

Response Paper 3

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There are significant tradeoffs when choosing between examining multiple crafts together or individually. While interpretation of a single craft production cycle is less complicated than looking at it in the context of a greater production framework, it also does not give the whole image and must be recognized as such. The decision to look at multiple crafts is a difficult one, as the context is often lacking to make the analysis worthwhile, but it is also a decision which is critical to understanding a number of important questions about past societies. I will begin by looking at the study of a single craft and discuss how adding additional crafts will help or hinder the analysis.

Single craft studies are commonplace for a number of practical and theoretical reasons. While it is reasonable to believe that a single craft study should be augmented with the addition of other crafts, it is more difficult to actually perform this analysis¹. For one thing, it is difficult to locate sites which contain both the original craft and secondary (or covarying) additional crafts at which rigorous multicraft analysis might be feasible. Trying to locate a sufficient number of any one product in order to draw firm conclusions is difficult, let alone finding a large number of locations with two disparate objects or technologies present. In all but the most common crafts, this is infeasible. As such, the scope of questions to which multicraft studies are even practical is far smaller than that of single craft work.

Additionally, the interpretation of single crafts is easier than an amalgm of techniques. While not all production processes are distinctly separated between, say, glassmaking and pottery crafts, many of the questions which want to be known about a production process (Who used it? When was it used? Why was it chosen over other options?) can be answered quite simply using knowledge of just one craft. A good example of this is Shortland's work on cuneiform glass texts. Even while just examining a narrow scope — the practical considerations of Mesopotamian glass recipes — he is able to formulate some probing questions about the “rationality” of ancient production processes. If, in an attempt to better understand the context of glass production in Mesopotamian society, Shortland had looked for texts which referenced both lithic tool production processes and glass recipes, he would almost certainly

¹This reminds me of a common problem I have encountered in statistics. While a multivariate analysis, where many different outcomes are predicted simultaneously, often leads to more interesting results, it is horrendously difficult to interpret and has only come into widespread use among a small number of highly devoted individuals. When choosing what to examine, the ease of interpretation is a major factor, as without this additional contextualization an analysis means nothing.

still be searching. Single craft studies are by no means cursory, and very comprehensive studies of a single craft can make as strong, or stronger, conclusions than studies of similar scope for multiple crafts. As each craft has a great deal of rich details of the production process which can be studied, the depth of a single craft study will be potentially greater than comparative multicraft surveys.

However, it is critical to also perform multicraft studies when applicable. As Miller discusses in “The Analysis of Multiple Technologies,” it is impossible to fully understand the transfer of designs and patterns (of production, production process organization, and decoration) without some knowledge on both sides of the bridge. With this in mind, it is understandable that she advocate examination of “both the choices made and the choices not made” — by having thorough knowledge of two production processes, it is often easy to see where they could potentially have borrowed from one another and then examine archaeological evidence to see whether or not this indeed occurred. By looking only at one side of the divide, however, everything is conjecture and there is no guarantee that interesting questions be answered. A multicraft study can ask broader questions about the ancient values of a certain style or production technique than would be possible without examining the alternatives. A good example which Miller brings up is the use of stone polishers. By examining three crafts simultaneously and noticing that they all use the same quarry for their polishing stones, the researcher would be able to determine potential economic values and trade specialization. When, if examining only a single trade, a researcher were to determine that one craft’s stone came from somewhere, it says very little about the economics of the culture. It is these questions — the ones which are general to a society and show their values, as opposed to their abilities — which are best answered by a multicraft study.

Thornton states, when discussing the historical implications of his extraordinary refactory crucible, that “technical knowledge may appear and disappear many times before it is adopted on a wide scale.” It would be fascinating to examine this observation in the context of cross-craft designs, as they are ever shifting and evolving with and against one another. Is the existing context of a production process enough to identify its origins in earlier techniques? Can we ever fully understand the decisions and processes at work to produce the artifacts we examine? While it seems unlikely we will ever achieve anything beyond theories for the deep questions that face us every day, the use of multicraft studies as a tool for interpretation of societal values is something which should be savored and appreciated.