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Ceramics and the history of consumption: pitfalls and prospects

PAUL COURTNEY*

SUMMARY

This article attempts to outline some of the main theoretical issues and practical achievements in the history of consumption. It does not attempt to offer a history of ceramic consumption but instead aims to raise a number of methodological and theoretical issues relevant to ceramic interpretation of the medieval and post-medieval periods.

CONSUMPTION: HISTORY AND THEORY

The discipline of economic history has had a profound effect on the development of British medieval and post-medieval archaeology. A number of distinguished practitioners, notably Maurice Beresford, Rodney Hilton, Chris Dyer and David Crossley have either promoted or been actively involved in medieval or later archaeology. In addition, a 'top ten' of history books read by archaeology graduates would probably be headed by W. G. Hoskins' (1955), *The Making of the English Landscape* and Sir Michael Postan's (1972) *The Medieval Economy and Society*. Unfortunately archaeologists who use such works as a source of facts are often less aware of the underlying theoretical debates within economic history. I wish briefly to touch on one area of live debate, the significance of consumption in understanding past economies and societies.

One of the central themes of economic history has been the study of economic growth, particularly in relation to the Industrial Revolution. Economists often divide the economy into supply and demand sides. The supply side of the equation emphasises the price of goods rather than demand for them by consumers. Post-war British economic historians have tended to emphasise the supply factors behind economic growth, for instance, investment, technological innovation, cost of materials and transport. One result of the over-dependence on supply models has been a tendency to explain the Industrial Revolution almost exclusively in terms of internal factors such as falling agricultural prices while denying any significant role for foreign trade, slavery and colonialism (see Solow 1991, Hudson 1992 and Blackburn 1997 for revisionist critiques).

The history of consumption has long roots. Particularly noteworthy are a group of scholars who worked at the turn of the century. Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 book, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, characterised the leisure spending of the American middle classes as 'conspicuous consumption'. His realisation that consumer spending was used to send messages about social status was a major breakthrough. The German sociologist, Georg Simmel (1904) emphasised the role of fashion, and especially the 'trickle-down' theory of social emulation in creating a modern consumer society. He argued that subordinate groups copy the fashions of the elite who are then forced to adopt new styles in order to differentiate themselves. The German economic historian Walter Sombart (1913) argued in his book, *Luxury and Capitalism*, that the root of the capitalist ethic was to be found in the extravagant, competitive consumption of late-medieval and early-modern European courts. A more sophisticated development of Sombart's court theory was developed in the 1930s by yet another German, the sociologist, Norbert Elias (1939 and 1969), who later sought refuge from Nazi persecution in Britain. He emphasised the political use of material culture by court society. His research on etiquette books led him to suggest that the growth of manners or 'civilised' behaviour was rooted in the social and political upheavals of the late Middle Ages. In particular, he argued that the social instability of the later Middle Ages promoted manners as a means of distinguishing new or insecure elites.

There was subsequently a long period of disinterest in consumption among historians and economists until the 1970s when a major source of renewed interest was the growth of material culture studies. Among the leaders in this field have been folklorists, who in America were to have a profound effect on the growing discipline of historical archaeology (see Quimby 1978; Schlereth 1982 and St George 1988). One can mention, for example, Henry Glassie's (1975) structuralist analysis of the organisation of space in Virginian folk housing which had a profound influence on the archaeology of James Deetz (1977). One impact of this 'material culture' approach was that objects were increasingly seen not just as purely functional items, but as mirroring wider ideological change. For instance, James Deetz and Edwin Dethlefsen (1965), in their classic study of the changing iconography of New England gravestones, suggested that a change from death's head to cherub motifs reflected a shift from a 'medieval' to an 'enlightenment' world view, as marked by the adoption of scientific rationality.

One significant contribution of the material culture approach has been to emphasise the value of life histories — studying the life of an artefact from production through marketing, purchase, use and re-use, discard and collection or archaeological retrieval. Scholars such as Ian Hodder (1982), Daniel Miller (1985) and Arun Appadurai (1986) have used ethnographic fieldwork to emphasise the notion of context. That is, the same object may have different uses and meanings for different individuals or groups. Another contribution from anthropologists has been the notion that the exchange of goods in pre-capitalist societies cannot be understood in purely monetary terms. Marcel Mauss (1925) for example, argued that the gift had important social and religious significance in archaic societies and stressed the nature of reciprocity in gift giving. More recently, the French anthropologist, Pierre Bordieau, has distinguished between 'symbolic capital' and 'economic capital', the idea that transactions might take into account symbolic gain (e.g. a sense of gratitude) as well as economic gain. In a study of social distinctions in modern French society he has argued that waste or conspicuous consumption is a function of economic power, a means of converting 'economic' into 'symbolic' capital (Bordieau 1979 and 1980, 112–21).

Effective analysis of consumption in history is also dependant on an understanding of its role in changing economic structures. The controversial Hungarian economist Karl Polanyi (1944; *et al.* 1957) suggested there were three basic forms of economy, the first based on gift exchange between equals, the second based on redistribution in a hierarchical society and lastly a market society. Polanyi also argued that all markets before the 19th century were 'embedded' in social relations. However, most modern scholars would argue, unlike Polanyi, that the 'market' was well developed in the ancient and classical world (e.g. Silver 1985 and Woolf 1990). Polanyi's notion that modern economies are not socially and politically 'embedded' is also hardly credible.

