Book reviews

Archaeology, art, and artefacts

Arnold, Dean E. Social change and the evolution of ceramic production and distribution in a Maya community. xxx, 351 pp., maps, tables, figs, illus., bibliogr. Boulder: Univ. Press of Colorado, 2008. £54.50 (cloth)

Few researchers have been committed to conducting ceramic ethnoarchaeology for their entire career. However, Dean Arnold, who trained originally as an ethnographer, reveals that to recognize the complexities of social and technological change, one must be devoted to longitudinal research. Arnold’s research encompasses thirty-two years beginning in 1965 and continuing to 1997 in the Maya community of Ticul, Yucatán, Mexico.

The book is divided into four parts, the first part beginning with a lengthy theoretical introduction focused on social and technological change in relation to several paradigms, including Cathy Costin’s specialization parameters, evolutionary processes, technological choice, and cognitive anthropology and engagement theory. The latter part of the introduction concentrates on the use of ethnographic analogy, Dean’s methods, and a short discussion concerning how the book is organized.

The second part of the book systematically discusses the thirty-two years of changes in the Ticul population and organization of potters, and the demand, consumption, and distribution of pottery. What makes this book accessible to both archaeologists and ethnoarchaeologists, and hopefully ethnographers, is that Arnold removes the static dimension of materials by always concentrating on how individuals, families, and the community have changed in relation to pottery production and distribution. These chapters lay the foundation and allow the reader to have a good sense of the social, economic, and technological changes Ticul has experienced over these three decades. The predominance of the pottery production in Ticul remained household-based, even in large units with wage-labour households. Arnold documents a kin-based model documented by using genealogical data, residence maps, and participant observation. The distributional changes started with pottery sold at the local markets and fiestas and expanded into more urban markets when a highway system was built. This led to more specialization with brokers, who could act as intermediaries selling to the rising tourist markets of Mérida and Cancún.

The third part of the book uses a life-history perspective through discussing changes in clay and temper procurement, composition of pottery fabric, forming technology, and finally firing technology. Arnold documents that ‘all choices are social’ regarding the complexity of clay and temper procurement. Furthermore, he challenges the predominant view that elite control of resources restricts the mining of clay. Rather he emphasizes the flexibility that potters engage in while procuring clay and temper and forming and firing vessels, which becomes increasingly specialized, efficient, and productive, consequently dictating the complexity of pottery production. Archaeologists will discover his most important contribution is that production did not grow but the intensity of production increased by individuals specializing in specific tasks. The biggest surprise
from reading the book is that INAA (instrumental neutron activation analysis, a method of materials analysis) was inconclusive in detecting subtle clay and temper changes. I commend Arnold for including these data as negative evidence demonstrating to archaeologists and ethnoarchaeologists that the use of high-tech equipment to see slight changes in clay and temper procurement may prove ineffective.

In the book’s conclusion, Arnold concisely summarizes the dramatic changes and reconnects the introductory chapter by discussing Ticul’s efficiency and paradigms of social change and specialization. These changes, as well as the increase of demand for pottery, display the complexity of craft specialization, and by taking a holistic approach (i.e. studying the social, as well as the technological aspects) can make a lasting contribution concerning how archaeologists interpret the past.

Arnold’s engagement in participant observation has allowed him to describe the intricacies of pottery production, especially why some families adopted some techniques but rejected others. So how should archaeologists use the Ticul case study if it occurs within a capitalistic, cash economy system? Arnold rightly argues that this study has important relevance to archaeologists since it relates to a long continuum of Maya pottery production. Archaeologists cannot separate the past from the present and we are all dependent on the use of analogy tied to the present. Arnold contends that the role of demand is the key to craft production, and archaeologists will need to separate out elements associated with the modern world economic system from qualities that are related to their own society.

The production of the book is excellent, containing plentiful maps, graphs, and tables, as well as numerous black and white photos that aid the reader in conceptualizing the cultural and technological changes that Ticul has undertaken over a span of three decades. All who are interested in ethnoarchaeology, pottery, and craft specialization should read this book and it would be a welcome text for courses focusing on ethnoarchaeology. Dean Arnold’s remarkable commitment to ceramic ethnoarchaeology research in Ticul is a significant contribution to the field of archaeology.

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