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## An Archaeology of Colonial Identity: Power and Material Culture in the Dwars Valley, South Africa

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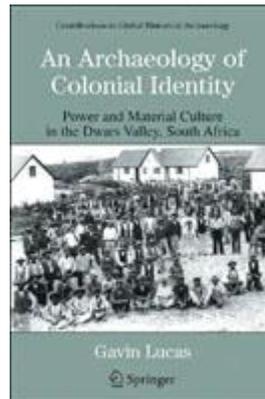
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## Book Review



### H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Gavin Lucas. *An Archaeology of Colonial Identity: Power and Material Culture in the Dwars Valley, South Africa*. Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology Series. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2004. x + 223 pp. Illustrations, maps, references, index. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-48537-4; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-306-48538-1.

Reviewed for H-SAfrica by Yvonne Brink, Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town.

Gavin Lucas begins this book by remarking that many ceramic shards found in Iceland, where he now works, are of the same Chinese porcelain as those found at the Cape, in Australia, the Americas, and the islands of the East. He sees this as a sign that globalization is not something that arrived with the advent of the new millennium, but a process that began with the voyages of discovery from the fifteenth century onwards. Globalization, then, along with its connections to colonialism and the rise of European capitalism, is a theme running through the book.

Lucas shows how matters important to the wider world both impacted and were influenced by events around an obscure river valley in a small Dutch colony at the southern tip of Africa. Ultimately, Lucas suggests that it is here, at the Cape, which he rather poetically and not at all irrelevantly calls a space between, that European capitalism really originated. The book is about his attempts to substantiate these ideas with reports on his work in the Dwars River valley in the district of Drakenstein, South Africa. Through archeological excavation, archival research, and oral histories (obtained from the descendants of freed slaves who lived there in the nineteenth century), he is able to slot themes such as colonialism and consumption in with the main theme of global capitalism. Lucas sees the construction and articulation of colonial identity as "the unifying force which binds them together" (p. 2).

The book is to be welcomed, first for the mere fact of its being a study in historical archeology, of which, in spite of a recent increase in number, we still have too few. Second, because he gives his arguments a firm theoretical base, although I feel that the chapter on theory could have come at the beginning rather than at the end.

The opening chapter sets out the author's way of working, and here there is much to be admired. First, Lucas is clearly appreciative of the inherent intertextual nature of writing, including his own, which he admits is heavily dependent on the work of others and is therefore as much an act of retelling as an originary event. But he is also aware that intertextuality permeates "all" texts and this enables him to look critically at archival and oral source material -- something not always taken seriously in archeological studies. He studies what he calls his "visual archive" -- sketches, paintings, photographs, and cartography--with the same critical eye as written and oral sources before effecting a match between image and text. Third, he sees his sources as produced in a particular context and tied in to the prevailing discourses of the time they were produced. There is a hint here that issues of language are important to Lucas, and I would have liked a more profound theoretical exploration of this idea. Central to his work is the belief that, in the structuring of identity, material culture is not simply a veneer but is "deeply and fundamentally constitutive" of it (p. 8); yet he also speaks of material culture as "discourse/materiality," rather than taking an older Marxist view which sees culture as discourse and nature as materiality. For Lucas, the construction of subjectivities is "both" discursive and material (pp. 187-188), and with this I wholeheartedly concur. Finally, he suggests that identity is inextricably linked with power, and material culture is a means of articulating power.

Using the excavated cargo of the wrecked East Indiaman "Geldermalsen" to exemplify the kinds of goods traded with the East, Lucas sees it as summing up the nature of European activity in the Indian Ocean during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the Cape becoming an ever more important stopover. It is not until the last chapter, after examining connections between Europe, South Africa, and Asia in terms of the movements of objects and people, that he explains his belief that capitalism emanated not from Europe, but from "an ambiguous in-between space created through European and Asian interaction" (p. 188). The question he asks is how this Cape, this in-between space, this halfway station and its architecture contributed to the understanding of the processes of global capitalism. The answer is that it is precisely because it "was" a halfway station that it enabled Euro-Asian trade to be instituted and to flourish. The desire of Cape people for the exotic, Eastern goods that they could exploit for articulating status and identity in a sense prefigured the modern consumer culture. The Cape thus played a significant role in the development of European capitalism and the transition from mercantilism to industrialism.

He also views the discovery of diamonds and gold in South Africa, during the nineteenth century, from the space-between perspective. For Lucas the development of colonial multinational mining companies contradicts ideas that capitalism emerged from Europe. His perspective emphasizes the importance of colonial space in the process. He sees the dispersed nature of multinationals, largely due to modern airfreight and the Internet, as meaning that companies are no longer defined by national boundaries and many are

relocating "back into the space of former colonies" (p. 192). Readers will have to decide for themselves whether the arguments are convincing enough to warrant a possible change in mindset, but here there is certainly food for thought.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) was no international giant, but in its own way, it enjoyed global mercantile importance. Lucas sees the placing of its monogram on almost everything it owned -- from buildings to plates and glassware -- as an attestation of corporate identity and as symbolic of the eye the Company kept on everything that went on at the Cape. As an example of the way the VOC exerted control, even over free enterprise undertakings, Lucas uses mining activities on the slopes of the Simonsberg in the Dwars River valley. Although the mine operated during the 1740s as a private concern with twenty-two shareholders, the three top directors were important VOC officials. Based, as it was, on a story (a mythical one as it turned out) told by a somewhat unsavory ex-VOC serviceman of a rich ore deposit in the region, it is not surprising that the project folded. The VOC participated in the gamble because of a desperate need for silver to pay for its trade goods. Lucas therefore sees this seemingly minor undertaking as an important link between the Cape settlement and the global trade network. The story of the mine is well told and epitomizes one of the strengths of the book: the author's ability to make what could easily have been presented as dry, historical data come alive by engaging with characters on the periphery of traditional history.

