged which incorporates theoretical, methodological and applied approaches. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, economists and museologists have all been active participants in debates concerning the nature of material culture and its ability to inform our understanding of a broad range of cultural and historical processes. The study of material goods can shed light on subjects ranging from trade networks, colonialism, capitalism, urbanisation, mass consumption and industrial processes, to the development of colonial and post-colonial identities. It is in the study of material culture in its social and physical context that archaeology has the most to contribute to these interdisciplinary debates. This potential has yet to be fully realised however and in this paper possible reasons for this failure are canvassed. Recent fieldwork at a colonial whaling station in Tasmania presents an opportunity for demonstrating the potential of archaeology to contribute to material culture research within terrestrial and maritime archaeology.

Studies of material culture can be divided into three broad groups. The first of these deal with artefacts from an empiricist perspective, a perspective familiar to archaeologists. Artefact cataloguing, typologies, seriation and dating are at the core of our understanding of ourselves as a discipline and I will not review such research here. The second stream of material culture research concerns ethnographic analyses of material life. Studies in this category aim to describe the everyday lives of ordinary people: what they wore, what they ate, how they cooked, how they set their tables, how they furnished and decorated their homes. Such minutiae provide the context in which larger scale dramas, be they political, economic, or social are situated. Many studies in this area are carried out by scholars in the disciplines of museum studies, history, the decorative arts or the broadly defined 'material culture studies' (Schlereth 1985, Ames 1976).

Archaeology provides direct information about those who could not or did not write, enabling ethnographic histories of those groups to be written. Examples of this genre in the American context include studies such as Yentsch's (1994) work on African-American and Anglo-American culture in the Chesapeake region, Beaudry and Mrozowski's (Mrozowski *et al.* 1996) work on mill workers in Massachusetts, Yamin's (1997) work on inner-city neighbourhoods in New York, and Praetzelis and Praetzelis' (1992) work on gold rush merchants in California. All of these studies are characterised by close attention to the details provided by rigorous analyses of artefacts and their contexts. Discussions of ceramics, for example, are not limited to descriptions of decorative patterns, but include reconstructions of table settings, and are combined with dietary analysis from floral and faunal remains, and integrated with careful reading of documentary and oral sources. Together, this information is used to construct fine-grained vignettes that illuminate past lives, and which thereby provide the foundations for analyses of changing cultural patterns linked to broad historical processes such as industrialisation and mass consumption.

The third broad category of studies deal with the cognitive aspects of material culture. Tilley (1990) has called archaeologists' recognition of meaning 'the structuralist encounter' and he attributes its beginning to the publication of *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* in 1982. For historical archaeologists however the influence of structuralism was already well established, due to the work of Mark Leone (1973), James Deetz (1977), and Henry Glassie (1975). Based on those works and others, archaeologists began to move beyond functionalist interpretations to consider the social and cultural meanings embedded in objects.

Cognitive analyses are based on the premise that material culture embodies codes of meaning that must be mastered by

those who use it and which facilitates communication at a symbolic level between those who understand the language. While goods are meaningful at a symbolic level as well as at a functional level, the symbolic meaning of goods is not incidental to culture. Rather, goods and their meanings are fundamental to the operation of cultural systems. According to Douglas and Isherwood (1978:60), '...goods are primarily needed for...making visible and stable the categories of culture.' That is, goods not only have the ability to function in this way, but they are vital to the processes of cultural formation and negotiation.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *habitus* further emphasises the integral role of goods. *Habitus* is the understanding of the behaviours and practices appropriate to one's place in society. While this understanding is sometimes overt and deliberate, more often it remains below the level of conscious thought, implicitly informing everyday actions and choices. It is not an inflexible set of rules, but rather a fluid competence that enables individuals to respond appropriately to the unexpected. People are able to act in new situations by choosing from among a familiar range of practices and structures that constitute their *habitus*. This knowledge is not an imposed set of norms, as it arises out of common practice, but it is consensual and shared, the product of continual assessment of self and others. We judge our own competence and that of those around us, as they in turn judge us. Because of the opportunity to accept and to reject judgements, ongoing examination facilitates change and *habitus* is therefore open-ended. Competence is not innate or instinctive, although when fully realised it may appear to be so. Rather, it must be acquired as part of the socialisation process. Knowledge of *habitus* is enculturated and passed on through practices which are learned, and learning takes place explicitly through the use of space and objects. The objects themselves are the means for understanding the social world. This direct relationship between learning and objects is what Hodder (1986:73) sees as the exciting potential offered for archaeologists.

