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Multicrafting Mania

Identifying multicrafting and cross-craft interactions allows archaeologists to trace connections among craftspeople, workshops, and the spread of technical knowledge. Since archaeological training tends to compartmentalize specialists by material and the degree of technical knowledge required to understand a single type of past craft production can be high, such investigations have been relatively rare, though recent interest is growing. This short paper will consider three articles devoted to case studies of multicrafting, all of which are New World examples.

The first, “A Holistic Approach to Pre-Hispanic Craft Production,” by Shimada and Wagner, examines a workshop site in Peru with a specific methodology advocated by the authors for the investigation of sites of production: the holistic approach. By this, the authors mean that they intend to examine the entire craft process from raw material acquisition to use of finished products, as well as to understand the larger social landscape in which the workshop and its craftspeople and products are situated. They believe that previous studies of craft production have ignored important evidence and connections between crafts. Their proposed holistic approach involves a broad regional and diachronic scope, focused excavation at sites of production, extensive interdisciplinary collaboration, and the integration of archaeometry, experimentation, and ethnoarchaeology. They apply this approach to a Middle Sican site with evidence of both ceramic and metal production. By examining the relative and internal physical layout of both the ceramic and metal production areas, as well as they evidence of the types of fuel used, the layout of various rooms, the remains of ceramic molds and other tools, the authors are able to elucidate much about the internal organization of each craft and the connections between the two. The metal workers required various ceramic components for their furnaces and tools, and the ceramic craftspeople were evidently imitating the sheen of metal with their blackware vessels. In many ways, the site at Huaca Sialupe is unusually ideal for a multicrafting study, but the precepts outlined in this article could be applied fruitfully to less ideal sites as well.

Randolph Widmer discusses another site of multicrafting at Copan in “Elite Household Multicrafting Specialization at 9N8, Patio H, Copan.” Here, Widmer investigates three closely associated workshop structures in a single patio complex. The author believes that all three workshops were devoted to the manufacture of elite goods, but that several rooms were more specifically devoted to elite ritual objects, while others manufactured primarily secular objects. Some of these rooms evidently collapsed in an earthquake, which preserved much of the original material in situ. However, the contrast in material between rooms which apparently suffered collapsed roofs in an earthquake and those that did not is striking. Widmer is perhaps too quick to distinguish between a more ritually-charged type of production in the collapsed rooms of structure 110B and a more secular type of crafting in structure 110C, which evidently did not collapse. As Widmer notes, the lack of de facto tools probably results from curation. So too, might the lack of unusual or “ritual” materials like those found in other rooms. Widmer does combine this observation on the lack of “ritual” material with the layout of the structure, which is apparently much more like a domestic structure than the other workshops, as well as the contents of the middens associated with each building and mortuary evidence. However, the patterns in the midden material could result from activities not considered by the author, so this set of buildings does still problematize the practice of comparing assemblages resulting from very different depositional processes. Still, if Widmer’s interpretation is correct, he has successfully identified two very different types of production in close juxtaposition at a single site, which has important implications for how archaeologists elsewhere deal with craft districts or quarters. Widmer also makes the important point that production of items in perishable materials like leather and feather does not survive archaeologically, which may limit our ability to identify correctly sites of multicrafting.

While the multicrafting identified at Copan occurred in apparently “elite” workshops (though with low outputs), other archaeologists have sought to identify multicrafting in non-elite settings. Kenneth Hirth, in “Intermittent Crafting and Multicrafting at Xochicalco,” investigates four domestic workshops at a pre-Hispanic urban center in Mexico. Through careful excavation, Hirth has identified several loci of obsidian production within each of the four workshops. In conjunction with the amount of material within each workshop, Hirth interprets the separate debitage concentrations as evidence of part-time production by several (likely male) craftspeople within each building. Based on the various geological origins of the obsidian flakes in each building, Hirth determines that each household was engaged in independent production and each was keyed into specific and separate networks of exchange. Hirth subdivides the type of domestic production at each household into several categories, including obsidian blade and blade tool production, obsidian lapidary production, obsidian biface finishing, poch opal biface production, and agriculture.

Hirth declares that “it was an unexpected surprise to identify multicrafting in all four domestic workshops. In retrospect, it should not have been” (87). Yet as I reflect on his article, retrospectively, I wonder whether the productive activities identified by Hirth at these four workshops should really be considered an example of multicrafting. Certainly, Hirth has done well in identifying the various types of products produced at these sites and has made some very important observations on the physical and social organization of production within these domestic workshops. Yet classifying “obsidian blade and blade tool production” as a separate craft from “obsidian biface finishing” seems somewhat pedantic. Most archaeologists would be unlikely to state that a potter who produces both cooking pots and fineware drinking vessels is engaging in multicrafting. Though differing in clay preparation, shape, and other important variable, the production of both types of pottery would draw on a similar set of skills, such as knowledge of local clay and temper resources, experiences with the potter’s wheel, and knowledge of fuel and firing temperatures, among myriad others. Similarly, although the biface preforms could have come from a different source than the unworked obsidian, similar skills and knowledge of material would be needed to produce a blade and to finish a biface preform. These skills could be easily transferred to poch opal biface production, and obsidian lapidary production is, perhaps, simply an easy way to utilize and benefit from exhausted cores. Lapidary production from tool production waste products may require some separate (though related) skills than tool making in the same material, but material procurement and knowledge of material properties and waste disposal requirements remains the same. The reuse of waste material in this way has much in common with the later concept of industrial ecology. Given the similarities in materials, techniques, tools, and waste disposal require for most of the workshop activities carried out at Xochicalco, should we really consider these all separate crafts?

While my instinct would be to answer this question with a flippant “no,” perhaps Hirth’s use of the term “multicrafting” here illustrates an important point. In reality, most production does involve some element of multicrafting, and many ancient craftspeople also engaged in agriculture out of necessity. Further, an object does not need to be made of composite materials to be the product of multicrafting; craftspeople may not have a single specialty, and even those with a single specialty may talk frequently and exchange techniques and tools. While I might still object to the extension of the term “multicrafting” to the assemblages described by Hirth (with the exception of the stucco processing in Operation H and, possibly, the lapidary activities) because the technical term “multicrafting” generally describes a situation in which different materials or fairly different production techniques are employed, I do think that Hirth has done important work in delineating the different types work done with obsidian and related technologies at Xochicalco and the relative levels of intensity. Archaeologists need to pay careful attention to the range of objects produced by craftspeople and the skills, materials, and infrastructures required to produce them, whether or not these fall under the heading of “multicrafting.”