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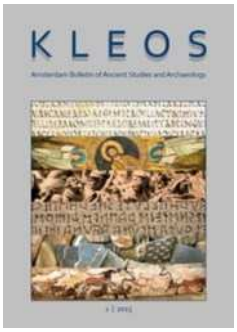

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Identity – A Material Approach

ROBERT NICKOLAI MUSSERT

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the construction of identity in the past through the production, consumption and adoption of material culture. First, I explore the concept of identity itself, showing that identity consists of many different elements, and is dependent both on the agency of the individual and the structure in which it resides. I argue that material culture can have both an indicative and communicative function in this respect. Second, I discuss production, consumption and adoption with regards to the construction and communication of identity; I consider both conscious and subconscious choices and actions during the production process and mechanisms of consumption and adoption of material culture. I will show using examples that in all stages of the use of material culture in the past, from the production stage to its eventual use, a suitable environment was provided for the construction and communication of social and other identities. In light of the theme of this issue of Kleos, the paper provides an overview on how to think about material culture.

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▶ *Profile Page*

Introduction

When 'confronting matter', as is the theme of this issue, it is not simply material culture[1] we seek to study and define; it is the underlying social and political processes which result in a certain material environment that is our main concern. In the end, we search for social structures, world views, and identities. The concept of identity has for a long time been an important aspect of social science. Our identity, as individuals and as social entities, describes who we are and what we are, and is thus vital for understanding both ancient and contemporary societies. When studying identities in the past, however, our sources are limited, especially in societies without a literary tradition. As archaeologists we therefore face the challenge to study this concept based on material culture. As fragmentary as the archaeological record may often be, we may still use it to reconstruct past identities. In this paper, I provide a broad overview of archaeological theory and applications in the study of identity, showing that both through the production and consumption of material culture, and the deliberate and subconscious decisions made during these processes, ancient individuals

and groups communicated their identities. I will first discuss the concept of identity itself, after which I will discuss how the production, consumption and adoption of material culture influenced either the expression of identities, or identities themselves, and how these processes can be studied.

The many faces of identity

'Identity', with 'religion', 'culture' and 'person', is one of those abstract concepts that archaeologists and other students of the social sciences have racked - and are continuing to rack - their brains over, for it would almost seem as though the most important concepts in studying (ancient) societies are the most difficult to define. The problem with defining identity, being such an abstract concept, is partly one of scope: if the definition is either too general or too specific, it may become either unusable or exclusive. The definition of identity is, therefore, something that requires careful consideration before it can be used 'in the wild'.

A first indication can be gleaned from its etymological origin. The Latin word *identitas* (sameness), derived from the more widely known *idem* (same), mainly stresses the group aspect of identity: it is the commonalities (that which is 'the same' within a group) that constitute a particular group's identity. A second definition is provided by the Oxford dictionary: 'the characteristics determining who or what a person is'.[2] This definition, in contrast to the Latin translation, acknowledges the possibility of an entity having an identity existing outside the relation to other entities (where the former required commonalities and therefore more than one entity). This also opens doors for many other possible identities: a person can be a man, a woman, a child, a parent, a citizen of a certain city or village, country, continent, et cetera. These definitions are, however too general. Archaeologists (among others) have tinkered with the definition as well. The authors of *The Archaeology of Identity* describe identity as 'individuals' identification with broader groups on the basis of differences socially sanctioned as significant', and originating from a sense of belonging to a group, which entails active engagement, and is therefore constructed through continuous interaction with said groups.[3] Walter Pohl similarly defines it as 'a bundle of relationships between the individual and the social world',[4] stating that it can be seen as 'static or dynamic, as objective or subjective, as social or individual, as factual or as constructed.'[5]

As we can see, dictionary definitions as well as the more specific definitions by the mentioned authors underscore the group aspect of identity. Worryingly though, they sometimes still tend to automatically focus on ethnic identity, which is only one of many facets identity can have. In fact, identity can have multiple scales and characters. Firstly, it can manifest itself on an individual level, the person; a social level, that of a group; and on a wider cultural level. Secondly, there are identifiable facets like gender, ethnicity, religion, age, et cetera. While some of these are interrelated, they can be seen as distinct 'categories', for lack of a better

word. It must be said, however, that such 'categories' are not set or fixed, and ever changing and flowing.[6] Identities vary and differ in both time and space: 'Being four years old and female in Britain in 3000 BC would have been an entirely different experience from being ten years old and male in Rome in AD 200. Those societies would have had different expectations of how a person of a certain age should behave, dress and function as a member of that society, and this would also have been intersected by their gender, status, religion and ethnicity'.[7]

