

# Coins, Trinkets, Bits and Bobs

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Crystal B. Lake, *Artifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 272pp., \$35 paper.

**B**Y 1699, DR. JOHN WOODWARD, a prominent English naturalist, geologist, and antiquarian, had acquired a particularly curious shield as part of his antiquities studies. The shield was just over thirty centimeters in diameter, fantastically carved, and contained traces of gilding. In the ensuing years, Woodward became convinced that he had acquired an authentic bit of weaponry from ancient Rome—a view that Woodward felt was validated through his correspondence with a number of fellow antiquarians, historians, and other experts.

The shield—a buckler made of iron with a raised center circle—was elaborately engraved with what Woodward believed to be the Gallic chieftain Brennus’s attack on Rome in 390 BCE. “The scenes are so close to ancient accounts by Livy and Plutarch that Woodward thought the Shield had been made at the same time as the events depicted rather than as illustration of the text,” the British Museum’s catalog describes of the artifact today. It turns out,

however, that the shield wasn’t as ancient as Woodward supposed; it was most likely manufactured in the 1540s.

Almost immediately, Woodward’s shield—and the story of Woodward’s shield—quickly became more than the material, physical weapon. (“Woodward’s treatise on the shield, printed in 1713, prompted [Alexander] Pope’s satire of the same year on the follies of antiquarianism,” the museum’s catalog dryly notes.) The shield, and by extension, antiquarianism, became a bit of cultural shorthand, an allegory, and even punchline in the eighteenth century, thanks to the satires of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. In truth, to presume that the shield really was what Woodward supposed it to be—an artifact from Brennus’s reign—took a lot of Gaul.

This incident—indeed, this artifact—begs the question of what we ought to make of the artifacts collected, studied, and catalogued by antiquarians centuries ago. How did such artifacts shape the developing social and political theory of England during the eighteenth century? And do such antiquarian relics hold any similar cachet or explanatory power for audiences today?

**H**istory is full of stuff. Material, tangible, physical stuff.

This stuff—what we call material culture—shows the relationship between people and their things in how it’s made, how it’s used, and how it’s discarded (or not) over time. For centuries, historians, archaeologists, philosophers, politicians, and antiquarians have used such stuff to establish what they claimed was a “true” account of history. One of the long-held expectations about material culture is that it offers a set of historical texts—in the form of objects—that are implicitly free of agendas, biases, or politics. Stuff, such logic goes, is simply the sum of its material properties. Stuff is a primary historical source, thus a more reliable text for understanding the past than secondhand accounts. However, as was the case with Dr. John Woodward’s shield, stuff is never “just stuff.”

Because older material stuff—artifacts, really, in proper parlance—is decoupled from its original contexts, artifacts can easily be co-opted into symbols and icons of those that find and collect them. Artifacts become palimpsests, as different eras inscribe their own meaning onto this historical stuff, thus becoming relic things of the past twice or thrice over. As such, the meaning of the same physical thing—the same artifact—can be made, unmade, and remade over time.

In *Artifacts: How We Think and Write about Found Objects*, Crystal Lake argues that artifacts are not, in fact, agents of fact—an assumption that is generally put forward by contemporary archaeologists and anthropologists. Rather, she argues, artifacts are incomplete texts that invite us to fill in their histories with our own imaginations, because artifacts are fragmentary by their very nature. Artifacts are a bit more like inkblots, the argument goes, because they tell us more about the people describing them than anything else.

“Artifacts, in short, were objects whose states of fragmentation allowed them to enter into the categories of fact and art but also prevented them from settling into either category for good,” Lake offers in her introduction. “As such artifacts thrived in textual networks where they could be discursively interpreted and debated, but they eventually receded from the networks where objects were valued as either obstinate things or constructed entities.”

Lake takes her readers through a history of artifacts that people dug up or collected in England during the eighteenth century, focusing on coins, manuscripts, weapons, and grave goods as specific case studies. These specific types of artifacts, Lake argues, were “everywhere” in eighteenth-century England, influencing everything from natural history to the debates about the natural rights of the monarchy. Specifically, *Artifacts* examines such stuff through the writings of Enlightenment thinkers like Percy Bysshe Shelley, Horace Walpole, Jonathan Swift, and Lord Byron who, Lake argues, used artifacts to inspire speculative—and often contradictory!—reconstructions of history.

