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The meanings and value of Late Antiquity

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STONER, J. 2019. *The Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects in Late Antiquity*. Leiden: Brill. Pp. xii + 132. ISBN 978-9-00438-687-7

If any period has struggled to find meaning and value, it is Late Antiquity. As the long-suffering third wheel to Classical Greece and the Late Republic/Early Empire, Late Antiquity is often seen variously as a culture and society of shifting meanings, identities, and values, and as an uninteresting period, only relevant for its relationship to earlier and later history. The field itself has fought to define and promote its own place within Academia.

Jo Stoner's *The Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects in Late Antiquity* focuses on the meaning and value of objects in Late Antiquity. Stoner grapples with many important theoretical questions about meaning, value, and behavior in Late Antiquity, alongside historical questions about Late Antique culture and social relations. More than that, by creating a rich and accessible set of narrative vignettes, she simultaneously contributes to what can only be described as the ongoing, perennial, discipline-wide effort to add value and meaning to the field of Late Antiquity and place it on an equal footing with other periods, both as a scholarly field and in the public imagination. While on the surface we are presented with the question of what was valuable in Late Antiquity, upon digging a little deeper, we see Stoner asking questions about what we mean by value. Digging even deeper we spot some of our own field's anxieties about its value and an effort to humanize the period and make it more accessible.

The value of Late Antiquity today

Scholars and instructors of Late Antiquity know that the field has traditionally been a harder sell than Classical Greece or Rome. In the minds of many students and the public it remains a time of esoteric religious disputes and rigid dogmatism that presages the disaster of the Dark Ages. While scholars of Late Antiquity have worked hard for decades to promote the value of the period, it is still valued low in comparison to other fields in Classical studies. Peter Brown's strategy was to direct eyes away from the bleak decline of the West to the aesthetically, spiritually, and culturally rich world of the Late Antique East, by creating something of a brand-new Classical period for ancient history.[1] Many scholars followed and expanded that strategy. Some tried new strategies entirely. More studies came out, more data was made available, and more students were trained in the field, which helped it to grow and attract attention. An important aspect of this was humanizing the period. For instance, much recent work has been about focusing on the everyday social and economic life of the period. Another strategy was to focus on continuity rather than rupture, to show how Late Antiquity fit into long-term trends. If Late Antiquity has become valuable now it is not because it is an example of high civilization; it is because it is another mere chapter of the human story, a period no less or more than any other, but one full of rich cultural life and engaging narratives. But getting that message out there is a challenge. Stoner's book continues that work: it promotes the value of this period to students and scholars through a study of value, by presenting a very human and relatable set of vignettes alongside more scholarly arguments.

In the conclusion of the book, Stoner uses a reconstruction of the domestic object world of a Late Antique house to synthesize her findings. Stoner is aware that this goes somewhat against the grain of archaeological practice, which prefers us to stick to limited, rooted, and specific contexts. But having built a theoretical foundation and extensive set of case studies, Stoner instead puts into words that part of the archaeological imagination that desires to

[1] Well-known, well-read, and seminal works in the 20th c. include Brown 1971 and Cameron 1993, just two examples among a rich and diverse bibliography. There are, of course, many more examples in this vein, including entire series such as Brill's *Late Antique Archaeology* (now a journal) as well as journals such as *Antiquité Tardive* and the relatively young *Journal of Late Antiquity* and *Studies in Late Antiquity*.

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travel to the past, to borrow from L. P. Hartley, as "a foreign country," and thus connect to the humanity that crosses the centuries. Archaeologists often do this in the field, in museums, and in their minds, but more rarely in an engaging and inventive way in writing. The reconstruction in the final chapter is about more than merely illustrating the conclusions of the earlier chapters; rather, it speaks to us as a reminder of a wider effort to define and develop the value of Late Antiquity itself.