Hodges (1982) utilised Polanyi's theoretical framework in his work on Dark Age states and trade. He emphasised the royal control of trade especially through emporia (wics) such as Hamwih, which as Yorke (1982) has demonstrated, was close to the royal site of Southampton. Certainly kings, along with the aristocracy and the church, were the main consumers of luxury trade goods, though we should not forget the trade in bulk commodities such as iron, grain and cloth (Heidinga 1987, 207). Nevertheless, many historians, while accepting the existence of royal interest in trade offering protection and facilities to traders in return for levying tolls, have tended to question the ability or desire of kings to exert direct control (e.g. Ennen 1972, 40–3 and Dyer 1988, 74–6). In other words there is a dispute about the relative importance of gift exchange and the market in the long-distance trade of the pre-Viking era. Certainly the wide diffusion of 7th- to 9th-century coins from commercial centres, such as Huy and Maastricht in the middle Meuse valley, would argue at least for the existence of the market at the level of international exchange (Verhulst 1989, 18).

George Duby's seminal book, *The Early Growth of the European Economy* (1974), was heavily influenced by Mauss. Duby outlined some of the links between incipient consumerism and the rise of commercialisation in the 10th to 12th centuries, an area which promises to be a major focus of research in the next few decades. One of Duby's major contributions was to suggest that the early growth of northern European towns was largely fuelled by the aristocracy's demand for luxury goods. There is increasing evidence for links between the emergence of seigneurial society, the so-called "feudal revolution" of French scholars, and the growth of the market in the 10th and 11th centuries. The relationship was perhaps more complex and reciprocal than that outlined by Duby. As Adriaan Verhulst (1997) has so cogently argued, there is a pressing need for medieval historians and archaeologists to reintegrate the economic and socio-anthropological approaches.

Barbara Rosenwein's (1989) study, *To be the Neighbour of Saint Peter; the social meaning of Cluny's property, 900–1049*, has made an important contribution to understanding the chronology and nature of rural economic change in a region of France far inland. She cogently argues that there exists a spectrum from gift to capitalist economy rather than a clear-cut opposition between pure forms. Rosenwein's study of the unique collection of charters associated with the monastery of Cluny in the Mâconnais region pinpoints a marked shift forward along that spectrum in the 10th century. Until this point land was given to cement social relationships, rather than sold. By the year 1000 however, an inflationary land market was emerging where land was bought and sold in order to build and sustain power.

The late 12th to 13th centuries saw the monetarisation of the economy reach new heights (Lopez 1971). Important economic mechanisms such as 'bills of credit' owe their origin to this period. Money and production for the market were also becoming more important in the peasant economy (Britnell 1996; Britnell and Campbell 1994). In ceramic terms this is clearly reflected in the increased number of production sites, often in rural locations and with limited market areas, as well as in the markedly increased volume of ceramics found on urban and rural consumer sites.

Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of commercialisation does not mean that the medieval economy can be interpreted entirely in monetary terms without examining its social and political context. We should however beware of creating a false dichotomy with a supposedly 'unembedded' modern economy. A vast amount of money still changes hand as gifts (inheritance and charitable donations), for example, and the grandest buildings of modern Paris tell us more about Presidential ambitions than the state of the French economy. As well as linear change, whether evolutionary or revolutionary, the economy also experiences cyclical changes or phases of expansion and contraction. Cyclical change has received particular attention from some members of the *Annales* school of historians in France, notably Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (see Burke 1992, 151–5). Going (1992) has used the evidence of ceramics to make an innovative study of cycles in the Romano-British economy. One area of potential is the search for structural similarities in the expansion and decline of different ceramic industries over long periods of time, Braudel's *la longue durée*.

Perhaps the key work in the adoption by historians of an explicitly consumerist approach was Chandra Mukerji's 1983 book, *From Graven Images: patterns of modern materialism*. Studying the impact of new goods such as textiles and maps, Mukerji argued that the roots of European materialism, 'hedonistic consumption' as she terms it, were rooted in the growth of colonialism in the 15th and 16th centuries. Mukerji stressed how the proliferation of consumer goods changed not only the physical world but also European mentalities. One could suggest that the earlier impact of Islamic influences in the Christian lands of the Mediterranean littoral was a precursor.

A key feature in the development of consumption studies has been the emergence of quantitative analysis of probate inventories. These documents, which list moveable goods held at death with valuations, mostly date to between the 16th and 18th centuries. A number of historians have used these to analyse changing patterns of consumption including Jan de Vries' (1974) study of rural Friesland, Lorna Wetherill's (1988) wide-ranging analysis of urban and rural England and Carole Shammas's (1990) comparison of England and America. Other important British studies are Joan Thirsk's (1974) study of 16th- and early 17th-century consumption and Spufford's (1984) work on 17th-century chapmen (mobile traders). This work has shown an international trend towards the accumulation of goods, a process with a marked upturn from the mid 17th century; however, regional, class and national differences have also emerged. De Vries (1974, 214–24 and 239) has suggested that the rural Dutch farmer tended to invest in luxury goods such as silver, books, and clocks rather than mass-produced items more conducive to industrialisation. James Horn's (1988 and 1994) comparison of the early Chesapeake in America with the Vale of Berkeley in England has shed light on the impoverished conditions in which early colonists found themselves compared with back home.