This understanding of the role of objects as part of cultural knowledge suggests the recursive nature of the meaning embodied in artefacts. Social competence is enculturated through practices, and the practices in turn act on what constitutes the competence. The goods that are involved in this process do not passively reflect culture, they actively pass on culture and in so doing structure culture. In the words of anthropologist Grant McCracken, 'Surrounded by our things, we are constantly instructed in who we are and what we aspire to' (1990:124). Artefacts are meaningful at a symbolic level, embodying categories of thought and belief but they are also powerful agents for changing those categories. Meaning in artefacts can thus be highly contested and is an arena for continual negotiation.

MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA

The best-known studies of material culture in Australia are ethnographic studies which examine physical dimensions of life. Maynard's (1994) *Fashioned from Penury* provides not only a description of clothing and dress practices in colonial Australia, but also a consideration of the cultural meaning of clothing and its implications. Isaacs' (1987) *The Gentle Arts* is a similar but more lavishly illustrated work on domestic crafts. *Australians at Home* by Terence Lane and Jessie Serle (1990) is another work in this vein which will be familiar to many archaeologists as a reference text. Indeed, its use as a reference text is significant, because what becomes apparent from a review of studies of Australian material life is that while archaeologists might be referring to it, we are not contributing to it. Not only are there no major texts based on the results of archaeological work, but archaeological examples are not included in the syntheses written by others. None of the above authors use archaeologically generated information in their discussions of ordinary life, with the exception of Maynard's (1994:21, 22) passing reference to the working man's shirt from Hyde Park Barracks.

Why is there this silence with regard to archaeology? Is it because archaeology has little to offer? Strident claims are regularly made about the value of archaeology and its ability to reveal much about the undocumented aspects of history, and it is on that basis that we lobby to have sites and assemblages preserved for future analysis. Karskens and Thorpe (1992) go further by outlining with heartening clarity potential contributions to the history of Sydney, all of which are eminently achievable, as demonstrated by Lydon (1993) and by the results of the Cumberland/Gloucester Streets project in Sydney's Rocks (Godden Mackay and Karskens 1996, Karskens 1998). The claims are justified and the potential is real, but so far archaeologists have largely failed to engage with material culture in an analytical way. Artefact analysis has not been a priority in Australasian historical or maritime archaeology, either at the time of excavation or in subsequent research, a point made by Birmingham (1988:149) when she wrote that:

In any state-of-the-discipline enquiry into current Australian historical archaeology the biggest question marks concern the interpretation of artefacts and their integration into larger archaeological research designs designed to answer specific historical questions.

Little has changed since that time: in many excavations artefact analysis is never completed, and if completed, it plays a minor role in the reporting and interpretation of the site. Assemblages that we insist museums maintain because of their research potential are rarely exploited or even looked at again. One recent exception to this has been the re-analysis of the assemblages from Little Lonsdale Street, Melbourne (Mayne and Murray in press, Mayne and Lawrence 1998). Here however the emphasis is on a general ethnographic discussion of life in an inner-urban working class district, rather than explicitly on the role of material culture associated with the site.

Some indication of the lack of importance accorded artefact studies is evident in a brief review of articles in the two main journals in Australasia, *Australasian Historical Archaeology* and the *Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology Bulletin*. *AHA* volumes 1-15, and volumes 7-19 of the *Bulletin* were surveyed for articles specifically about material culture or artefacts. Such articles were defined as those which included artefacts or material culture in the title, or which were specifically about classes of artefacts or particular assemblages. Conservation oriented articles were excluded, as were general excavation reports, although several (but by no means all) of the published excavation reports do include discussions of artefacts. Of the *AHA* articles, 12 of 131 were about artefacts and of the 176 *AMI*

articles, 10 were about artefacts. Some artefact studies do appear in other places: two of the five ASHA occasional papers are artefact studies, while the 1987 ASHA publication, *Papers in Australian Historical Archaeology*, edited by Birmingham and Bairstow, is essentially a guide to artefacts on Australian sites. Connah has recently (1994) edited *Archaeology and the Historical Artefact*, a compilation of student projects from the University of New England, which have undertaken to analyse individual artefacts in museum collections. *AIMI* has recently published a special publication devoted to the porcelain assemblage from the *Sydney Cove* shipwreck (Staniforth and Nash 1999). It is noteworthy however that the major summary of Australian historical archaeology, *The Archaeology of Australia's History* (Connah 1994b) makes only passing reference to artefacts.

