

Discuss the contribution of material culture studies to the understanding of social identity.

The aim of this essay is to explore how useful material culture studies is to understanding societies which existed under Roman rule, especially those of Gaul and Britain. These provinces of Rome adopted Roman culture and used Roman objects for their own use, which could come under the heading of cultural bricolage, where new cultural items are obtained by attributing new functions to previously existing ones, however I shall address this later on in the essay. Woolf comments that anthropologists and archaeologists use the concept of culture as a way of making sense of the diversity of human societies that cannot be expressed simply in terms of biological variation. It is seen by many to be a more precise way of understanding societies rather than seeing how advanced or rich a society was.¹ Studying and understanding social identity can also be seen as an excellent alternative to relying on narratives written by Roman authors who were biased and wrote from a 'Romano-centric' position, and it also allows us to consider other elements, for instance class, status, gender, age, occupation, and religion.

Material culture can be defined as “the study through artifacts (and other pertinent historical evidence) of belief systems--the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions--of a particular community or society, usually across time. As a study, it is based upon the obvious premise that the existence of a man-made object is concrete evidence of the presence of a human mind operating at the time of fabrication. The common assumption underlying material culture research is that objects made or modified by humans, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, reflect the belief patterns of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and, by extension, the belief patterns of the larger society of which they are a part.”² Concerning Roman culture, Woolf defines it as “the range of objects, beliefs and practices that were characteristic of people who considered themselves to be, and were widely acknowledged as, Roman.”³ It is believed that every man-made object required the operation of some thought and design. Therefore it is the assumption of material culture studies that this thought is a reflection of the culture that produced the man-made objects. With this theory we can see, in some way, how a culture, which had no written records of its existence, lived. One advantage of material culture studies is that it is beneficial to social historians who wish to know about an entire group and not just the elites of a particular society. A useful definition of the term archaeology is that it uses “fieldwork and excavation, and the comparative study of sites and objects to compile information about the past...which can illuminate aspects of Roman life which were never recorded”. However it does have its limitations as it cannot achieve certainty as “all known sites and artefacts are merely a surviving sample of what once existed- and not necessarily a representative sample.”⁴ So in understanding identity we may be able to place these artefacts in context as we will know what particular objects are used for certain practices, for instance burial customs or forms of pottery produced.⁵ Jones defines cultural identity as “that aspect of a person's self-conceptualization which results from identification with a broader group in opposition to others on the basis of perceived cultural differentiation and/or

1 Woolf, G. 1998. *Becoming Roman. The origins of provincial civilization in Gaul.*

2 Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America*, 3

3 Woolf, G. 1998. *Becoming Roman. The origins of provincial civilization in Gaul.*

4 Greene, K. 1986. *The Archaeology of the Roman Economy.*

5 Greene, K. 1986. *The Archaeology of the Roman Economy.*

common descent.”.⁶

Concerning material culture, Pitts chose 12 areas of study, these were: “architecture, art, epigraphy (inscriptions in stone), faunal remains (animal bones), floral remains, funerary evidence, literature, monumentality, pottery, settlement (morphology and landscape archaeology) and small finds (portable material culture other than pottery)”.⁷ Epigraphic inscriptions allow us to observe how literacy spread through Gaul and Britain, along with helping us to trace an “outline of the cultural geography of Roman Gaul”.⁸ Woolf also comments that inscriptions are useful as they represent a wide range of Roman cultural customs which included political, cultic, and funerary practices. He adds to this by suggesting that inscriptions should be seen as attempts made by people to assert their identities and to show their achievements in terms of status.

Art and architecture are important as it gives us some insight into cultural ideologies, however this type of evidence only really survived if it was owned by the elites of the society, and the art and mosaics were only limited to this class, so it has its biases. Although it does have its uses as we can see how the adoption of villa architecture by the British and Gaulish tribes shows the acceptance and spread of Roman culture throughout the conquered countries.

Burial customs are very important as it is very much linked to culture as we observe a particular society's treatment and approach to their dead, thus giving us an insight into how identities are negotiated, along with recording the globalisation of social practices. Also Pitts comments that it was common for amphorae, drinking vessels and metal drinking utensils, usually imported goods, to be found in the tombs. This perhaps hints at the importance of drinking held by the society.⁹ One very good example of how cultures embraced and utilised Roman culture in funerary rituals is to be found in Woolf's 'Becoming Roman' where the Lingon wanted his altar beside his tomb to be made of marble from Luni in Italy, which is meant to be the best quality stone, Woolf comments that it is significant that the Lingon knew precisely where the best marble was to be found as it shows that he has become more culturally aware of the quality materials the Roman world has to offer.