It is clear, then, that these different identities are expressed in different ways, which can be observed in the material culture. It may be wise to note here that this works both ways. Not only do objects have meaning within a context of social identities, but objects themselves may be be part of the social context which shapes social identities. Anthony Giddens, in explaining his structuration theory, states that human action cannot be seen as isolated individual choices and performances, but must be placed within a larger context of social structure. He states that these structures provide unconscious motivation for the intentions and actions of human beings.[8] These structures exist external to human action, but serve to constrain free initiative and individual action.[9] In a material sense, one could argue that objects can provide constraints on human behaviour as well. The array of objects at our disposal provides a context within which we perform actions in the world. This would mean that not only do we create objects, but that, in a sense, objects also create us. However, these structures are not just material. While some identities are actively created individually, some (if not most) are the product of long-lasting, often group-wide social structures that shape, stimulate or restrain certain identities. After all, people express themselves under social conditions and on terms that already pertain at their time of birth.[10] I would say that there are two forms in which these social structures can manifest themselves, namely history and authority. The first relies on 'how things have always been done' (although it is not uncommon for a past to be forgotten, remembered and altered to a group's needs[11]), while the second relies on control by a certain authority (such as the absence of religious freedom, or forced conformity). In the latter case, one does not speak of a subconscious structure, but an obligatory one. Nonetheless, identities are not created in a vacuum, but within a social and/or material structure.

Studying identity

During the 1860s, after Charles Darwin's publication of "On the Origin of Species" in 1859, evolutionary thought led to the idea that a certain biological inequality existed between cultures, and many believed that technologically less advanced peoples were culturally, intellectually and emotionally primitive compared to 'civilised' peoples.[12] This (now alarming) notion was then transformed into a view in which ethnic and national groups were internally homogenous and historically continuous, defined by either their culture or their language.[13] Studies from more recent decades,

however, have stressed the dynamic construction of identity and its subjective, constructed and changing nature,[14] and there is still a general consensus that identities cannot be seen as clearly demarcated and historically or spatially constant, but as changing and fluid. We must be careful, however, not to confuse identities that we ascribe to peoples with the identities they ascribed to themselves, or equating adoption of a practice with affiliation with a certain group.[15] However, even if we are careful, this will always remain an 'occupational hazard' for archaeologists.

The fact remains that one of the most important assumptions in studying identity through material culture is that the material record reflects past practices, which were generally not performed without reason, and were therefore to a certain degree meaningful and a way for an agent[16] to interact with their social context.[17] We can, then, study ancient material culture as a physical manifestation of these past practices, and therefore of these meanings. When studying social identities or identities communicated outside the self, it is social interactions and relations that need to be studied - both the use of material culture in these social interactions, and a shared way of doing things. It is important to restate my earlier point here: identity has multiple scales and categories, and one can therefore assume that we could also look at the same object in different ways, since the object will convey multiple scales of identity. So, to be as effective as possible, we must study these multiple identities.

How, then, can we derive these multiple identities from objects? While objects can exhibit multiple identities, they need not always be used for the expression of all of those identities, since some elements might be suppressed or emphasised.[18] Not only can they be variable in their expression, they can also be interpreted in different ways; human perception of objects is variable, and one culture, group or person will look upon an object in an entirely different way than another. This raises interesting questions, such as what happens when an object which holds meaning for one group ends up in another. Does its meaning change? Does it gain an extra meaning? In short, there are two sides to expressing identity through material culture: that of the expresser and that of the interpreter. It is therefore even more vital to look at the traits that the users themselves chose to articulate, since it is these traits that bring us closer to understanding the identity and meaning which objects attempted to convey. One process through which this was possible was the production of material culture itself.

Producing identities

One of the aspects of material culture that communicates identity is the physical production of an object itself. Producing pottery, for example, is a time-consuming process, and since in many periods 'mass-production' as we know it was impossible, we can assume that people spent a lot more time on a vessel than in modern society, especially if it needed to be painted or receive some other surface treatment. It follows, then, that

artisans did not just execute any action in this process without it having some meaning, or at least a reason. In most cases, there is a discernible pattern of certain groups having certain ways of doing things. Following the Binfordian concept of culture as an 'extrasomatic means of adaptation', this is reduced to nothing but technical adaptation to certain environmental conditions and functional pressure. However, this is a simplistic idea that exhibits a total disregard for social tradition and meaning.[19] To contrast this view: in an extensive anthropological study among several different communities, Olivier Gosselain noted that a wide variety of the technical choices he encountered served the same goal, while no environmental or other technical constraints played any part in the adoption of a certain production technique. It is much more likely, then, that technological choices in the production process come not from a technological motivation, but a social one.