Of the studies that have been done, the majority are from an empirical perspective and fall into the first category of material culture studies discussed above. Pearson (1992) for example provides useful information on the origin and use of ships tanks in Australia, while others describe portions of excavated assemblages. Stuart (1991) describes glass bottles from the *Loch Ard*, and Brasseley (1991) describes the clay tobacco pipes from the Victoria Hotel in Auckland. Only a minority of studies incorporate broader theoretical perspectives within either of the second and third categories of material culture research. Birmingham's (1992) analysis of artefacts from Wybalenna looks at the cognitive implications of artefacts for understanding resistance, while Piper's (1988) reconstruction of Chinese diet on the goldfields and English's (1990) discussion of salt meat on the *William Salthouse* are clearly ethnographically oriented studies. Some of the artefact sections included in more general site reports also can be considered as ethnographic studies.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The failure of archaeology to reach a wider audience with such studies is a serious shortcoming for two reasons. First, it is increasingly difficult to maintain credibility in continued claims to preserve archaeological sites and assemblages because of their unique contribution to historical understanding. When archaeologists are unable to demonstrate a wider utility, it is difficult to expect others to continue to support our claims. Second, it deprives other disciplines of what is legitimately valuable and unique information of relevance to them. One of the strengths of the archaeological resource is its ability to present information in context. *In situ* objects, buildings, spaces, and environments preserve a range of original relationships which are unrecoverable in any other way. Moreover, they do so for the entire range of people in society, from poorest to wealthiest, rural, urban, and in between. The sorts of relationships referred to are not simplistic notions about Pompeii-style snapshots of moments in time: they are complex and fragmentary, mediated by depositional contexts and taphonomic activity. However, archaeological assemblages do contain information about the range and nature of goods and what a household group managed to acquire, how they occupied space, and how they transformed their environments.

This kind of information is of relevance to others because of the importance of context in recapturing the symbolic aspects of the meanings of goods. Kopytoff has noted that the meaning ascribed to an individual item alters as it is used by different people and at different times, and has proposed a biographical model of analysis. Goods have life cycles with recognisable periods or ages, and will be culturally marked at different stages in their 'lives' (Kopytoff 1986:65-67). Goods move from being commodities which are bought and sold, to priceless heirlooms, to rubbish, and back again. From this perspective, context becomes all important in the interpretation of an artefact because context provides information about the stage of life an artefact was in. Museums preserve artefacts in the heirloom stage, archaeological sites more frequently preserve those in the rubbish

stage. Even the kind of site can provide information on context, as an object's meaning on a convict site may be different from the meaning of that object on a gentry site for example.

The importance of context is a point also made by the anthropologist Grant McCracken. He writes '...goods in any complement are linked by some commonality or unity...these things have a kind of harmony or consistency and therefore somehow "go together"' (1990:119). Goods are like language in their conveyance of meaning, but objects are not read in a given order as are words in a sentence: goods are read at once, in a group, and the meaning carried is that constructed by the group as a whole and by the juxtaposition of items within the group.

