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**Crafting Complexity Craft and Social Identity, edited by C.L. Costin & R.P. Wright, 1998. (Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association 8.) Arlington (VA): American Anthropological Association; ISBN 0-913167-90-8 paperback, US\$15 (members), £22 (non-members), vii +182 pp.**

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### **Crafting Complexity**

*Craft and Social Identity*, edited by C.L. Costin & R.P. Wright, 1998. (Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association 8.)  
Arlington (VA): American Anthropological Association; ISBN 0-913167-90-8 \$15.00 Members; £22.00 Non-members, vii + 182 pp.

Stephen J. Shennan

Craft production has long been a focus of archaeological interest. Craft specialization has played an important role in many accounts of the rise of civilization and the state. Attempts have been made to reconstruct pre-industrial craft processes. As far as the craft products themselves are concerned, they have always formed the basic raw material of archaeological study and in recent years have been accorded a much more active role than before, as things that led their own varied social lives and had a profound impact on the societies in which they were used and circulated. The premise of this book is that it is now more than time for the makers of the objects to have a more three-dimensional existence, and to be granted the capacity for agency demanded

by recent social theory, as opposed to being regarded as pre-industrial robots churning out products specified by social norms.

If this is to be done, they can no longer be seen as an undifferentiated mass, but must be distinguished from one another in terms of such features as age, gender, power, autonomy and wealth, all of which can vary between craftspeople even within a single society and a single craft. One aspect of this process of differentiation is that simple oppositions, like that between attached and independent specialists, have to be abandoned. Another, perhaps paradoxical aspect, is that in some instances individual craftspeople come to be recognized as 'great artists'. This is particularly clear in Reents-Budet's discussion of the painters of Maya polychrome ceramic vessels. She points out that individual artists and their work can be identified not just by their painting styles, but also because their names are painted on the vessels, together with those of their patrons: 'In other words, here in the Late Classic period, the artist and his patron move from anonymity and join the art historical ranks of "immortal" creators' (Reents-Budet, p. 74). Of course, this sort of argument takes us back to the type of approach developed by Beazley for Classical Greek pottery, with its emphasis on connoisseurship in the investigator, on the one hand, and the genius of the producer, only apparent to the greatest connoisseurs, on the other. In the Classical field this approach is now condemned as naïve and reactionary, ideologically extremely dubious and anthropologically decontextualized. It would be a nice irony if such approaches as that adopted in this book, with its very contemporary emphasis on the active agency of craft producers, rehabilitated more traditional approaches. Of course, it is no accident that the Maya polychrome vessel painters who achieved these individualized identities were themselves members of the ruling élite: aristocrats could be recognized as individuals.

But the volume is not just about individuating the craft producers. In a rather different vein, Costin makes the point that crafts and their producers have been of central social importance because the crafts themselves often provide key metaphors for the organization of society as a whole, whether it is the association between spinning/weaving and feminine gender in Mesoamerica or the symbolic identification of kings as blacksmiths in parts of Africa.

The substantive papers in the volume explore a range of different aspects of the process of craft production and the identities of the producers.

The contribution by Lass looks at crafts in pre-

colonial Hawai'i. We learn that craft specialist roles had a strong hereditary element; that some crafts were male and others female — for example the making of chiefly feathered cloaks — while there was no strict dichotomy between independent and attached specialists. Some, like the feather-cloak-makers, were essentially attached, and probably worked full-time, at least for long periods. Others, like canoe-makers, were occasionally commissioned by chiefs. Others still, like bark-cloth-makers, probably worked part-time and some of their products were simply taken by chiefs as tribute or taxation. Finally, adze-makers were probably independent specialists.

Clark and Houston use early ethnohistoric sources from Yucatan for their examination of artisans and craft activity among the Maya and show how all-pervasive was craft production and its influence. In this context they emphasize that the distinction between craft production and subsistence production is really an unhelpful one: better, they suggest, to see a contrast between female and male work rather than craft and subsistence. Male and female work were complementary: female work involving everything around the house, male work everything away from the house. Spinning and weaving were the complement of male subsistence pursuits such as farming, fishing and bee-keeping. On the other hand, textiles were also the key resource linking subsistence with the political economy, since cloth formed a major part of demand for tribute as well as being a general medium of exchange.

Wattenmaker and Wright discuss craft production in different parts of third millennium BC Mesopotamia, emphasizing the wide variety of statuses for craft specialists. Like Lass, Wright indicates that the attached versus independent contrast doesn't work in practice here. Crafts were often hereditary, for example in the case of potters and foresters, but there was no straightforward equation between crafting and social identity because legal statuses were more important for people's identities than occupations.

Childs' contribution focuses on traditional iron-workers in the former East African kingdom of Toro. Some master iron-workers, head smiths of lineages, were able to gain local wealth, power and privilege, and some of these, as specialists attached to the royal court, achieved even more status and wealth. But knowledge was not just technical; much of it was esoteric knowledge associated with rituals, symbols and roles considered as at least as vital as more 'practical' skills.

Costin's substantive paper examines weaving

in the Inca empire. She argues that the identities of weavers varied considerably in terms of such features as gender, age and ethnicity, and that these different categories of weaver produced different types of cloth. In particular, there was a correlation between the amount of control exercised over the artisans and the symbolic significance of the cloth produced. Thus, relatively unsupervised women wove plain cloth but it was a category of sequestered women, recruited into state service in childhood and bound by tight restrictions on their behaviour, who wove the elaborate tunics of the nobility. By being defined as metaphorical sisters and wives of the ruler they were given the social attributes necessary to produce items of the highest significance.

Brumfiel's chapter on Aztec craft specialists also emphasizes that there was no unitary category of craft specialists but an enormous range of different statuses, albeit without the qualitative distinctions that Costin finds among the Inca. And indeed, she suggests that Aztec craft specialists had greater prestige than they did among the Inca and others, perhaps partly because craft goods were extensively distributed through the market system; furthermore, since the specialists sold their own products, they received personal credit for the goods they produced. Such differentiation without strong state control is also seen in Sinopoli's Vijayanagara example.

Finally, Spielmann's examination of crafting in 'middle-range' societies shows a different picture again, identifying three kinds of craft specialist. Where ritual performance is relatively open, skilled independent specialists are found, with the craft often inherited on family lines. Where ritual knowledge and performance are paramount in achieving status, ritual craft specialists are also likely to be ritual practitioners. In the last case, where ritual is only one means of obtaining position, ritual craft specialists may not be the practitioners but they are quite likely to be incorporated into contexts such as households which ritual practitioners control.

It is clear that the main lesson of the contributions to this book is that the concept of a unitary phenomenon of craft specialization is unhelpful and analytically misleading. In one sense, subsistence farmers are just as much craft specialists as anyone else and in Clark and Houston's Maya study male versus female labour is a better distinction. In complex states the enormous range of specialists and their social identities both within and between societies defies easy categorization. Interesting though they are, however, the studies never get much beyond describing the complexity of their specific situ-

ations and as a result the book comes across as a rather disparate collection of papers. What we now need to start doing is theorizing the basis of the newly identified axes of variation in terms of social and economic processes, recognizing the central role of material objects in all human societies.

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