The notion of a consumer revolution was brought to the fore by McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb's 1982 book, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the commercialisation of eighteenth-century England*. Ceramics were to take central stage in Neil McKendrick's contribution to this study. He emphasised the revolutionary marketing methods of Josiah Wedgwood. McKendrick *et al.* argued that the industrial revolution rested upon a demand-led 'consumer revolution' in the mid 18th century fuelled by social emulation. McKendrick's thesis has been criticised on several grounds (e.g. Fine and Leopold 1990; Hudson 1992, 173–81). It has been pointed out that many of the industrial innovations attributed to Wedgwood had already been pioneered by less well-known Staffordshire potters (Barker 1991). The upsurge of consumer spending has also been shown to have a much longer history than just the third quarter of the 18th century (Weatherill 1988 and Shammas 1990). Another criticism of McKendrick's consumer revolution model was his over-reliance on gentry-led social emulation as a driving force for consumption. Colin Campbell (1987) has stressed the relation between the notion of individualism inherent in the Romantic movement and self-definition through consumption. Other factors include the need to cement social connections and an increasing fascination with novelty for its own sake. In the context of the increasing dislocation of European societies by industrialisation and urbanisation, goods may also have strengthened a sense of identity.

An important theoretical contribution has been made by Jan de Vries (1993 and 1994) who argues that the Industrial Revolution was indeed supply-led, driven by rapid technological and organisational change, though not without its demand or consumer element. He suggests however, that it was preceded by a demand-driven 'industrious' revolution, indicated by a marked upward rise in the numbers and value of consumer goods recorded in inventories from the mid 17th century onwards. This 'revolution', de Vries argues, reflects a structural change in the household economy of peasant society in western Europe, with women and children becoming more engaged in wage labour in order to buy the new consumer goods, often by-products of colonialism.

The history of consumption has also made an impact on medieval studies, for instance in Chris Dyer's 1989 book, *Standards of Living in the Middle Ages*, which is notable for its utilisation of both archaeological and historical evidence. For this period the supply versus demand-led argument has, not unsurprisingly given the nature of feudal society, taken a different form. The central debate has focused on the extent to which economic change was driven by lords or peasants, both groups being significant producers as well as consumers. The role of peasants as innovators has been particularly stressed by John Langdon (1986 and 1991) in his work on both medieval milling and medieval horse traction. Courtney (forthcoming and 1997a) and Dyer (1995) have also suggested that peasant consumption and market involvement may have contributed to the re-organisation of parts of lowland England and northern France into villages and common fields from around the 10th century onwards.

It is possible to recognise (though not without controversy) specific economies as being either supply- or demand-led, that is by producers or consumers. Nevertheless, no economy can be understood entirely in terms of supply or demand factors. Producers and consumers always exist in complex reciprocal relationships. Furthermore the acquisition of goods by consumers reflects socio-cultural factors as well as purely economic factors. Individual acquisition of goods is certainly limited by available surplus wealth or at least the ability to call on credit. However, it is clear that different groups and individuals are selective not only in what elements of material culture they appropriate or adopt but in the use they make of them.

CONSUMPTION AND CERAMICS

In the second part of this paper I wish to examine some of the implications of consumption theory for ceramic research. Probate inventories, one of the key sources for consumer historians, only exist in significant numbers at least in Britain from the mid 16th to mid 18th centuries and generally exclude the poorer sections of the community. Despite the oft-vaunted potential of archaeology for looking at the dispossessed, we have, however, little archaeological data for the poor in either medieval or post-medieval Europe. This problem will only be addressed by making it a priority in future research strategies.

One benefit of the growth of consumption studies has been to provide a more sophisticated theoretical background for the analysis of industrial innovation. In particular it is clear that ceramic change reflects a complex inter-relationship between producers and consumers. This is most apparent in the 18th and 19th centuries when rapidly changing fashion interacted with rapid technological innovation. One major area which is starting to be explored is the study of marketing. It is becoming increasingly clear that regional markets existed within Britain with different production centres dominating different parts of the country at the same time as firms were exporting on a global scale. Firms also reacted to international markets by producing different lines, a phenomenon best researched in regard to the export of Staffordshire ceramics to North America (Miller *et al.* 1994; Ewins 1997). One line of enquiry with enormous potential over the next decades will be the study of the inter-national links between technology and fashion. English ceramics, for example, not only found a ready market in continental Europe but influenced, and were influenced by, continental fashions. What we need is to move away from a traditional art historical approach based purely on style to incorporate the economic and cultural dimensions.

The explosion of new ceramic styles at the end of the Middle Ages has likewise been termed a 'ceramic revolution'. Here one can also point to supply factors such as technological innovation, mass production, the involvement of capitalist entrepreneurs and development of more extensive marketing networks, the last a general feature of the period. The success of Rhenish mugs was partly due to their competitive price (a classic supply factor) in relation to traditional wooden turned-cups. In 1420–1 Elizabeth Berkeley, countess of Warwick purchased 390 white (wooden) drinking cups for her household at £1 10s 8d or 0.94d each (Ross 1951, 102). By 1467, Sir John Howard could buy 240 stonepots, presumably plain Rhenish mugs, for 8s or only 0.38d each (Crawford 1992, I, 400).

However, the success of the new products also relied on the exploitation of changing patterns of consumption as the 'feudal' social structure went through a major upheaval. There may have been an increase in social as opposed to dietary drinking in the later Middle Ages to judge from the switch from wheat to barley and meat production. Norbert Elias's concept of the rise of manners associated with the emergence of new groups and fear of social instability is particularly relevant. One innovative feature of the Rhenish stoneware industry was its ability, at least by the 16th century, to produce a wide range of products, from the plain and utilitarian to the highly-decorated status object. The product range, whether plain or decorated, was made even more flexible by the possibility of adding silver or gold mounts (Gaimster 1997, 115–41; Baart 1994). Certainly recorded mid 16th-century prices could be considerably higher than those paid by Sir John Howard in 1467. In 1550 Sir William Petre of Essex purchased three stone pots at 6d each (Emmison 1964, 68), while in 1585 the groom of the bedchamber of Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester bought four stone pots for 10d each in order to display violets (Adams 1995, 231; see also Gaimster 1997, 137–8). These latter prices were however presumably for decorated, top of the range products, and the 16th century was marked by monetary inflation.