This concern for context is what differentiates a rigorous analysis of the meaning in artefacts from attempts to achieve understanding from isolated artefacts through an assumed empathy with the object and those who once used it. Solitary artefacts provide an illusory sense of connection with the past, and the latter approach, akin to object fetishism, seeks to exploit that closeness. However, we cannot ever hope to achieve real understanding of the thoughts and motivations of past people. We can only try to contextualise their experiences, to provide broad descriptions of what they saw and what they did. The analysis of an artefact assemblage can get closer to describing former commonalities than can any consideration of one artefact alone. It requires a range of goods to be able to explore the

consistency of patterns, and hence the symbolic meaning, that the goods conveyed when in use. Archaeological assemblages preserve elements of the original complements of goods used by people in the past, and the analysis of assemblages can be directed towards recovering the commonalities that at one time linked them. The commonalities might not be at the level of a single room or even a single household. They may be at the level of the neighbourhood or even the region. However, as Deetz (1993) has pointed out, this need not inhibit large scale comparison between and within sites. It may help us to begin to build up a picture of material life in middle class Melbourne compared to that in the neighbourhoods of working people, or between Melbourne and Sydney, or cities and rural districts, or between Australia and other parts of the world.

PUTTING ONE ASSEMBLAGE INTO CONTEXT

Consideration of context and cognition is informing the analysis of artefacts from the site of a whaling station in Tasmania. The site (Fig. 1), located on Adventure Bay, Bruny Island, was excavated in December 1997 by a team of archaeologists from La Trobe and Flinders Universities (Lawrence 1998). The whaling station was in use between approximately 1826 and 1841, and was owned by James Kelly and Thomas Lucas, two Hobart entrepreneurs (Kostoglou 1995:34-36, Evans 1993:11-

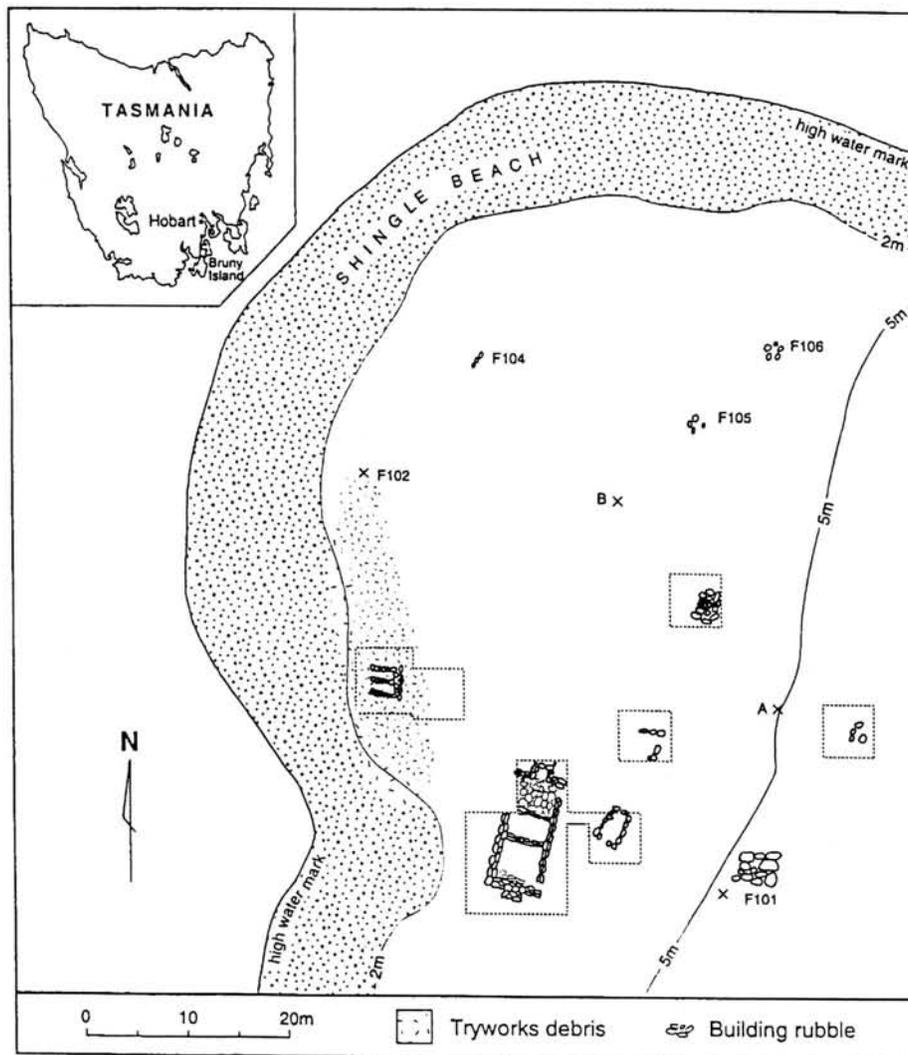


Fig. 1: Map of Kelly and Lucas station showing major structures and excavation areas (Lawrence 1998).