An important element of this is the production sequence, or *chaîne opératoire*, which encapsulates these many technological choices and processes during the production of an object.

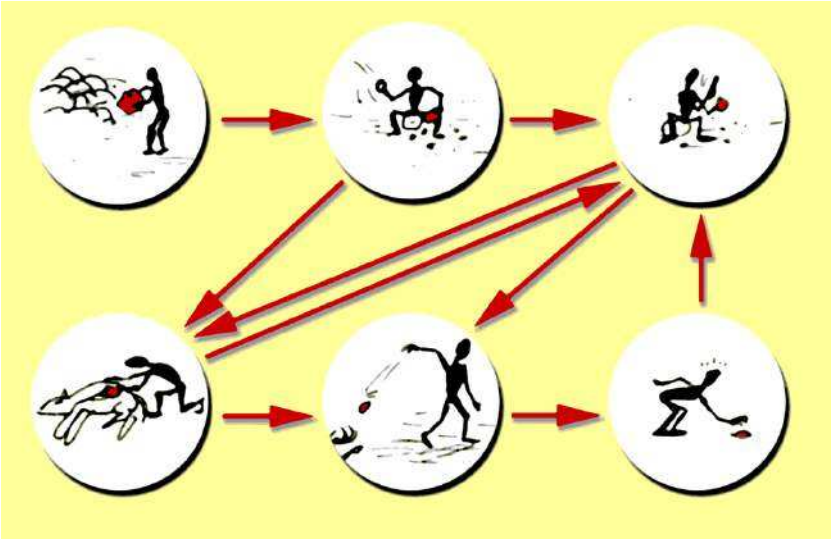

Figure 1
The chaîne opératoire: raw material acquisition, production, finishing, and additionally use and discard (by José-Manuel Benito, unpublished artwork)

The term was originally defined by André Leroi-Gourhan as the sequential nature of bodily actions as one goes about daily repetitive technological activities,[20] and is proposed to be influenced by the ideas of Mauss, who focused on how bodily actions both reflected and were conditioned by social tradition, since they were learned behaviours within a society.[21] If we can then assume that certain indicators of identity found their way into the production sequence, which leave either visible or invisible traces on the finished product, studying the *chaîne opératoire* can help to further understand how these identities relate to production. Important here is the correlation between active or passive decisions and visible and invisible traces. Gosselain states that visible traces are reflections of superficial, situational and temporary facets of identity, while invisible traces (e.g. clay selection, extraction and firing) reflect deeply rooted social facets of identity,[22] since 'potters select and transform the materials as they have

been taught to do, being neither keen to modify their habits nor interested in other ways of doing it.'[23] It is thus not just the active choices, but also the subconscious ones that communicate identity through the production process. It is the entirety of this process, and all conscious and subconscious, individual and group-wide assumptions, habits and choices that can be used for the study of individual or group identity.

An example of a certain group actively identifying themselves through production is women. While early academic thought sadly paid little mind to the role of women in production, seeing it as mainly the domain of the male, more recent studies have indicated that women in fact did take part in production, and some modern anthropological studies in Africa and New Guinea have shown that in some cases the roles were even reversed.[24] Within the production context, women actively stress their own identities, and in male-oriented societies it could be used as a means of subverting social organisation.[25] An example of this is attested in the Ilchamus culture in Kenya, where women are, among other things, responsible for the production of certain milk gourds for infants. The iconography on these gourds expresses the reproductive role and power of women, and since in the Ilchamus society male power is actually based on reproduction (of both children and cattle), this can be interpreted as subversion, since these women identify themselves with the most important element of male power. This example shows that the production of material culture is not just a technological process in which the end product expressed identity, nor is it just the techniques themselves that exhibited it. It is the active and deliberate construction and presentation of identity which expressed the identity of women in this society.

Consuming identities

Now that we have seen how identity can be 'infused' in objects, consciously or subconsciously, we can now turn our attention to the other end of the process, the consumption of objects, and how individuals and groups appropriated them to communicate their own identity.