The argument

This book is about objects and domestic life in Late Antiquity. The book's core mission is to demonstrate the multiple meanings and diverse scales of value that domestic objects held in Late Antiquity. The high-quality illustrations might fool you into believing it is simply a work of art history, but in fact it is very much a social and economic history, rooted in anthropological theory. Late Antique archaeology has become increasingly interested in interdisciplinarity, so this anthropological approach is welcome. Where fine art was once the focus of the field, now the archaeology of daily life reigns. Where political history once dominated, now social history is getting attention. Where philologists once focused largely on theological philosophies, ordinary religious practices now gather equal attention. *Domestic Objects* focuses on all three: anthropologically informed artifact analysis, social relations, and ordinary practices of meaning. Since much of the driving theory is anthropological, as an economic historian I found much of theoretical and historical interest for me in what is a relatively brief 106-page monograph.

Each chapter in sequence unfolds a little more of the overall theme. The first three deal with a specific type of meaning form (not material). After substantiating her point that these meanings are multiple and complex, using examples of different objects, Stoner switches to a specific artifact – the basket – to see how this one object carried all the meanings discussed in the previous chapters. While the introduction focuses more on the concept of object biography, which of course lays out the basic methodology used by Stoner, theoretical propositions of meaning and value appear again and again throughout the text. Unlike earlier and typical categorizations that are de rigueur in catalogues, informed by the material of an object (wood, stone, ceramic, etc.), or by function (artwork, tool), or even provenience, Stoner switches to the purpose and meaning of the object as a basic categorization. This allows her to carry out a refined comparison between meaning types and to bring the aspect of value to the forefront. Stoner's approach also allows the objects to suit multiple purposes and to hold multiple identities, what she terms complementary and "competing uses for objects." For example, heirlooms are closely connected to marriage and dowry but are not limited to a specific class of artifact or material.

Chapter 1 looks at heirlooms in the form of silver vessels, gold, jewels, family clothing, and texts. Stoner employs anthropological ideas that objects have the capacity to accumulate history, which contributes to their uniqueness, and that objects can store memories but must physically endure to do so. Accordingly, Stoner focuses on heirlooms and gifts that are not simple commodities such as food. Heirlooms have a gender component since they are connected to marriage and dowries. Although it is interesting to know that families reclaimed these matrilineal dowry heirlooms and that legally they could remain in the female line (12), one of the most interesting sections was on coin-sets and how relatively valueless coins could be transformed into something valuable by being turned into

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heirlooms as icons of power (15). Beyond these artifacts, evidence of inheritances and heirlooms is also seen in wills.

I found the distinction between heirlooms and "objects of age" such as spolia helpful. If there is a topic on which Late Antiquity has produced continual debate, it is the question of spolia, the consensus passing over the years from the idea that spolia were evidence of decline, to the understanding that they reflect creative recycling, and then to their role as evidence of shifting identity and values. One thought-provoking example Stoner mentions is Lullingstone Villa, where owners kept the heirloom busts of the previous owners, which in Stoner's opinion may have been a matter of social propriety (24).

Papyri also appear as heirlooms in this work (24), making one realize that their rarity in the archaeological record outside Egypt is a pity. Papyri had multiple values: as official and legal documents that constituted the family's ownership of wealth, as personal and informal texts (such as the charming case of a man named Ptolenaios holding on to his brother's schoolwork), as art and literature, and, for some, as simply personal poems. Even a letter from an official might be kept safe because of its association with fame and power. And yet, Stoner notes the deflating fact that much of this material was palimpsest and recycling and had little value beyond that. Nevertheless, the evidence shows clearly that heirlooms possessed many forms of value, intrinsic, sentimental, or personal, or some mix in between (20). For Stoner, value can be formal or informal; it is created by intentional curation or a by-product of a long life. Lower-value objects (economically) made for more informal creation of heirlooms, using ad hoc methods, whereas higher-value objects involved more formal creation (e.g., incised metal vessels).