The term “artefactes” first appears to English readership in Sir Kenelm Digby’s *Two Treatises [on] the Nature [of] Bodies [and] Mans Soule*, published in 1644. In Digby’s assessment, “artefactes” were simply all things that were human made. What immediately follows from Digby’s treatise is the question of whether such “artefactes” had agency to act or influence; or whether they were simply the by-products of human actions. And this question of artifact agency remains highly debated and largely unanswered in a plethora of contemporary fields from art history to archaeology. From the beginning, however, and this is perhaps one of Lake’s main theses, “artefactes”—artifacts—have been political.



Figure 1 Dr. Woodward's Shield. Embossed iron buckler, French, 1540s. 14 inches diameter, 2.75 pounds. British Museum, OA.4710. Photo: British Museum.

Not only have artifacts always been political, they have also always been provocative—intellectually as well as socially. Although antiquarianism has long been out of academic fashion, the study of ancient artifacts was foundational to the conceptualization of a plethora of intellectual disciplines from paleontology to art history to contemporary archaeology. (The word “fossil,” for example, comes from the Latin *fossa* and simply referred—originally—to objects that were in the ground. Consequently, this could and did

include rocks, coins, “figured stones” with plant and animal impressions, as well as gemstones.) But more than anything else, Lake points out, antiquarian collecting was a great equalizing activity among people over centuries—from amateurs to professionals. The seemingly never-ending flotsam of coins, trinkets, bits, and bobs has offered a material record for humankind to interpret and re-interpret for millennia.

Lake contends that it's easy to dismiss the stuff of antiquarian collections because it's all rather overwhelming in its material

volume. “But we’ve forgotten about most of the old, dirty, rusty, moldy, and broken items—the small bits and bobs whose origins or backstories were unknown and whose worth or meaning was not self-evident—that once called out to so many people,” Lake claims. The “we,” however, is a bit ambiguous. For museum curators and collectors, provenance is a way of keeping historical memory; for archaeologists and historians, the fragmentary nature of objects is often taken for granted as the encountered or found state of a thing. Perhaps, the more interesting claim, that Lake alludes to, is the idea that these artifacts—any artifacts—are still very much alive and active as they continue to influence how history is told.

Historically, there has been a deep split between classical archaeology, historical archaeology, and prehistory. All three use artifacts to reconstruct lives and human interactions from the past—but what cachet artifacts carry and how artifacts are read as texts is deeply different depending on the type of archaeology (or anthropology, for that matter) at hand. Traditionally, artifacts from the Paleolithic, for example, are studied, utilized, and read very differently than Roman coins. Lake’s book reinforces the temporal divides between different types of archaeological inquiries; this is, one would venture to guess, in large part, due to the artifact classes that Lake focuses in on—historically, artifacts collected by antiquarians were more likely to be tied to “complex civilizations” of the past. “By testifying for themselves, antiquities seemed like they were capable of resolving the conflicts over the nature and history of England’s government that people themselves could not resolve,” Lake

theorizes. The question of where some of these artifacts ended up centuries later (natural or regional museums? private collections?) could push to extend the social and political lives of these artifacts even further.

Coins, manuscripts, grave goods, and weapons carry a neat duality of social and political theory of England’s long eighteenth-century; Lake is unendingly upfront and clear that this is the focus of *Artifacts*. It would be curious, however, to consider whether other artifacts picked up by antiquarians and natural historians—like Paleolithic handaxes or prehistoric artifacts made of bone—could be subjected to the same duality of social and political theory that Lake ascribes to the artifacts under her study.

**A** *rtifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects* is a smart, careful reading of how certain sets of objects in the long eighteenth century of England influenced developing social and political theory. Although then-contemporary historians and philosophers claimed that considering these artifacts as merely material objects insured that “these artifacts spoke for themselves” and offered an unbiased look a history, Lake’s analysis shows that artifacts and their interpretations are, as ever, products of their contexts.

Today, Dr. John Woodward’s shield has become more than just a historical anecdote—it’s OA.4710, bequeathed to the British Museum by John Wilkerson and currently on display in the museum. It’s a powerful reminder that the cultural history of such antiquarian artifacts is still very much being written. **A**