A number of factors might affect an individual's acquisition of mobile goods including ceramics. Firstly there are purely economic factors such as standard of living and purchasing power. There is also the cost of the item to be purchased and that of competing items, for example, the relative costs of pewter and ceramic drinking vessels. Durability, however, may have meant that metal goods were cheaper in the long term. Another factor was the choice available in the marketplace or from the street trader, always likely to be greater in major urban centres and ports such London or Southampton than in isolated rural areas such as mid Wales. Immigrant groups, such as the Italians in medieval Southampton and Hanse merchants in London, may also have maintained distinctive customs and tastes as well as influencing native acquaintances (Gaimster 1993; Gaimster and Nenk 1997, 172). Nevertheless, class and ethnicity are not always easy to distinguish from archaeological assemblages (see Majewski and O'Brien 1987, 189–91). Excavated 16th-century settlements in upland Wales, such as Brenig (Denbighshire) and Beili Bedw (Radnorshire), have produced relatively few finds. However, artefacts did include high quality items such as weapons from Brenig and a 'façon de Venise' glass from Beili Bedw (Allan 1979 and Courtney 1991). The relative lack of objects, even taking into account rubbish dispersal via middens, probably reflects distance from markets and cultural differences rather than poverty.

In Sacramento (California) excavations on the H156 block by Adrian and Mary Praetzellis (1997) revealed deposits of the 1850s associated with Chinese businesses and boarding houses for Chinese workers. These assemblages produced a high proportion of British ceramics as well as evidence from the animal bones for 'Euroamerican' style food preparation. Adrian and Mary Praetzellis argue that this situation cannot simply be explained by acculturation of the highly conservative Chinese community. They suggest that the British wares were purchased due to difficulties in obtaining supplies from China.

Furthermore, the Praetzellises argue that the artefacts operated in two dynamics. The first was the internal hierarchical world of economic and social competition between the ethnic Chinese — merchants, Chinese association agents, their staff and transitory lodgers. The transitory lodgers probably had few personal possessions and were fed on low-priced cuts of meat butchered in "American" fashion and served on utilitarian British wares. In contrast, the elite would have eaten traditionally favoured foods such as pork and chicken and were more likely to eat from Chinese porcelain. The second dynamic was the external world of relations between the merchants and their agents and the non-Chinese officials and businessmen they wished to influence. Regular banquets were held to influence non-Chinese contacts and at these Chinese and American popular culture were fused to create a favourable ambience. Thus Chinese food was served on British "Willow" pattern plates with knives and forks in order to advance a 'decidedly Asian strategy'.

The higher the social group the greater the access to distant markets is likely to be, either through travel or social and economic contacts. It should also be remembered however, that many people in the late-medieval and early-modern periods spent part of their early life in rural or urban service, which perhaps gave opportunities for servants to acquire cast-offs from their masters. This may have been increasingly the case in the post-medieval period as fashion made current styles rapidly redundant. Archaeological analysis of past households should take into account the possibility that goods belonged to servants rather than a nuclear family. In the case of medieval manor-houses or castles and post-medieval country houses their owners may have visited only occasionally, if at all. Did the often rich early 16th-century finds assemblages found in drains left unemptied at the Dissolution, for example, come from monks, guests, servants or corrodians? The latter group comprised long-term paying-guests, such as the elderly, who were a prominent feature of late-medieval English monasteries. Cess-pits have been one of the richest sources of datable finds groups in early-modern English towns. They were regularly emptied in normal use and their final fills often appear to be linked with the demolition or rebuilding of the adjacent house. It is possible that life-cycles of buildings might tend to correspond to household life-cycles thus creating age- and sex-related biases in artefact and dietary evidence. An example might be the abandonment or rebuilding of a house upon the death of a widow, a form of householder commonly recorded in urban surveys and rentals.

A number of more cultural factors are also relevant. To what extent is the item purely functional rather than status symbol; many objects are both. Even what at first sight seem to be luxury purchases such as silver, intended solely for display, were in the past a means of saving wealth. Following the argument of Norbert Elias (1969), items of pure social display might be as 'necessary' to certain social groups, such as courtiers, as the need to eat and sleep. Different social groups had different norms for what was expected as minimal or excessive cultural accoutrements of their rank. Individuals might be chided for dressing or building houses above their rank, and the sumptory laws were a statutory, though probably ineffective, attempt to control codes of dress. Anne Yentsch (1988 and 1991) has also drawn attention to the way that early-modern ceramics might relate to different gender domains within the household. Nevertheless, individuals did not always follow the social norms. One major area of debate in historical archaeology has been the ability of elites to control the cultural values of the less powerful. Certainly it was likely to be the rich rather than the poor who had most power in determining the forms of material culture. The poor and disposed could however subvert these forms to their own ends. Put another way, the poor servant had little choice but to bow to the master but might then spit into his food.

Archaeologists studying the 19th century have the advantage that they can often link households with named individuals. Not surprisingly, American scholars have largely led the way in the social interpretation of ceramics through their work on ceramic assemblages of this period (see Majewski and O'Brien 1987 for an overview of early work). A pioneering study was Otto's (1977 and 1984) comparison of owner, overseer and slave assemblages from Cannon's Point plantation in Georgia. One central problem relating to the economic interpretation of past consumption is determining what pots actually cost the consumer. Here, factors of mass production and marketing could competitively lower the price of superior or imported products. Work on determining prices is most advanced for 19th-century North America. Here, George Miller (1980 and 1991) has used import and sales documents to create price indices of standard forms and wares. These are an extremely valuable tool for analysing expenditure patterns. Unfortunately, Miller's indices have often been misused, especially in American contract archaeology, as a purely mechanistic means of determining social status and as a poor substitute for the detailed analysis of ceramic assemblages by vessel count, function and context.