Another interesting idea that Stoner discusses is how *regularity* of seeing creates a distinction between text and object as heirlooms. She offers a compelling argument that things which are frequently seen and those which are not frequently seen would have a different impact on memory and emotional weight. Stoner calls this "active" versus "passive" (26). It is reminiscent of Atkinson and Whitehouse's argument that high-frequency rituals are less emotionally arousing than low-frequency rituals, which are highly emotionally arousing, such that each serve different purposes and are present in different cultures at different rates.[2] Heirlooms which are hidden away would be seen less often but when they were seen, they would produce a heightened emotionality, invoke storytelling and long-forgotten memories, and even be a part of rituals of initiation (as the theory holds), in a way that perennially visible objects could not be.

Chapter 2 moves on to the category of gifts. Stoner talks about "how gifts have the ability to represent their donors in material form" (86) and evoke memories. The association of a gift with a moment in one's life course produces the subjective sentimental value. Working from anthropological literature, another interesting element discussed is how gifts create connections (87), creating social "relationships," even after death. Stoner takes a "reasonable fit" approach to reconstruction, creating a place of imagination. She argues that gift-giving was a common and valuable tool for maintaining relationships (95). It was both "meaningful" and "pragmatic" due to the necessary reciprocity inherent in gift-giving. Although Stoner's gift analysis is based on the work of Marcel Mauss, she moves quickly to the role of value in making the gift exchanges work, how they

[2] Atkinson and Whitehouse 2011.

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communicate messages about the donor and the recipient via taste, fashion, and generosity, and how they connect spouses, spouses and parents, parents and friends, and patron and clients.

We see the value of labor in handmade gifts (40). The question Stoner raises is important: how does the unique and personal manufacture of objects alter their value? Stoner creates a useful distinction, which is more effective for Late Antiquity than the modern distinction between handmade or non-handmade, since everything in antiquity was effectively handmade. The distinction is between gifts bought (i.e., existing already) and gifts already owned by the giver (also already existing) in contrast to gifts made specifically for the recipient. Objects manufactured or altered are, using Gell, "indexes" of their maker and share their identity and agency (41).

Chapter 3 addresses souvenirs. We see souvenirs of events, sacred souvenirs, the flask industry, and eulogiae. This chapter provides a good example for the question posed earlier about the value of Late Antiquity, of visualizing, humanizing, and reconstructing, because the concept of souvenir is so modern that it helps bridge us and them. Stoner's argument is that Late Antique souvenirs largely had the same range of functions as modern souvenirs. She asks the right questions: was their production standardized or at least generally conforming to established conventions that imply a recognizable genre of object? When objects are identified by location, does the product type matter, or their origins as souvenirs (55)? Does the origin value the commodity, the experience of making or moving it, or does it function as a recall device to create a memory/souvenir (56)? For instance, there is a spectrum of mass production and standardization in souvenirs. Just like with ancient ceramic vessels, homogeneity "convey(ed) a sense of authenticity" (53).

A large portion of the chapter is dedicated to pilgrimage, no small topic these days in scholarship. The body of evidence Stoner presents convinces that buying souvenirs was an essential part of the pilgrim's journey (68). Stoner points out recent evidence that shows pilgrimage was both pagan and Christian, part of a wider scholarship trend to expand the complexity of Late Antiquity and reopen the book on paganism. The picture Stoner paints is one of remarkable convergence of practices between pagans and Christians when it comes to the use of objects in the domestic sphere. Pagan household shrines, places for heirloom objects, gifts, and even souvenirs, evolved into Christian ones. Interestingly, Christians, to avoid seeming too pagan and to avoid the hubris of having sacred objects at home and not in the church, thought of them as secondary objects of veneration (71). These objects were souvenirs *as well as* objects of devotion, lending them even greater value.

