The Construction of Value in the Ancient World


Justin St. P. Walsh

This expansive volume is the outcome of a conference organized in November 2009 at the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles, by Papadopoulos, a Hellenist, and Urton, an Andeanist. Twenty-five papers from the conference appear here, representing a wide array of geographic and temporal specialties, including the ancient and medieval Mediterranean, Mesoamerica, Neolithic Europe, and China. At the core of the book is a difficult-to-define concept: value. The problem with pinning down precisely what we mean when we talk about value, let alone how value is “constructed” by people and societies, emerges repeatedly throughout the various contributions (although the problem may be greater than is acknowledged by some of the scholars here). Particularly evident is the fraught relationship between economic value and other kinds of value, just as there is tension between modern economics as a social science and anthropology/archaeology (e.g., D.W. Jones, Economic Theory and the Ancient Mediterranean [Malden, Mass. 2014]; see also P. Erdkamp’s review [BMCR 2015.04.33]).

The editors have organized the chapters into four sections (place value, body value, object value, and number value; a fifth category, art value, was folded into the others after the conference), preceded by an introduction. The length of the introduction (47 pages), which is much more than a summary of the articles that follow it, is indicative of the complicated nature of value and its treatment by writers going back to antiquity. Papadopoulos and Urton invoke theorists from Aristotle to John Stuart Mill to Karl Marx to Marcel Mauss in order to understand value; although in these cases, “value” seems mostly to be equivalent to “utility” and therefore to be more related to economics than the symbolic types of value represented by many of the papers in the volume. The articles by Papadopoulos (an update of a paper previously published in 2002 on the invention of coinage), Englund (on literary evidence for exchange values of silver for various goods in Ur III Mesopotamia), and Bailey (on how the distribution of small-value coinage at a Roman or Byzantine site such as Sardis can indicate the function of various spaces) are the ones most clearly related to economy and exchange. Modern economics only make an appearance in the introduction and in a strange excursus by Englund on progressive and regressive features of the U.S. tax system (429–30). It is perhaps worthy of note that none of the contributors is an economist or economic anthropologist—Graeber, whose book Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value (New York 2001) is easily the most-cited work in this volume, was invited to participate but apparently was unable to do so. Papadopoulos and Urton try to push the discussion further by seeing value as an aspect of culture, subject to negotiation and flux, and “suffused with [a] paradox” that arises from its relative nature (21), but a convincing and encompassing conception of “value” still seems just out of reach. Indeed, a concept that is general enough to fit all cases but useful for promoting greater understanding might well be impossible to achieve. Lacking this, the editors suggest instead the four “ways of thinking” about value that form the categories into which the book is divided. In this review, however, I cross those boundaries to identify some other trends that appear in some of the contributors’ discussions of value.

Some of the scholars represented here, for example, explicitly link the emergence of identifiable value systems in various cultures to the appearance of social inequality. Renfrew connects fungibility, measurement (counts or weight of objects), and burials in Neolithic Europe to understand how archaeologists can identify status claims made through objects with valuable associations, such as spondylus shells or metal. Burger similarly analyzes preceramic Peru and the use of objects to identify differences between individuals of different status. Systems of attributing value can themselves be used to identify differences, as noted by Cummins for Europe and the Americas at the time of contact. Such interactions between differing value systems could help to foster conflict.

There is also a significant amount of variation in the extent to which authors explicitly acknowledge or develop theoretical approaches. Chapman’s article on the meanings associated with places in Neolithic Europe and the construction of identity, Porter’s analysis of the classical Greek concept of aesthetics as an element in the identification of value, and especially Voutsaki’s excellent discussion of the placement of offerings in Mycenaean Grave Circle tombs are three examples that deploy theory in effective ways. Bray’s article concerning certain Inca drinking cups and bowls is practically unique among the papers here in posing the question of what “value” is, and it offers an appealing way of identifying it as “a process rather than a property” created through “interactions between subjects and objects and is thus
neither static nor a universal property or thing” (394–95; a reference to Arjun Appadurai’s work would have been welcome here). Flad’s study of the production of luxury items in first-millennium B.C.E. Sichuan is also strongly theoretical, focusing on how “negotiations of value are political”; but in discussing the use-life of objects from production to disposal, he lacks references to some important earlier work on this subject, such as André Leroi-Gourhan’s chaîne opératoire or Michael Schiffer’s natural and cultural transforms.

A few papers deal primarily with literary or epigraphic evidence rather than material objects. In addition to Englund’s contribution on Ur III cuneiform tablets (already mentioned), Alcock writes about the values evident in the choice by conquerors of Athens not to destroy its famous buildings and artworks, Kurke discusses the phenomenon of Greek choreia (group performances of song and dance) as “cultural values in action” (219), and Stuart unravels the inscriptions showing measurements of very long periods in the Maya Long Count calendar.

The categories used by the editors to organize the papers are understandable, but there are ways in which they can cause confusion (a point they acknowledge). For example, number value—closely related as it is to quantification and therefore clear definition (after counting, one knows how many objects are present)—is of a very different kind from the other kinds of values, which can vary not only among cultures but among individuals from the same culture. The other kinds of values can even resist any definition, remaining ambiguous. Bailey, for example, is self-aware about the difference between number value and the other kinds of value, which she seems to attribute to numbers’ “neutrality” and “ordinality” (my terms), while other kinds of values are “essentially, systems for organizing things” (516). But surely number values expressed through counts and ranks are also systems of organization.

There is an unusually wide range in the length of the contributions. At least four of the papers are between 26 and 32 pages; Kosiba’s chapter on how the Inca transformed the topography of conquered settlements as a way to endow them with new values (31 pages) is explicitly noted as a (thorough) summary publication of his dissertation. At the same time, a few examples (Alcock, Stanish, Donnan, Geary) are only seven–nine pages long, perhaps showing little development from the original conference presentations; these examples tend to be more conversational in style. These papers also tend to eschew theory; Donnan’s piece on Moche adornments stands out among this group as being essentially limited to a description of “things the Moche valued,” with little in the way of explanation of the processes or structures by which values were identified and attributed in that culture. Cooney’s discussion of mummification and burial practices in the Egyptian 21st Dynasty presents an interesting explanation for changes: rejection of traditional expensive grave offerings and elaborate coffins in this period, combined with much greater attention to maintaining the integrity of the corpse, is relatable to increased threats posed to burials by robbers. But this explanation is also not explicitly theoretical, and thus it is difficult to extend its lessons to other periods and places.

Given the size of this volume and the array of cultures (and languages and writing systems) represented in it, the excellence of the copyediting deserves recognition; it is a production of the highest quality. Both line drawings and photographs are numerous and reproduced perfectly, including color images, and they are clearly labeled.

In the end, although there is much of value (pun intended) in this book, it seems that some of the papers could have been edited for length in order to bring their focus more sharply to bear on the concept of value, while others could have been expanded to increase the significance of their arguments. The achievement of the book is to extend a vital and timely conversation that will only continue to engage archaeologists working in all places and periods. This volume stands as a microcosm of that conversation, including as it does specialists in a variety of cultures who have only rarely interacted with one another in such a way, which is to be highly commended.

Justin St. P. Walsh
Department of Art
Chapman University
jstpwalsh@chapman.edu

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