

***Objects: Reluctant Witnesses to the Past.* Chris Caple. London: Routledge, 2006. 266 pp.\***

Reviewed by Jeb J. Card

Chris Caple's book, *Objects: Reluctant Witnesses to the Past*, has two basic goals. One is to provide an introductory overview of techniques available to archaeologists and other students of material culture. The other is to promote pragmatic object-based analysis of material culture. This approach bridges divides between and within disciplines, and documentary and style-based archaeological analyses are deftly integrated with materials science analyses in the case studies ending each chapter.

A major foundation of Caple's object-oriented approach is what he dubs the FOCUS system (Formalized Object Construction and Use Sequences), a thorough checklist of information that can be gleaned from visual inspection, and valuable for an investigator to keep in mind. Detailed observation must be matched with chronology, not in the traditional sense, but through forensically reconstructing modifications to an object. Production only begins the chain that eventually lands an object in front of the investigator. Its use life, including collection and curation, must be carefully documented, as a field archaeologist or forensic anthropologist would note site formation processes. This is excellent advice, and as noted by the author, mirrors the growing interest in the production sequence approach to artifact analysis, particularly the influence of Pierre Lemonnier's work with technological choices. Caple does a good, if brief, job showing his intellectual precedents and ancestors.

Though potentially of broader approach, the practical emphasis in *Objects* is on rare or unique museum pieces. Caple discusses production scale and how that translates into past and present value of an object. He categorizes scale into three categories: mass-produced and/or utilitarian objects (which the reviewer notes may be less suited to Caple's approach as they may have a minimal lifespan between production and discard), rarer "crafted" objects, and unique "bespoke" luxury items. The case examples emphasize bespoke luxury items, including royal portraits and cathedral doors, and the crafted objects, such as a medieval reliquary or helmet. In two cases more common artifacts are analyzed as a class (brass pins and majolica/porcelain plates). While perhaps not as useful for most day-to-day archaeological work, it makes more sense from the perspective of organizing and investigating museum collections.

The bulk of *Objects* is a general introduction to various investigative techniques. Caple divides these into two categories: visual analysis (various kinds of microscopy and the subjects it can be applied to, Ultraviolet and Infrared observation, X-Ray) and elemental/molecular composition analysis (a couple of flavors of X-ray fluorescence, spectrometry, and radiometric analyses). In practice many of the visual analyses requiring particular equipment and technical capabilities (x-ray, electron microscopy) are closer, from the perspective of execution, to the elemental/molecular techniques, leaving a de-facto two-fold approach: very detailed visual analysis and technical analysis. Some language or concepts are moderately technical, though

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surprisingly the worst case I could find does not involve high-tech instruments, but terminology regarding glazed ceramics. I study such materials and had no issue here, but a quick survey of colleagues confirmed that the language is not commonplace amongst those working with pre-European materials in the Western hemisphere.

Chapters are organized by the questions an analyst can ask (“How?” “Where?” “Why?” etc.), but the divisions are somewhat superfluous. Caple’s object-oriented approach is holistic, making it difficult to separate out the question of how and who made an object from what can be gleaned of trade networks from the social use of the object. Each question becomes dependent upon the others. This is not a criticism, but instead evidence of how the object-based approach transforms our perspective. As a side note, the author’s skepticism of DNA residue is welcome in an age when the popular conception is that DNA can solve anything. But recent extensively reported sequencing of Neanderthal genetic material directly contradicts some statements here, and may raise the eyebrow of a student only three years after publication (McGroarty 2009).

Each chapter ends with a case study, an object or class of objects analyzed with an emphasis on the main “question” of that chapter. These cases show the techniques in action, and are intriguing in several instances (others less so). All case studies are from the Old World, all are from periods with documentary evidence, most are from the medieval period, and, with the exception of a fake “Han Chinese” mirror of unknown provenience, all emphasize Britain. This emphasis was underlined by a brief mention of wheeled toys in the Inca civilization, presumably referring to wheeled figurines in Mesoamerica, a geographical error equivalent to putting Glastonbury in Carthage.

The case most familiar to this reviewer, a general discussion of blue-on-white pottery, is handled in a particularly strange fashion. While Chinese porcelain is discussed in some detail, the emphasis here is on ceramics that might be found in Britain. There is little discussion of lusterwares from the Middle East or Iberia or the development of majolica in Spain and Italy. Instead the focus is on Delft in northwest Europe and particularly in England after initial Dutch development, which then moves to a discussion of European porcelains. This might make sense from the perspective of what is in the ground in the United Kingdom, but it is a baffling way to discuss the development of blue-and-white pottery. Considering the potentially broad utility of the ideas here, a more international and chronologically deep approach might be kept in mind for future editions marketed internationally as this volume is.

*Objects* is a welcome introductory text emphasizing a holistic object-based approach to the investigation of past material culture, an approach increasingly practiced in archaeological research, and at places the holistic approach is refreshing. The volume is also a good, if somewhat scattershot, introduction to technical analyses. This volume might complement a basic disciplinary textbook in an introductory undergraduate course, but some of the discussion of techniques would be redundant. It would be useful as a core text for a graduate course in archaeological technical analyses or other studies of material culture, though it could stand to include a wider range of objects.

## Reference Cited

McGroarty, Patrick

- 2009 Complete Neanderthal Genome Mapped. Discovery News, February 12.  
<http://dsc.discovery.com/news/2009/02/12/neanderthal-genome.html>, accessed March 15, 2009.

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