A number of American scholars have used Miller's indices to compare 'consumer choice profiles', though interpretation of inter-regional and urban-rural consumer profiles may be complicated by different access to markets (Miller and Hurry 1983). Susan Spencer-Wood (1987) used Miller's indices in comparing five 19th-century sites in the Boston area of Massachusetts. This led her to suggest that the better-off showed their status through fine tea and coffee pots while poorer groups bought similar wares but in less expensive forms. Diana Di Zerega Wall (1991) similarly compared two 'middle-class' assemblages from mid 19th-century New York. The less affluent of the two households had both everyday and tea wares in middle-of-the-range Staffordshire ironstone. The better-off family also had ironstone ware for everyday family use but had two sets of porcelain tea ware, the better and non-matching set almost certainly reserved for use in the parlour. This ritualised space, as the setting for the afternoon tea ceremony, was a major focus of middle-class female conviviality and social competition (see Roth 1961 and Emmerson 1992, 13–27).

However, a consumer choice analysis for fourteen excavated households on a city block in Wilmington, Delaware by Leedecker *et al* (1987) failed to differentiate satisfactorily working- and middle-class households, based on a documentary analysis of the occupations of the head of household. Similar difficulties correlating ceramic assemblages with documented social status were encountered by Susan Henry (1987) in her study of turn-of-the-century Phoenix, Arizona. The authors of both studies suggested that the overall household composition, its life cycle stage and income strategy, needed to be identified, for instance, whether working sons and daughters and/or boarders were present (see also Henry 1991 and Klein 1991).

Acquiring price information from before the 19th century is considerably more difficult. It is unclear, for example, how valuations in such sources as the highly-static customs lists and probate inventories relate to real prices. These can still however give valuable clues about what may have been costly or high status items. Wicker-covered glass bottles were valued at 20s. per dozen for customs purposes in

1582, compared with 20d for the same number of wicker-covered earthen bottles, the latter probably from Martincamp in eastern Normandy (Willan 1962, 9). Inventories are also valuable as they sometimes locate ceramics to named rooms in a house. Unfortunately, low value items are often entirely excluded from inventories or are lumped together under such unhelpful terms as 'In earthenware 3s 4d' or the famous 'in small things forgotten' (Deetz 1977, 4). It can also be a problem relating sometimes vague or inaccurate descriptions from such sources with modern archaeological classifications.

American scholars were responsible for much pioneering work on ceramics in probate inventories. Gary Wheeler Stone (1970), Marley Brown III (1973) and Mary Beaudry (1980) used inventories to explore how colonial Americans used and perceived ceramics. Information from inventories was also incorporated into the innovative Chesapeake ceramic typology (Beaudry *et al.* 1983). More recently, Anne Martin (1989) has made a study of competition between pewter and creamware in late 18th-century Virginia. Her work suggested that some groups, especially in rural areas, remained loyal to unfashionable, though durable, pewter, despite the fashionable nature and relative cheapness (in the short-term) of creamware. As noted above (p. 100), tea wares have been seen by urban archaeologists as one of the best ceramic indicators of status, at least when adult females were present in the household. However, a study by Anne Martin (1996) on the relatively remote area of Bedford County, Virginia suggested rural resistance to the adoption of the new 18th-century fashion of tea drinking. A parallel might perhaps be seen in medieval Monmouth where it seems Welsh populations around the Norman town did not adopt ceramics until the mid 13th century despite their urban availability from the late 11th century (S. Clarke, pers. comm.). Adoption probably reflects two entwined processes, acculturation and commercialisation of the rural economy (Courtney 1996, 128).

Diversity in ceramic assemblages might be one indicator of status, at least inland, in that they may reflect wider social or commercial contacts. For example, a small bowl of early to mid 17th-century Chinese porcelain, extremely rare in Britain, was found in a cess-pit at Usk in Gwent, not on a navigable river. This almost certainly reflects the close economic contacts of Usk's tiny elite of merchant families with Bristol (Courtney 1994, fig. 39:84, 58–9, 62 and 109). Examination of the documents of the Wynn family in the Conwy valley in north-east Wales in the 17th century indicates the range of ways they acquired ceramics often at long distance. The family even wrote in 1665 to their mine manager on the west Welsh coast, asking him to acquire some brown stone jugs next time a boat passed. A 1674 letter from a north-east Wales contact to the Wynns passed on a message 'there are none of those earthen ware nearer than Dublin, whence, with all speed possible he shall have one' (Courtney 1988). Household accounts from Chirk Castle on the Welsh borders refer to the purchase of stone jugs at 10d each in Chester in 1666, about 24 miles distant. Other purchases recorded in this period came direct from local potters and the town of Wrexham, 10 miles away (Courtney 1986–7).

Ceramics and other consumer goods may have been acquired by other means than purchase, for example by theft or as hand-me-downs; the latter phenomenon may have increased with the increased rapidity of fashion changes. In the early modern period many people spent part of their lives as servants. One documented example of ceramics arriving as gifts is the example of potted venison. A haunch of venison was preserved by being set in layers of suet, gravy and fat in a large earthenware pot, which might cost up to 15d according to a 1696 potter's inventory from Abingdon in Berkshire (Brears 1984, 36–7; Vaisey and Celoria 1974). Pots of venison were sent by the rural elite as gifts, often over considerable distances. In 1690, 10s was spent sending eight venison pots about 200 miles from Chirk Castle in Flintshire to London (Courtney 1986–7, 9–13). Unfortunately, the archaeological identification of venison pots is probably too difficult. Another example of pottery exchanged as gifts may be the elaborate, and undoubtedly very expensive, 16th-century French polychrome vessels in "Saint Porchaire" ware, some of which combine the arms of courtiers with royal heraldry or badges. Tim Wilson (1996, 126) has suggested that such vessels may have formed part of ritualised gift exchange within the French royal court.