Pottery is considered to be the least biased class of material culture, as Pitts states that it has the ability to “provide a bottom-up perspective of consumption practice at virtually all levels of society”.¹⁰ This is important as issues have been raised about trusting evidence which belonged to the elite class as it will not give a viewpoint from a sub-elite class' perspective, and so it is considered to be biased towards the elites. What pottery can offer us is an insight into a particular society's consumption habits, for example we can see that by the number of amphorae and drinking vessels, found in sites in Britain, that drinking and feasting were major customs before Romans invaded, but studies had shown that the production of this pottery is reduced after the invasion, Pitts suggests that it is because the practice of feasting was no longer able to affirm one's status as an elite.¹¹

Small finds, which can include things like swords, brooches, glass, are useful in providing an insight

6 Jones 1997, xiii

7 Pitts, M. 2007. The emperor's new clothes? The utility of identity in Roman archaeology.

8 Woolf, G. 1998. Becoming Roman. The origins of provincial civilization in Gaul.

9 Pitts, M. 2007. The emperor's new clothes? The utility of identity in Roman archaeology.

10 Pitts, M. 2007. The emperor's new clothes? The utility of identity in Roman archaeology.

11 Pitts, M. 2007. The emperor's new clothes? The utility of identity in Roman archaeology.

into all classes of a society, more importantly in the non-elite classes. Brooches can be seen as useful towards understanding identity as they could have several uses such as expressing age, gender, ethnicity and what class a wearer belongs to.

Literature can be useful, however there is the problem of it being written from a 'Romano-centric' viewpoint and has the potential to be very biased. According to Tacitus the Britons "who just lately had been rejecting the Roman tongue now conceived a desire for eloquence...the toga was everywhere to be seen...warm baths and elegant banquets." This is a good example of classical text which describes how Britons assumed the identity of Roman culture.

Using a case study such as Pompeii can help illustrate the usefulness of material culture studies, as this city was against Rome in the Social War, and was successfully besieged in 89 BC where it was turned into a Roman colony. From here we can see the imposed identity on the citizens in the city and how the culture was adopted. The official language of Pompeii was Oscan but was soon replaced with Latin. The temple was converted into a Capitolium where statues of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva were placed on a high podium. A temple to Venus was built along with an amphitheatre, a bath complex and a small odeon. So wholesale changes were made to the city of Pompeii and the identity of being connected to Rome was taken on.

From his analysis of Terrenato's book on cultural bricolage¹², Roman E. Roth has pointed out that the concept of bricolage could be useful for the "study of Romanisation processes at all levels of society".¹³ However he approaches Terrenato's book with caution as he states that it mostly focuses on the social identity of elites. An example outlined by Roth is the city of Volterra, where villa-style buildings were found with mosaics and columns, but these were only for the elites whereas the sub-elites of Volterra did not experience the same changes that the elites had as their own buildings were untouched, unchanged for centuries. Terrenato concludes his book with stating that it was only the elites who adopted and embraced the cultural and political lifestyle of their Roman counterparts.

In conclusion material culture can be an extremely useful tool in understanding social identity as Pitts argues in his paper, "The emperor's new clothes? The utility of identity in Roman archaeology", that despite the recent attention paid to identity, which has led to focus being shed on ignored themes such as gender and on classes of evidence like small finds and pottery, there is still a major focus on cultural identity. He suggests that there should be an equilibrium between focus on cultural identity and on other forms of identity like gender and religion. Material cultural studies allows focus to be placed on these themes, which have previously been ignored, equally. We must also acknowledge, as Woolf argues, that the transfer of Roman material culture does not automatically imply an associated transfer of Roman culture. There is also the problem of interpreting material culture as the analyst's viewpoint of identities and the use of objects could be very different to what people, who actually used them in the past, perceived them to be. There are many questions to ask pertaining the problems with identity and material culture, for example is how much can the spread of Roman material culture be equated with Romanisation? Or did Rome actually pursue a policy of Romanisation or not? There are many opinions based on these types of questions, but material culture in social practice can help identity to be

12 Terrenato N. 1998, The Romanization of Italy: global acculturation or cultural *bricolage*?

13 Roth. R. Towards a ceramic approach to social identity in the Roman world: some theoretical considerations

used as a way of understanding and explaining change¹⁴

14 Pitts, M. 2007. The emperor's new clothes? The utility of identity in Roman archaeology.