15). During that period the station was occupied on a seasonal basis over the winter months by a crew of up to 40 men. They were engaged in hunting and processing the southern right whale, valued for the oil and baleen produced. At that time the right whale fishery was the leading export industry in the Australian colonies and employed large numbers of men in Tasmania and New South Wales (Colwell 1995:3).

In broad terms the Kelly and Lucas site is typical of those associated with primary industry in nineteenth-century Australia. It was a rural, 'frontier' place, distant from the colonial metropolis of Hobart, whose residents viewed activities there, when they were considered at all, with distaste and disapproval (Buttrose 1998). There was regular contact with the Aboriginal people whose country they were usurping, which was characterised by a complex blend of co-operation, exploitation, and at times outright violence (Plomley 1966, Pybus 1991). The station was a male enclave, largely without female residents or visitors, although for a brief period Aboriginal women resided there. It was a place of single men living in barracks, not couples with children living in family homes. Although distant from the centres of colonial society, the station was not necessarily isolated. Adventure Bay opens onto Storm Bay, the main sea road to the Derwent Estuary and Hobart. In an age of maritime travel, this was the colony's front door, and in the 1830s 30 ships a day called at or passed by the bay. Adventure Bay was within easier reach of town than were many closer inland settlements.

These characteristics mean that the study of the station has the capacity to shed light on a range of key questions of historical and archaeological significance. This assemblage can provide insight into what daily life was like in such a place: the buildings, the diet, the clothing and personal possessions of the inhabitants. Consumer choice within corporate enterprises can be explored, as can trade and supply systems within the colony. The assemblage also suggests ways in which status, ritual, and contemporary social structures were played out at the station. Analysis of the entire assemblage is still ongoing, but here these issues will be explored through the preliminary analysis of the ceramic assemblage (excluding clay pipes).

Excavations were carried out in five locations at the station, including the tryworks, where the whale blubber was rendered into oil, two crew barracks, a store room, and a large stone building interpreted as the headsman, or manager's, quarters (Fig. 2). The total ceramic component (less the clay pipes) weighed 1782.27 grams. Ceramics amounted to one per cent of the total assemblage by weight, two per cent by number of fragments. All of the ceramics were recovered from the headsman's quarters and the precinct immediately around it, including the store room and a sheet deposit of rubbish associated with those two buildings (Table 1).

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the vessels represented by the assemblage. With the exception of two saltglazed stoneware storage jars and a creamware chamber pot, the remainder were table and tea wares in a variety of designs. At least one blue and white Chinese Export Porcelain (CEP) dinner plate was present, represented by two fragments. The other tea and tablewares were of earthenware, and while most of the dinner plates were shell-edgewares (of which five separate designs were represented), all of the teawares were transfer-printed underglaze (TUG), predominantly blue with one pattern in green and one in sepia (Fig. 3). There were two blue willow dinner plates, one of which was particularly good quality, and another two plates also in blue transfer-printed underglaze patterns.

All of these dishes represent what was commonly available in urban markets at the time. The edgeware plates were slightly out-of-date and becoming unfashionable, but they were still perfectly serviceable. Because the differences in the edgeware designs were so small, they also had the advantage of appearing as a matched set to the casual glance. In contrast, the teawares

did not match at all: no two cups shared the same design. However, transfer-printing was the most popular decoration of the day, and green and sepia the most up-to-date colours, only recently available (Godden 1964). There is nothing to suggest that this collection of dishes was in any way inferior to that used elsewhere in the colonies. It was modern, good quality crockery, not the top-of-the range ironstones used by someone like Sir John Jamison (Wilson 1988), but not the cheapest of creamwares and industrial slip or mocha wares either. Despite its distant location, the station was able to take advantage of trade networks and supply systems that brought the most current consumer goods not only into the colony but even to its distant outposts.