Nevertheless, caution is needed in inferring status from the economic valuation or exotic nature of pots. One of the most startling warnings is provided by Martin Hall's (1992, 386–90) excavations of the early 18th-century Dutch phases at the fort in Cape Town, South Africa. These revealed a concentration of high-status 18th-century Chinese porcelain of only fine quality in a building clearly used as slave quarters. The slaves are presumed to have stolen or collected these wares, probably as broken sherds, as an act of petty resistance — prehistorians be warned! Similar evidence for slaves hiding stolen goods comes from root cellars of slave cabins in the USA. A recent study analysed the ceramics from three 19th-century plantations in Georgia using Miller's price indices to evaluate economic ranking. This study showed the most expensive ceramics in certain vessel forms surprisingly to be associated with the slave sites rather than the plantation houses.

The slaves on these plantations were able to earn some money under the task system, as an incentive to produce more. Adams and Boling (1989) argued that the slaves used their involvement in the market to save up to buy relatively expensive ceramics as status symbols.

The examples I have offered so far all come from the post-medieval period which is marked by rising consumption, and clear evidence for the use of at least some ceramics as status items. What of the medieval period? One argument recently put forward by Matthew Johnson in his *Archaeology of Capitalism* (1996, 188–96) proposes that before the "ceramic revolution" of the late 15th century, ceramics carried little or no social meaning beyond that embodied in their function. Even if this is true they might still shed some light on status via their function. Graham Dawson (1976, 170) suggested that the limited range of ceramics at Kennington Palace might reflect the reliance of royal courts on metalware. Drip pans might suggest the eating of roast meat, a practice which North American scholars would evocatively describe as an elite 'foodway'. One stoneware mug is unlikely to be a useful guide to status but large numbers could suggest an extended, and therefore elite, household.

Certainly, Grenville Astill (1984) noted that if one looked, for example, at the contrast between urban and rural sites, medieval British ceramic assemblages seemed to give poor indication of status. Rural sites might have fewer jugs but within the same region showed very similar ranges of wares. Astill noted that this was in marked contrast to Italy (and presumably also to the western Mediterranean in general). In this region a wider range of types existed and ceramics appear to offer a much more sensitive guide to social status (see Mannoni and Mannoni 1975; Blake 1978 and 1980). By contrast a more negative pattern between ceramic types and social status is common in Northern Europe. Analysis of the distribution of both ceramics and glass across the major Hanseatic port of Lübeck in northern Germany, showed little difference in the types of ceramics or glass present on plots identifiable from the documents with highest, middling and lowest social groups (Fehring 1987, 220–1). Similarly, the plotting of the percentage of medieval imports across Exeter by John Allan (1984, fig. 55) showed no marked differences within the city.

Despite the warnings of John Allan (1983), a number of scholars have recently emphasised the medieval export of jugs from the Saintonge as an integral part of a wine drinking cultural package (Deroeux and Dufournier 1991; Kissock 1991 and 1993–4). If we accept this latter view the very presence of Saintonge jugs is evidence of high-status wine drinking. However, I too would like to raise a few doubts. Firstly, the economic organisation of the trade seems little different from other pottery industries such as the Grimston and Scarborough ware jugs of north-east England which were exported to Scandinavia on the back of the general export trade from nearby ports. The export of Ham Green and Redcliffe ware jugs from the Bristol area to south Wales and Ireland is another example. It seems economically sensible to ship one's highest value wares, but it remains problematic how expensive such wares were once they arrived at their destinations, given the low cost of water transport and economies of scale (see Willan 1976, 1).

Furthermore, if recent material culture studies have taught us anything it is that we cannot assume the function or perception of these vessels was the same in Britain as it was in their home market. We cannot *a priori* know they were used as wine drinking emblems of status by merchants, rather than for ale drinking by richer peasants or pisspots by monks. This can only be determined by such means as organic residue analysis. I am not necessarily arguing that such vessels were not emblems of status, but that it needs to be demonstrated by careful analysis of their contexts at the household level rather than assumed from how pretty they look to a post-William Morris audience. Even in Britain, what applies to medieval Southampton may not apply to inland Leicester or rural south Wales.

It seems certain that that the highly-decorated Saintonge jugs were more expensive than plain vessels and thus more likely to be a useful status symbol. Unfortunately we do not know the range of price differentials. Were even polychrome Saintonge jugs out of reach of the pocket of the urban poor or the rural villein who might wish to buy a single 'luxury' item? One should also remember that the association of particular ceramics with 'high status' sites may reflect access to markets rather than their high cost. Thus the presence of decorated Saintonge on so-called high status Edwardian castle sites of north Wales may reflect little more than the fact the isolated English garrisons were supplied from Chester, a major importation centre.

John Allan's (1994) review of imported wares in south-west England emphasises the coastal distribution of medieval imports with movement inland of over 20 miles being a rarity. He noted that the breakability of Saintonge, in particular, might be a factor, but argued that the most likely reason was the low value of such wares. This conclusion is supported by the use of Saintonge jugs by poor fishing communities on the Scilly Isles, as well as by an assemblage from poor urban housing of cob construction in Rack Street, Exeter, which produced a number of Saintonge and Rouen jugs, including at least one Saintonge polychrome vessel (Allan 1984, 67–70).

