
This study is based on ethnoarchaeological fieldwork between 1965 and 1997 in the potting community of Ticul near the city of Merida in the state of Yucatan, Mexico. Arnold uses these years of research to address issues around the relationship of ceramics and social change. Although this work will be of interest to cultural anthropologists for its long-term perspective on cultural change in a single location, it will be most useful to archaeologists, especially those who study ceramics.

Introductory and concluding chapters bracket chapters on changes in the demography and organisation of potters, demand and consumption, distribution, clay and temper procurement, fabric composition, and forming and firing technology. Early in the book Arnold identifies a set of theoretical issues and models he wishes to explore, including models of specialisation and standardisation (e.g. Costin, 1991), evolutionary models (e.g. Shennan, 2000), and concepts of technological choice (e.g. Lemonier, 1986). Arnold also refers to ‘material engagement theory’, which attempts to describe and perhaps even explain the nature of human interaction with the material world. This reminds me of the various material culture studies approaches that have become popular in the UK and continental Europe (e.g. Tilley, Keane, Kuechler-Fogden, Rowlands and Spyer, 2006) but have been somewhat slower to diffuse across the Atlantic. Arnold’s comments on the agency of materials (‘forming technologies and raw materials also have agency, just as humans do’, p. 278) are the clearest evidence of these newer influences in his writing.

The key word throughout this study is ‘complex’. Arnold demonstrates that virtually every aspect of pottery production and distribution – from clay and temper acquisition to marketing – is embedded in a web of environmental, social, political and ideological contingencies. For example, an account of a protracted dispute between potters, hacienda managers, and local politicians over access to a valued clay mine offers tantalising indications of the politics, economics and even ritual of clay procurement that may have existed in the past. These are issues that few archaeologists consider in any detail and throughout the book Arnold criticises archaeological models that ignore or downplay the complexity of the cultural context of pottery production.

One of the changes Arnold notes is an increase in production for two specific consumers (tourists and hotel owners), and a resultant increase in specialisation (for example in clay and temper mining, vessel forming and polychrome painting). He notes that this reinforces other evidence that polychrome painting was probably a specialised activity in antiquity as well. One of the more interesting observations Arnold makes on this topic is that specialisation has increased production without necessarily producing larger production units, an assumption many archaeologists make. One of the few elements that has remained relatively stable in his years of study at Ticul is ritual demand for Day of Dead ceremonies.
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This work takes a sort of bird’s eye view, stressing trends/tendencies and overall patterns, most of which are directly relevant to archaeologists (e.g. can increasing specialisation be seen in fabric composition?). As I read the book, however, I kept wondering where the potters were. Arnold explains this in the last paragraph of the book where he promises a second monograph dealing with the potters themselves. I think that will make an excellent complement to this work.

It was interesting to me to compare this work to Arnold’s Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process (1985), which has become an ethnoarchaeological classic. Arnold’s perspective has become more eclectic since that book, which was influenced strongly by systems theory and other elements of archaeological Processualism. In that work Arnold emphasised the influence of the environment (including related issues such as land tenure) on potters and that interest is still present in the newer work, but like the archaeologists who have relied on his work, Arnold’s theory has also become even more concerned with how material practices are embedded in the complexities of the social and cultural world. As the work of someone who has spent decades thinking about pottery and working with potters, this book is unlikely to be surpassed anytime soon. If you have an interest in the production and distribution of pottery, or in craft production more generally, there will most certainly by observations of interest to you here.

James Aimers
State University of New York, Geneseo

References