That the assemblage appears to be so typical of what was available is itself remarkable however, when considered in terms of its context. The whaling station was not the middle-class parlours of Hobart, nor would its residents be welcome in such

Table 1

Location	weight in grams	number of fragments
Crew Hut A	-	-
Crew Hut B	-	-
Headsman's House	227.76	53
Storehouse	494.17	154
Midden	1060.34	271
Tryworks	-	-
Total	1782.27	478

Table 1. Spatial distribution of ceramics

Table 2

Pattern	Teacup	Plate	Chamber pot	Storage jar	UI	Total
Blue willow		2				2
Other blue TUG *	7	2			2	11
Sepia TUG	1					1
Green TUG	1					1
shell edge		5				5
CEP **		1				1
banded	1					1
Cream Coloured		1	1			2
saltglazed				2		2
total	10	11	1	2	2	26

Table 2. Ceramic vessel count

* transfer-printed underglaze earthenware

** Chinese export porcelain



Fig. 2: The headsmen's house at the end of the excavations, looking north. Scale is in 20cm divisions.

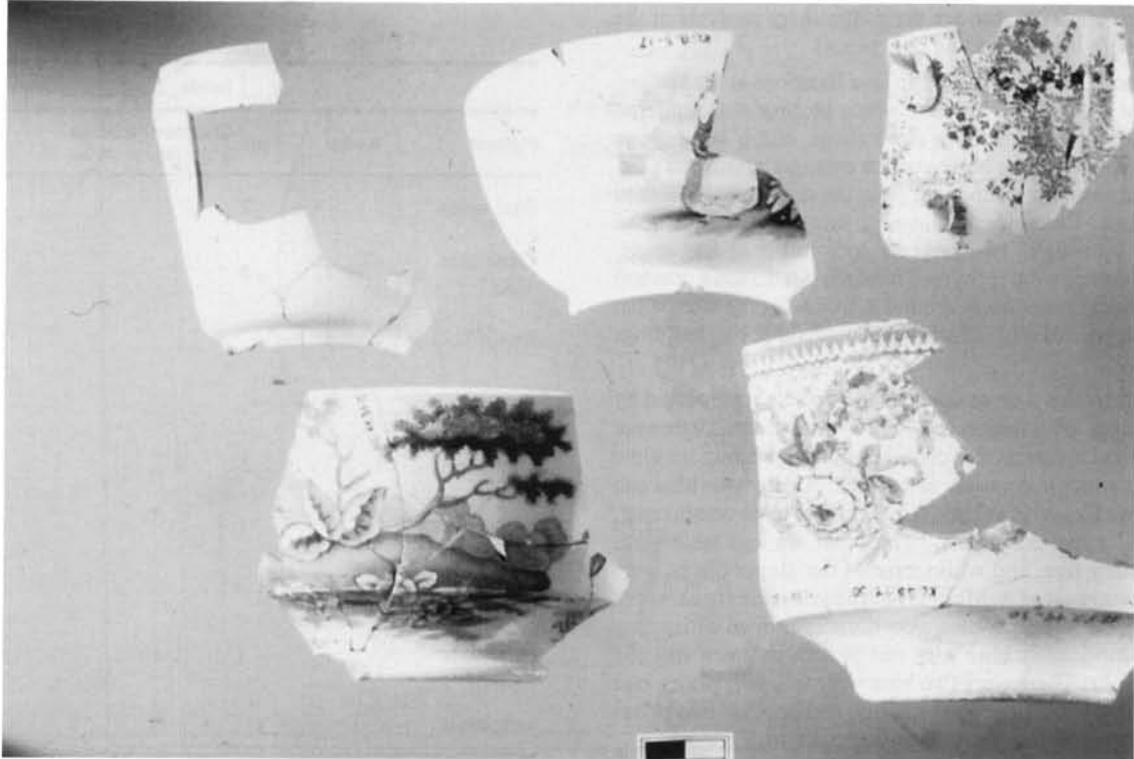


Fig. 3: A selection of transfer-printed teawares from the excavations.

surroundings. Further, there is evidence to suggest that some of Kelly's fellow whaling entrepreneurs were buying station supplies in bulk, and that these supplies included quantities of tin plates and mugs (Imlay brothers account book, 1837-1840). As the crew was provided with kit at the beginning of each season (the cost of which was later deducted from their wage, or 'lay'), it seems reasonable to conclude that the tin dishes were included in this kit and that is what the crew was expected to use. In this case, it could be expected that ceramics would be missing from the archaeological assemblage, because they simply were not used. Unfortunately, the crew quarters at Kelly and Lucas were too deteriorated to provide a sufficiently large assemblage for testing this assumption. However, the association of the majority of the ceramics with the headman's quarters is suggestive.