One avenue of explanation for the apparent lack of social patterning is provided by the study of medieval ceramic prices. Medieval manorial accounts frequently list the cost of pots bought for the dairy either under the 'Necessary expenses' section or under a separate heading 'Care of the dairy'. These vessels, which might potentially be made of wood or leather, are often specified as being of earthenware (*de terra* or *luteis*). Two forms predominate, the *patella* and the *olla*, though the translation of the terminology involved is far from certain. The *patella* was probably a pan or bowl (Latham 1965, 335). However, *ollis* were bought not only for cooking and food storage but also for the cellar and buttery (see below), where one would expect jugs for serving beer and wine. In 1322–3 three earthen *platellis* (a variant spelling of *patella*) and two earthen *olleis*, all at 1d each, were bought for the dairy at Wellingborough manor in Northamptonshire (Page 1936, 126).

At Cuxham (Oxfordshire), references to earthenware pots purchased for the dairy include: in 1294–5, two *patellis* for 1d and four *ollis* for 1¾d; in 1317–8, three *patellis* for 3d; in 1318–9 an *olla* and two *patellis* for 3½d and in 1347–8 one *olla* for ½d (Harvey 1976, 252, 319, 338 and 433).

The above account rolls, and many other unpublished examples, suggest that dairy pots normally sold at between ½d and 1d each in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Rather exceptional was an earthen *patella* at 2½d bought for keeping milk at Elton (Huntingdonshire) in 1350–1, perhaps because of its size or post-plague scarcity (Ratcliff 1846, 372; Moorhouse 1978, 8). In 1418–19 four earthen drip-pans were purchased for the kitchen of Acton Hall in Suffolk at 1½d each (Dale *et al.* 1984, 123). The term *urceolus terris* (earthen jug) is a rarity despite Moorhouse's (1978, 8) suggestion to the contrary.

Medieval household accounts also on occasion mention earthenware specifically. In 1406–7 seven *ollis* for white grease where purchased for the kitchen of the Bishop of Salisbury for 9d (Woolgar 1992–3, i, 295). Twenty-five earthen *ollis* for stewing (?bathing), cost Robert Waterton of Metley (Yorkshire) 1d each in 1416–17 (*ibid.*, ii, 513; OED *sub* stew), while 41 such pots bought for the Royal stew or bath at Bardfield Park (Essex) in 1344 cost a mere 18d (Salzman 1952, 276). In 1433–4, Henry Butele ('Butler') purchased for his master, Sir William Mountford of Kingshurst (Warwickshire), 287 earthen *ollis* for the buttery and cellar at 13s 4d, a groat (*ibid.*, ii, 406). For a total of 16d, eleven *ollis* were bought for the cellar, ten more for the kitchen and two earthen *patellis* for the ewery of the earl of Oxford in 1431–2 (*ibid.*, ii, 531). In 1475–7, at Tattershall (Lincolnshire), a dozen alepots (cisterns) were bought for 2s 1d and 2d paid for their (wooden) spigots (Myatt-Price 1957, 53; Moorhouse 1978, 8). In 1467 Sir John Howard purchased 44 great earthen pots for 3s 4d (Crawford 1992, I, 480). Sir William Petre of Ingatestone in Essex bought a number of pots and glasses in 1550 from Prentice, a potter at Stock in the same county. These purchases included a dozen cups for the butler for 12d, four pots for flowers for 2d, a cream pot and a cheese pan for 4d, two pots for the herbs for the parlour for 4d, four stool pots for 8d, two milk pans for 2d and two stew pots for 2d (Emmison 1964, 68; Brears 1971, 184).

The material of *Picherii* (pitchers) is rarely specified though the term was probably usually reserved for ceramic rather than wooden or leather vessels (see OED *sub* pitcher). In 13th-century household accounts pitchers were purchased in unspecified multiples (i.e. two or more) at totals of ½d, ¾d, 1d, 2d, 3d and 4d (Woolgar 1992–3, i, 134–5, 147, 149 and 159). In 1336 the burser of Durham Cathedral bought 80 earthen *pitcherii* for the feast of St. Cuthbert for 3s, under ½d each (Fowler 1899, 36). Bulk purchases, presumably at a discount, of many hundreds of pitchers for the royal household were recorded in the Close and Liberate rolls of the mid-13th century. These have been tabulated by Le Patourel (1968, table v) and indicate prices between 1s 2d and 3s 7d a hundred. However, 4500 vessels bought for 53s 7 ½d in Staffordshire in 1205 (*ibid.*), given the forms, are almost certainly wooden rather than ceramic. They comprised 4000 *scutellarum*, dishes or bowls, and 500 *ciffis*, cups (*Pipe 7 John*, 160). In general medieval drinking vessels appear to have cost no more than vessels bought for cooking and storage and were sometimes cheaper, perhaps on account of size.

My comments so far have been largely negative regarding the usefulness of ceramics to analysing medieval status. Yet I am not entirely convinced by Matthew Johnson's argument (see above, p. 102). On a theoretical level I would place less emphasis on the primacy of mentalities in explaining change. I would also argue for a less revolutionary origin for the materialism and proto-capitalism of the early-modern era, seeking some of its roots in the 'commercial revolution' of the high Middle Ages, whilst still stressing the truly revolutionary nature of the industrial, urban and corporate transformations of the 18th and 19th centuries (Courtney 1997a & b; see also Verhaeghe 1997). The evidence of Italian ceramics also suggests that what Johnson terms a lack of 'commodification' in ceramics was not a universal feature of 'feudal' societies. Certainly, there are indications in the documents which might point to the status function of some ceramics in Britain. A 1397 inventory of a Cambridgeshire knight lists four earthen pots valued at a 1d each but two more were valued at 6d each (*CIM* 6, 97).