Stoner demonstrates that some relics were prestigious but created from low-cost materials or requiring little skill and labor to make. Value was stored in the transferability of sacred power and the value of the memory of travel or the connection to exotic places ("extending the experience of visiting") (65). Relics possess metonymic function. A nice example is the reliquary box from the Sancta Sanctorum in the Vatican Museum (64), which contains mere stones, and was part of a culture of collecting stones and soil from the Holy Land. In this sense, they were low-cost, high-reward objects. Gifts from God were redistributed as charity. A traveler to Jerusalem might never return, so Maussian reciprocity would require a return gift or favor, something unlikely. Hence, Stoner notes, they built a "miraculous economy"– the donor received gifts in return from God, not from the recipient of the gift.

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The fourth chapter looks at basket making in monastic settlements and argues that baskets had "meanings other than their function and practical utility." Where scholarship has focused on function and utility, Stoner applies the same framework as in Chapters 1–3 to baskets. Before they had any connection to Christian communities, first, baskets were associated with femininity and women's labor. They were also associated with pagan rituals, especially mystery cults. They were both a symbol of plenty and actively helped produce abundance. In other words, they had already "accumulated layers of meaning" (80) by Late Antiquity, when they took on a host of other meanings (as heirlooms, gifts, and souvenirs). They were an economic activity, but they also created complex symbols and associations, justifying the monastic lifestyle.

At its simplest, basketmaking was an economic activity that functioned equally as a spiritual exercise. It was humble and it was meditative. When sold in the markets, baskets provided a small income to the community. Although an isolating and humble task, basketmaking also gave an opportunity for monks to visit the outside world to sell baskets. It was low in the hierarchy of tasks within a monastery, yet because even the powerful wished to be connected to the monks' humble spirituality, baskets gained a certain fame and importance. They came to be a symbol of the monastic ascetic identity and a source of blessings. When given as gifts, they were preserved even as heirlooms or bought and imbued with the same meanings as regular souvenirs, since they were connected to specific places and times as a "sample of the local material culture" and "local environment" of Egypt. They had practical, economic, and religious meaning and functions while simultaneously being heirlooms, gifts, and souvenirs. The examples in this chapter make for highly enjoyable reading, and the whole chapter is just the kind of reconstruction and narrative that humanizes a period such as Late Antiquity.

Chapter 4 is a wonderful encapsulation of a Late Antique practice that connects the mundane to the spiritual. The chapter presents a cultural image that is unique to the world of Late Antiquity: the holy man working on a basket with multiple meanings. But more than that, I would give this book to anyone I wanted to convince of Late Antiquity being a vibrant and relatable period. If we want to attract students to a richer view of Late Antiquity, there are many sections that help: on the occasions and festivals for gift giving (34–37), on the culture of relics (62–64), on the hanging of eulogiae over beds for health reasons (70), and the entirety of Chapter 4, outlining the spirituality of Christian monasticism using the lowly basket. Anecdotes and stories such as those about the jewel thief or Ptolenaios keeping his brother's schoolwork humanize Late Antiquity.

Value, in theory

The work is highly theory-based with an explicit "object biography" methodology, which allows Stoner to put humble objects in the same narrative as traditionally high-status objects – baskets alongside gemstones – creating what she calls a "broad spectrum" of value and use (92). Lower status, however, refers to the middling classes, not the lives of slaves or the destitute. High status means the very rich and the imperial family. Stoner uses a range of sociological and economic concepts such as "scales of value" and discusses "removal from commodification," "singularization," "symmetrically reciprocal relationships," "genealogical legitimacy," and "class emulation." She discusses intrinsic value versus sentimental value versus personal value (19). Her arguments overall present Late

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Antiquity as a time where "antiques" had value for more reasons than just decline and fall, and a real function in a world of family lineages and individuals making their way. She notes the negative aspect of gift-giving: it was not simply a positive and welcome expectation, but, much as today, people could receive unwanted gifts (and obligations) and have to give to people when they did not want to (36). In her discussion of transparency of value, she notes that the highly transparent gifts of imperial favor to soldiers were of low sentimentality until, naturally, soldiers became as interested in the idea of the object as a gift from an emperor, or the economic value of objects as mementos of events they took part in.