Whaling crews on board ship and on shore stations were organised into boat crews, with 6-8 men in each whale boat. The most senior and experienced men in each crew were the harpooner and the boatsteerer; the latter was also the headman. As each man's wage was a share of the total profits for the season, the skill of these senior men was closely associated with the success of the season. On shore stations the most senior of all the headmen acted as station manager. He, and to a lesser extent the other senior crew, were the station elite, who had earned their positions and were respected because of their skill. If anyone on the stations could be expected to have some autonomy in bringing their own kit, not to mention the financial wherewithal to do so, it would be the headmen, and particularly the senior headman. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that he would perceive clear benefits from doing so.

Although they had begun their careers as ordinary crew members, headmen were also incipient entrepreneurs in their own right. Many were locally born children of convicts and ex-convicts, but whaling was an industry in which skill and initiative were rewarded, and it was possible to work one's way up the ranks (Chamberlain 1988, Buttrose 1998). Some were able eventually to own and manage their own stations or their own ships: James Kelly himself got his start in a similar fashion (Bowden 1963). Even before that stage was reached, it was the headmen who were more likely to be married, and on occasion even to have their families join them on the stations (Gibbs 1995, Staniforth 1998). Gibbs (1995) describes the owner/manager of the station at Cheyne Beach, WA, who lived on the station with his wife and three daughters. The family was part of the middle class in the nearby coastal town and when the daughters grew up they married middle-class men with positions in the local civil service.

For headmen, purchasing and using their own dishes, rather than using the standard issue tin plates, would have served several purposes. Using earthenware and porcelain rather than tin would have differentiated them from the other crew, and would have been part of the process of erecting and maintaining status distinctions. The living quarters were also part of this process, as at the Kelly and Lucas station where the senior headman was able to live separately from the crew in his own apartment in a substantial stone building, while the crew lived in timber or bark barracks. Fashionable tablewares and teawares helped to affirm the headman's continued allegiance to the beliefs and values of the middle class. Having the proper tea equipage was necessary for the proper observance of the social ritual of taking tea. It is possible that at Kelly and Lucas' station the teacups, the dinner plates, and two stemmed wine glasses were used to entertain the owners when they came to inspect the station. Kelly was a master mariner who captained his own ships in the local trade, and would quite likely have called in at the station when his ships were picking up oil or bringing supplies. He may have continued the tradition of the 'gam', when the captains of ships meeting at sea exchanged gossip over a glass of wine or a cup of tea. His managers would need to be appropriately prepared for such occasions.

That such a range of ceramics were found on the station also suggests ways that masculine identities were being negotiated on the station. Although headmen's families are known to have been on other stations, there is no documentary evidence for that at the Kelly and Lucas station, nor were any toys or items of women's clothing or toiletries recovered here. Any adherence to the domestic ideology implicit in teacups and dinner plates is likely to have been on the part of the men. There was a tension at this time between masculine ideology which celebrated adventure, male companionship, and fast living, and those which espoused settled life and domestic responsibility (Lake 1986). Buttrose (1998) has analysed the ways in which whaling was a focus for this tension, and the presence in whaling culture of elements of both perspectives. The latter, domestic, ideal was most prominently the territory of evangelical reformers, the middle classes, and the metropolis. The choice of dishes suggests again the essentially middle-class masculinity being adopted by the managerial elite.