In 1366, 125 earthen pots bought for the stew (bath) at Windsor Castle (Berks.), being palatially refurbished by Edward III, cost 8d each. These are also likely to have been luxury products rather than merely being large pots as suggested by Salzman (1952, 276). Spanish lustreware would be a possible candidate in both the above cases. Certainly, these prices contrast markedly with the prices of ½ or 1d paid for dairy pots in early 14th century accounts, mentioned above (p. 103), but were still only a fraction of the cost of contemporary brassware.

Perhaps the most cogent alternative argument to Johnson has been put forward by Frans Verhaeghe (1991; 1996 and 1997). He argues that the development of 'highly decorated' medieval wares in north-west Europe from the late 11th to 14th centuries represents market segmentation and competition with the lower end of the metal industries for a share of the luxury market. Verhaeghe's segmentation phenomenon is clearly closely linked to the wider commercialisation of medieval society. One aspect of this was the percolation of a monetary-based economy into the countryside. We should not forget that an increasing part of the ceramic market was composed of the rural masses. By one recent calculation, only around 15% of the English population in the early 14th century was urban (Britnell 1996, 115). The better-off peasant may well have been increasingly in a position to buy luxury goods at the bottom end of the price range, even before the Black Death (Dyer 1989, 151–87). Jan Baart (1993 and 1996) has suggested that in regard to the highly decorated Dutch redwares, albeit on subjective rather than quantitative evidence, little differentiation can be perceived between urban and rural sites in Holland. A 1349–52 inventory of Robert Oldman, reeve of Cuxham manor in Oxfordshire, included a number of brass pots, metal ewers and basins but no mention of ceramics presumably because of their low value (Dyer 1986, 169–71; Harvey 1976, 153–9). Robert Oldman, a manorial official, was among the economic elite of medieval peasantry. Nevertheless in a predominately rural society, aggregate peasant consumption should not be ignored as an economic factor and needs to be investigated further, especially by archaeologists.

My feeling is that in the high medieval period, ceramics probably do carry some social messages, though probably less developed than in the post-medieval period. However, a number of *possible* factors may still have limited their usefulness as sensitive status indicators, notably lack of product range and low relative costs compared to metals. A major problem is our lack of knowledge of the price differentials between many plain and decorated products. It is possible that even the highly decorated jugs of northern Europe were potentially affordable by a wide range of both the urban and rural populace. This is not to argue that different socio-economic and ethnic groups did not exercise distinctive consumption strategies. However, it is unlikely that archaeological analysis between or across whole settlements will prove very productive in this regard. Rather it is analysis at the household level which will almost certainly prove most fruitful (Deetz 1982). Thus any artefact assemblage which can be related to an individual household is automatically of national significance. It should be stated firmly that status is only one aspect of the social use of pottery and that I have concentrated upon it merely as an avenue to discuss various ideas and 'fly a few intellectual kites'.

CONCLUSION

Like all theories, consumption theory offers a set of abstract ideas for analysing and understanding the real world. In contrast to so-called 'common-sense' approaches, an explicitly theoretical approach has the merit of making one's intellectual baggage transparent. Nevertheless theory should be a tool rather than an end in itself. Theory is of little value to archaeologists or historians unless it can shed light on 'facts', whether of artefact assemblages or documents.

The new awareness of consumption will be an important factor in analysing past economies and societies. It is not a general cure-all, but it does offer us many new avenues of exploration. At the grand level it at last offers European post-medievalists a way to come to grips with the complex relationship of our colonial past and the development of economies and cultures in the homelands. At the more mundane, but no less important level, I hope I have indicated how important an appreciation of consumption is to understanding the development of both ceramic industries and the social interpretation of individual sites. To avoid misunderstanding, I would emphasise I am certainly not arguing that we cannot or should not interpret the social status of archaeological sites in either the medieval or post-medieval period. To do so, however, we need to take a holistic and contextual view, analysing individual artefacts as part of total material culture assemblages. Most importantly we need to take into account the varied constraints and motivations which affected the acquisition of goods by individuals.

The fact that the past and its evidence (archaeological, historical and graphic) has left a complex and confusing picture does not mean we should not try to read it. Social status is not always easy to interpret from ceramic assemblages alone, as several of the above-mentioned case studies demonstrate. However, intelligent and contextual analysis of ceramic assemblages can give us unique insights into past social and cultural behaviour. It is those moments that make ceramic studies, as well as archaeology in general, such an exciting and relevant discipline.

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*20 Lytton Road, Clarendon Park, Leicester LE2 1WJ, UK.

Résumé
Cet article tente de souligner quelquesuns des sujets théoriques principaux ainsi que des réussites pratiques de l'histoire de la consommation. Nous ne donnerons pas une histoire de la consommation céramique mais à la place nous essaierons d'adresser quelques points de méthodologie et de théorie utiles à l'interprétation de la céramique médiévale et post-médiévale.

Zusammenfassung
Dieser Artikel versucht einige theoretische Fragen und praktische Erfolge der Gebrauchsgeschichte zu erörtern. Es wird nicht versucht, eine umfassende Geschichte des Gebrauchs der Keramik zu geben, vielmehr werden eine Anzahl methodischer und theoretischer Fragen angesprochen, die für die Bestimmung mittel- und nachmittelalterlicher Keramik von Bedeutung sind.