I would argue that consumption can signify a certain identity in two ways: a functional requirement related to one's identity (for instance, a toy was used by a child, while a bow was used by a hunter), and the choices which indicate deliberate consumption or appropriation for the expression of one's identity. The first category can be exemplified by age-specific material culture. When children become older, and they are allowed to participate in adult activities, the material culture they use on a daily basis changes, for example with using a bow in hunting societies. The use of a bow signifies adulthood, and using one when one has become a man therefore changes how society view him and how he presents himself.[26] It may be entirely possible that this transition into another role, and the shifting perceptions that go along with it, have consequences for many other forms of material impression and expression. Lucy warns that these processes are highly culture-specific and cannot be used for cross-cultural

generalisations.[27] However, it is clear that certain stages of life can be linked with certain ways of consuming material culture. Another example of how consumption is related to age is the material culture of children: in some assemblages deemed 'infantile' they can be identified by miniature material culture, which can be regarded as toys and other tools for role-play. Often mixed with these miniature objects are 'adult' objects, which Lucy identifies as toys that allowed children to play at their roles as adults.[28] Contemporary parallels would be dollhouses, which simulate household management, and toy kitchens, which simulate preparation of foods.

The second category is exemplified by the consumption of status goods. An assumption here is that individuals with status will inevitably consume status goods simply because they can, and to communicate their status or richness to others. Bourdieu states that these consumption patterns '[reflect] the key forms of social inequalities while at the same time providing the foundations for the reproduction of these inequalities.'[29] In other words, consumption of status goods both reflects and maintains social inequality. Not only the rich and powerful consumed status goods, however; in much the same way that Kenyan women subvert the power of men, so could relatively poor members of society use these objects to subvert existing elites.

A great example of expression of identity (in this case status identity) through material culture is the so-called Heroon of Lefkandi. This Greek building, erected around 1000-950 BC, was one of the largest buildings of its time, and housed the graves of a man and a woman. That they were either rich, important or both becomes clear not only from the monumental architecture but also from the goods that were found in the graves themselves: the cremated male was interred in a bronze amphora significantly older than himself,[30] and not even of Greek origin, but possibly from Cyprus.[31] In other words, this was likely an antique import, making it valuable.[32] The female was buried with, among other things, golden hair coils, a golden and faience necklace with a golden pendant, two golden breastplates, golden rings, and an iron knife with ivory pommel.[33] Since the majority of these objects were made of gold, it seems safe to conclude that these goods display a tremendous amount of wealth and status. What is interesting here is that these people attached significance to their wealth, and chose to display it through material means, which can still be interpreted by us now, even though this was not communicated through literary or other means.

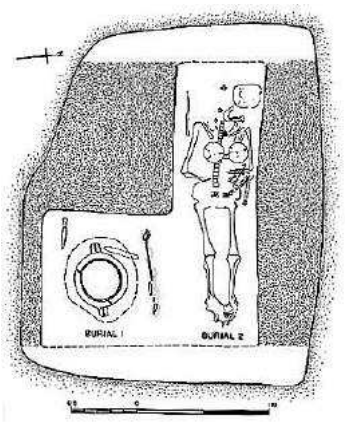

Figure 2
The burials at the Heroon of Lefkandi. Cremated male on the left, decorated female on the right
(after Popham, Sackett and Themelis 1993, plate 13)

Adopting identities

Previous considerations of identity have all focused upon production and consumption of material culture within a social context. But what happens if material culture from an external context, for example another region or country enters the local material culture repertoire?

In most cases this phenomenon takes place in an intercultural or interethnic context. One first thing to keep in mind here is that, as stated

above, cultures and ethnicities are not clearly defined in either landscape or material culture. But since within a social group at least some degree of internal cohesion can be identified vis á vis other social groups, we can assess how one group reacts to influences from another group if we keep this grey area in mind. When a new, 'foreign' element (in this case material culture) is introduced into a group, one might say that one of the following two things can happen: the group either resists it or accommodates it. However, these are rather polarised terms, and lead to binary thinking.[34] Binary thinking is, as in many facets of social science, a danger to the study of identity in the past, as it flies in the face of the fluid model of identity described above. If we are to study the effects of contact on the construction of identity, the forced construction of 'two sides' only serves to oversimplify a process that is essentially extremely complex. To combat this simplification, archaeologists have come up with several different models to better describe this process. Firstly, creolisation theory is a model in which the 'receiving' peoples adopt much of the relevant or useful elements, while retaining traditional elements, creating a new 'blend' of cultural identity.[35] However, this in my view still rather traditional and colonial model (the earliest origins of the term can even be found in New World colonialism)[36] does not improve on the situation described above, and does not incorporate the fact that in many instances both sides influence each other. Instead, it seems to imply that one side is the 'giver', dominant, greater, while the other is the 'receiver', submissive, lesser. The theories of hybridisation and Middle Ground, however, provide a less simplified approach: hybridity as a model relies on the mutual accommodation and appropriation of material culture, which ultimately leads to a community that is neither one nor the other, but a mixture of the two.[37] According to the Middle Ground theory, two sides of an interaction interact in a way that tries to mimic the other, leading to mutual misrepresentations that create a third culture which is not just a mixture of the two, but a new culture entirely.[38] These two frameworks provide a more complex and mutual view. However, I believe it is unwise to adhere to only one of these two, as they are not mutually exclusive, but not always applicable either. With these models one can now wonder how these different modes of interaction affected their own perceptions of identity. It is clear that the material culture in these cases expresses a new identity, but that is simply our interpretation of the material evidence. Whether they actually saw themselves as belonging to a 'third' or 'new' culture is a different question entirely.