DISCUSSION

If this pattern of middle-class masculinity, status distinction and highly developed supply networks is valid, evidence of it should be found on other sites as well. There is some suggestion that this is the case. The site of Burghley, also a Tasmanian site dating to the 1820s and 1830s, which was excavated in the 1980s (Murray 1993), has a ceramic assemblage similar in many respects to that of the Kelly and Lucas station. Like the whaling station, Burghley was an outpost of primary industry, in this case pastoralism, inhabited by single men, with ongoing involvement with Aboriginal people. Also like Kelly and Lucas, despite its overtly frontier character, Burghley was on something of a highway with comparatively good trade connections to the outside world. In this case, it was the main bullock road between the Midlands and the Van Diemen's Land Company headquarters at Circular Head and Stanley. Although remote, the men at Burghley could also expect to entertain important visitors from time to time, and also had access to trade and transportation beyond their immediate surroundings. At Burghley, as at the whaling station, the ceramic assemblage included a range of modern, good quality transfer-printed and hand-painted teacups and dinner plates, together with more old-fashioned edgeware plates and mocha mugs.

In this analysis context is provided by a consideration of the historical circumstances in which settlement of the sites took place, by a detailed discussion of the artefacts, and by comparison between sites. Intersite comparison however is hindered by the lack of available material on other sites. While it appears that the Kelly and Lucas assemblage is in many ways typical of middle-class sites, there is no real basis for making this claim. After a decade of excavating urban sites in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Hobart, many of which would be potentially comparable in age to Kelly and Lucas and Burghley, it is still impossible to describe these assemblages with any certainty. These excavations have essentially told us nothing about even simple questions like how colonial Australians set their tables, let alone contributing to more complex debates about the growth of modern cities, the nature of class structures in Australia, the operation of gender roles, ethnicity, or the development of Australian ways of life. This is not to overlook several important studies which do address these issues (see for example Birmingham 1991, Bairstow 1990, Lydon 1993, Karskens and Thorpe 1992). Rather, it is to draw attention to the fact that such analyses are based on what is at worst a sketchy understanding of the fundamental archaeological data, and at best a failure to communicate this understanding to colleagues.

It continues to be the case in Australia that artefact analyses are published primarily as part of site reports, and that there are few more detailed studies undertaken. Site reports can be difficult to access unless in the same city, and when they are

available the tendency is to provide a description of the finds but to stop short of quantifying them. Other researchers are thus unable to readily determine if one site has more or less of a given item than does another site, or if the ratios change over time. This is not only frustrating in individual cases, but it hinders the overall development of the field, because knowledge cannot become cumulative. Each new site is excavated and reported as if it is the first one. There is no sense in which knowledge or insight gained on one excavation is being used to inform either the questions asked or the conclusions drawn about others. New South Wales is presently in the process of drafting guidelines for best practise in the survey, excavation and analysis of archaeological sites, and it is likely that other states will also be considering these issues in future. These guidelines must make clear that a minimum standard for artefact recording must include quantification, even at the basic level of summarising the number and weight of each artefact type recovered. With modern computer programs, such data is not difficult to produce from the computerised catalogues, but it is virtually impossible for others to determine. This is only a first step to a more rigorous engagement with artefact analysis, but it is an important one, and unless it is adopted as common practise, each new excavation is condemned to be a repetition of those before it, rather than an advance.

CONCLUSION

Contextual studies have the potential to inform wider discussions of Australian culture. They broaden the scope of historical enquiry by providing information unavailable from other sources. In order to take up this challenge, several initiatives are required. Artefacts must be accorded as much significance as stratigraphy in reporting sites - they must be quantified in addition to being described, and rigorous procedures must be developed for their analysis. This includes the testing of standard techniques like the comparative price indices (Miller 1980, 1991) used in the analysis of ceramics, and meat-cut counts used in the analysis of faunal collections (Lyman 1977, Landon 1996). While commonplace overseas, these methods have yet to be tested and routinely applied in the Australian context. Assemblages must also be compared between sites, in order to develop understandings of broad patterns in Australian material life, and to produce the fine-grained ethnographic and cognitive studies upon which these understandings should be based. Finally, excavated collections must be returned to with new questions and new insights. Whilst artefact assemblages languish in storerooms, their full potential, and the full potential of historical archaeology, remains unrealised. Archaeologists are the only ones with the skills to carry out these tasks, and it is up to archaeologists to produce such studies. Until this is done, archaeology will continue to sit on the sidelines of cultural debate, vulnerable to charges of irrelevance and the inevitable attacks on funding that follow.

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