Ariana Gunderson

**Ceramic Dating Response Paper**

A central focus of archaeological excavations is to accurately date finds and their associated contexts. With more precise data, archaeologists can conduct more thorough research, especially in the case of historical archaeology. Archaeologists can also more easily make connections between their research and other research initiatives with accurate dates for the data collected. The readings this week all take canonical dating practices a step further, through more precise dating practices or by expanding the possible uses for current dating methods.

Current dating practices focus heavily on ceramics, founded on South’s Mean Ceramic Dating (MCD) process. Using manufacturers’ records, archaeologists can determine the exact midpoint of a particular ceramic’s production. By averaging the midpoint of all ceramics found at a site, archaeologists determine an approximate date for that site.

Every article incorporates the MCD process into their discussion. Groover encourages using all diagnostic materials, not just ceramics, when possible, advocating for an MAD (Mean Artifact Dating) process as a more thorough alternative. Adams emphasizes the time lag between when a ceramic is made and when it is discarded must be considered when dating archaeological sites. Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh offer new applications for MCD information, especially in cases where the MCD information does not match dates arrived at through other methods.

I was somewhat surprised at Adams’ article, in that the concept of a time lag between the creation and disposal of ceramics seems extraordinarily obvious to me. Adams’ article is, however, extremely thorough in discussing the abundant evidence of this time lag. Adams notes that South, the creator of Mean Ceramic Dating, is an advocate of incorporating time lag in archaeological dating practices. He accuses other archaeologists of ignoring time lag when employing MCD methods in their research. The article is also thorough in its discussion of the causes of time lag, subdividing causes into minute and discrete groups: Set Effect, Heirloom Effect, Fashion Effect, and so on. In their article, Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh provide an example of this time lag. The article discusses Deetz’s excavation at Parting Ways in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where he identified a difference between the Mean Ceramic Date determined for a structure and the date found in historical documentation. Deetz concluded that the ceramics were older than expected because the ceramics were hand-me-downs; the structure was inhabited by freed black slaves, a group «known historically to have been of low socioeconoic status» (Turnbaugh, 91). Adams would identify this phenomenon as the Hand-Me-Down Effect. The main takeaway of Adams’ article is the importance of considering the lifespan of a ceramic when dating it, not only the mean date of its manufacture.

Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh utilize MCD and the concept of time lag in ceramic dating to analyze archaeological sites in new ways. One example they cite is of an excavation in which the calculated MCD was an improbable date for the site based on historical documents. The excavators drew the conclusion that «something [was] wrong» with the Mean Ceramic Dating formula. Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh argue that the time lag between the MCD and the date of the deposit are to be expected, due to pottery’s lifespan: most ceramics are not discarded immediately upon creation. The article then examines a long-form case study of an archaeological excavation in which time lag in MCD calculations provided insight into the site’s history. The case study centered on two structures at Fort Independence which were considered to be inhabited at the same time. The MCD of the structures differed, though, with one structure consisting of notably older ceramics than the other. Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh suggest that this difference in MCD between the buildings came from a difference in ranking between the structures’ inhabitants; the house with the more recent MCD housed officers and the structure with an older MCD lower-ranking servicemen. The officers were more likely to recieve newer ceramics, whereas the lower-ranking soldiers probably would have used hand-me-down pottery. Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh’s article essentially expands on some of the «Effects» discussed in Adams’ article, using the idea of time lag in MCD to draw new conclusions about an excavation.

Groover also stretches the possible applications of ceramic dating; in this article he discusses household cycles and their representation in the archaeological record. Households follow cyclical size patterns: they grow in number with the birth of children and shrink when the children move out or parents pass away. Groover argues that this increase and decrease in size is represented in the archaeological record. This assumption is logical: more people use more plates, cups, and spoons, and therefore break and discard more plate, cups, and spoons. Groover then examines a case study of the Gibbs House in Kentucky to discuss the archaeological evidence created by household cycles. In the case of the Gibbs house, the amount of ceramic material found in the excavation correlated to the size of the household. With a specific emphasis on houshold cycles, Groover’s article proposes a new direction for archaeological research and a new focus for information gathered on dated ceramics.

 These articles all push the envelope on traditional dating practices by expanding their possible applications. In addition, many of them express discomfort with the current accepted ceramic dating methodology. As I discussed earlier, Groover indicates that he senses an over-reliance on ceramics, encouraging the use of all artifacts in dating (MAD instead of MCD). His opinion is that in diversifying the sources of information, a higher level of confidence in a date’s accuracy can be achieved. I agree with Groover in that archaeologists should consider the dates from all finds, not only ceramics, when calculating the official date for a site or context. Adams brings up Stephen Pendery’s suggestion that researchers focus more of their research on how ceramics were traded and used, instead of the current emphasis on dates of manufacture. I agree that the whole life cycle of ceramics should be considered when examining finds from an excavation, but the knowledge gained from calculating MCDs cannot and should not be discounted. Furthermore, I am excited by the possibe avenues of research proposed by Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh. In their article, they suggest using data already collected more creatively, a worthy ambition for all archaeologists.