When considering the interaction of multiple identities, the site of Pithekoussai emerges as a worthy example. This site was founded in the mid-eighth century BC by the Euboeans, and maintained contacts with many different peoples, among which the Greeks and the Phoenicians.[39] In the site's cemetery, a family was buried, consisting of a mother and three children. The urn used to inter one of these children is noteworthy, as it combines multiple identities. This vase was of Greek production from the

middle of the 8th century, and what is interesting about it is the inscription: the amphora contained a West-Semitic inscription that indicated that it was once used as a measure. It is believed that the buried family were Semitic-speaking people of likely Levantine or Cypro-Phoenician origin. Another interesting fact is that this family was buried according to Greek customs.[40] Thus in the context of Pithekoussai we have a Semitic (Levantine or Phoenician) family, using Greek material culture and burial practices, in a colony in Italy. This raises interesting questions, the most important one in the present context relating to the way they identified themselves: according to the writing they can be identified by us as Semitics, but they themselves seem to have appropriated Greek practices and material culture, while residing in a colony in Italy. So how did they see themselves? Did they see themselves as Phoenicians/Levantines? As Greeks? As residents of what is now Italy? Or did they see themselves as all three?

Conclusion

I have reviewed how production and consumption of material culture can be used for the construction of identity. The definition and scientific application of identity has been discussed, how it has many different faces and can be communicated in many different ways, and how conscious and subconscious actions within a structure based on history or obligation can be used as a tool. I have argued that production can be an expression of identity, and that the production process itself can be an indication of identity. Not only was the *chaîne opératoire* subconsciously used for the construction of identity, some groups used their role in the production process itself to express their own identities. Also, I reviewed how the consumption of material culture was used to construct identity, which can be broken into two categories: consumption based on the use for a social identity, and as a communication of identity, such as status. Finally, it was discussed how interacting communities leave their marks on each other, and how 'foreign' material culture was appropriated into the material record repertoire as an expression of identity.

Hopefully, it has become clear that identity is a fluid concept of construction and expression. On the one hand, identities are constructed by peoples and for peoples from underlying conditions. On the other hand, identities are actively expressed by ways of production and consumption of material culture.

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Notes

1 Objects and other identifiable physical remains of past societies.
2 ▶www.oxforddictionaries.com last accessed on 08-01-2015.
3 Díaz-Andreu et al. 2005.
4 Pohl 2010, 17.
5 Ibid., 10.
6 Casella / Fowler 2005, 8.
7 Lucy 2005, 66.
8 Giddens 1984, 6.
9 Ibid., 16.
10 Gardner 2007, 41.
11 Casella / Fowler 2005, 6.
12 Hales / Hodos 2010, 6.
13 Gamble et al. 1996, 4.
14 Ibid., 6.
15 Casella / Fowler 2005, 7.
16 Here taken to be an individual or object with the ability to perform actions or influence other agents in general.
17 Gardner 2007, 50.
18 Casella/Fowler 2005, 195.
19 Gosselain 1998, 78-79.
20 See Leroi-Gourhan 1964.
21 De La Fuente 2011, 225.
22 Gosselain 2000, 189.
23 Ead. 1998, 91.
24 Díaz-Andreu 2005, 31-33.
25 Ibid., 31.
26 Lucy 2005, 62.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Babiç 2005, 80.
30 Popham et al. 1993, 21.
31 Antonaccio 1995, 238.
32 Popham et al. 1993, 19.
33 Ibid., 20.
34 Casella / Fowler 2005, 39.
35 Ibid., 37.
36 Stewart 2007, 1-3.
37 See recently Van Valkenburgh 2013.
38 Malkin 2004, 357.
39 Mee 2011, 180-181.
40 Hales / Hodos 2010, 128-129.