Stoner also raises some interesting points about transparency in value: for her, the (economic or sentimental) value of a gift is not always clear to those receiving it. She uses the example of large imperial donations to soldiers as an example of where the true value of the gift needs to be clear and understood but contrasts it with more modest gifts such as jewelry, where the exact value might not be known. This implies that when sentimental value is low, transparency is more important. Stoner's argument opens the interesting idea of how different gifts and social relations allow for varied methods of disclosing (or even concealing) value.

Nevertheless, a deeper dive into value with a more attuned understanding of value in theory would have helped. For a book which features value so prominently, it was surprising not to see an explicit discussion of it in the theoretical examination in the introduction. For instance, there is no wrestling with theories of value that have featured so prominently in economic history. Are these objects valuable because someone made them with skill and effort (labor theory), because they are beautiful, because they grant prestige and influence, because they create and maintain social relations, because they serve a function in ritual and religion and inter-generational stability (evolutionary), or simply because they served as mental storage of ideas and meanings? Where the dogmatist might demand that a single analysis choose a single form of value, Stoner chooses as fits the moment. At times, more attention to contentious theories of value would have been useful. For instance, Stoner states, "Borrowing from Marxist theory, we know value stems in part from the time and labour expended in the production of an object" (42). Marxist historians would be very surprised to learn that value comes "in part," rather than entirely, from labor. Non-Marxist economic historians would be surprised that "we know" value comes even partly from labor. To outline the scholarly history of theories of value more clearly would have given the work more value of its own. But maybe for object narrative and behavioral analysis this ambiguity has worth, itself an example of how the human mind thinks about objects and meanings in multiple ways depending on the moment, rather than using an a priori overarching theoretical approach that assigns a primary form of value for the sake of economic analysis.

A meaningful and valuable Late Antiquity

If there is one word that sums up the argument of *The Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects in Late Antiquity*, it is the "multiplicity" of meanings created between people and objects (98). Stoner's argument that these practices and objects deserve attention in Late Antique studies because of, not despite, the profound social change and mobility made the case for the value of the period. I would be curious to see more of this kind of historicization. Stoner's Late Antiquity was not a shadow of the imperial period, but in fact showed

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remarkable continuity in behaviors and practices, adding further strength to contemporary arguments that re-use of material and objects was not the product of technical and economic decline but a deliberate choice. Late Antiquity may still be a tough period to promote, but this is a good way to make it valuable.

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The best of all possible brothels

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LEVIN-RICHARDSON, S. 2019. *The Brothel of Pompeii: Sex, Class, and Gender at the Margins of Roman Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xx + 243. ISBN 978-1-108-49687-2.

What was the experience of the ancient brothel like for clients and for prostitutes? Was the business a profitable one for the owners? These are among the questions this welcome new book addresses in the context of the most extensive discussion we have to date of Pompeii's famous Purpose-Built Brothel (PBB).

Despite its importance, this edifice, with its Pompeian address of 7.12.18–20, has received intense scrutiny only in recent decades. This trend began just over a quarter century ago with a pathbreaking contribution by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, who called attention to its usefulness for the identification of brothels in general.[1] The monograph under review, with its wealth of both information and speculation about this building, marks a significant development and will no doubt encourage further scholarly attention.

What the book offers is above all a series of reflections on themes of distinct importance. Among the most prominent is the idea that the ground floor of the PBB is not just the best-attested but the sole example of a brothel surviving in our material evidence. Equally significant is the point that this was not a low-end establishment, as many believe, but operated as a more elegant house of courtesans. Yet other discussions of interest center on the lines of sight and erotic frescoes on the ground floor, as well as the function of the upstairs level. The single most valuable contribution of the book perhaps lies in its examination of the material finds, which treads new and promising ground.

[1] Wallace-Hadrill 1995, esp. 50–55.