Archeological work at the mine, where two sites were identified, appears to have been minimal, consisting of a survey of the remains of nine buildings, excavation of what is considered to have been the main house on Site One, and a pick-up collection around the laborers' quarters on Site Two. Although there is a diagram of the sites showing the layout of the structures and their floor plans, there is no indication of exactly where the archaeological work was conducted, and there are no illustrations of this work. Comparing the sites at the Goede Verwachting mine and excavations at the Company outpost of Paradise in Newlands, Cape Town, Lucas finds "close similarities" in both the layout and the form of the buildings (p. 55). While one could agree as far as the layout is concerned, there is a glaring difference between the floor plans of the two main houses. The rectangular buildings of the earlier phases appear to be more or less the same, but later additions do away with the similarity. At Paradise, the traditional Cape Dutch pattern was followed with extensions added to the rear, thus preserving the important frontal symmetry. At Goede Verwachting, the symmetry of the facade was devastated when a large chunk of the "stoep" was cut off, to build on of a strong room at the "front" of the house. There could hardly have been close resemblance between the final phases of the Paradise and Goede Verwachting dwellings, and this major difference should be foregrounded and discussed rather than smoothed over for the sake of continuity.

Lack of discussion of a thorny issue is also a problem with part of the third chapter, where Lucas deals with contact between settlers and indigenous Khoisan people. Confronted with the question of whether there "really" were two separate indigenous groups -- Khoi herders ("Hottentots") and San or Soaqua hunter-gatherers ("Bushmen") -- Lucas laments the lack of archeological research covering the contact period and explains that he is forced to rely on historical studies. These he accepts rather too uncritically. What he calls "some

ambiguity" (p. 69) about the indigenous groups is, in fact, a matter of serious and ongoing archaeological debate. The opinions of prehistorians Andrew Smith and John Parkington, based on their thorough archaeological research, as well as the counter-arguments of others such as Karim Sadr have a very definite bearing on historians' notions of the fluidity of relations between the groups. Smith and Parkington are not convinced that the interchange between hunter-gatherer and herder lifeways was as uncomplicated a process as some historians make it seem. The existence of the debate, at least, needs to be brought to the attention of readers.

The rest of this chapter is an overview of changing patterns of landownership in the Dwars River valley, showing how differentiation developed within the settler community and how this manifested itself in material culture. Again, Lucas tells a delightful story, this time of the two farming families, De Villiers and Van As. The former were Huguenot settlers, the latter of mixed Dutch/slave descent. The Van As family disappeared from the scene after becoming particularly large landowners, leaving the De Villierses to exemplify the history frequently occurring at the Cape: development from lowly beginnings as cereal farmers and livestock owners to wealthy, slave-owning wine-producers. It is an absorbing story, well told, about people, places, and the things they owned and used. The "werf" and buildings of the De Villiers farm are the focus of Lucas's archeological work.

Two of the standing buildings are dated from 1821 and 1832, and Lucas sees them as representing the zenith of the owners' aspirations in material consumption. We are given a diagram of the "werf" in the nineteenth century, and a separate eighteenth-century reconstruction. The precise locations of Lucas's archeological efforts are not, however, drawn into the site maps. This, as well as the separation of the diagrams, makes it difficult to envisage exactly what Lucas did, especially as the verbal description is somewhat confusing. We do not know how many test pits he dug or where they were dug. There are no illustrations of the archeological work -- not even a photograph of an excavation or a section drawing of a test pit. There is little that we have come to expect in a work that calls itself "An Archaeology." While Lucas laments the lack of archeological work on which to base his own, I cannot help feeling that if he had made more of his own archeological work and been more meticulous in presenting it, this book would have gone considerably further in rectifying this lacuna. A follow-up study giving more archeological detail might be welcome.

Having first described an eighteenth-century gentrification process at Goede Hoop, in keeping with that of other studies, Lucas takes the progression through to include British influence in the nineteenth century. Two late nineteenth-century buildings reflect the trend. One of these is very small and he suggests this was a "retreat." The other is a dwelling clearly reflecting British influence, but with retention of the idea of the old Cape Dutch "voorhuis" in a very large dining/sitting room behind a narrow "English" entrance hall. What I find particularly interesting about this building is that it gives a hint of the possible complexity involved in what, no doubt, must have been a gradual dissipation of the symbolism tied up in the Cape Dutch building tradition accumulated during almost 150 years of VOC rule. This is a topic awaiting in-depth research. British influence included values: for example, new ideas about respectability and the separation of work from home.

The already evident differentiation between poor and wealthy was extended to include gender and class, as separation between male and female spheres of activity became more marked.

As a lead into a chapter on slavery, Lucas attributes all Cape prosperity to the fact that slave labor was readily available. If the suggestion is that the Cape could not have achieved what other colonies achieved without slaves, I foresee debate resulting from this issue. Overall Lucas's overview of slavery at the Cape marks a high point in the book. I do have problems, though, with the way he lightly speaks of "Creole" slaves and blithely accepts the opinion that Afrikaans was a creole language "developed as a language between slaves" (p. 122). Perhaps more reading is required here. The origin of Afrikaans has been, for many years, the topic of in-depth research by scholars of international repute both in South Africa and in the Netherlands. The result is a great deal of debate and a variety of opinions -- most of which do not accept the creole hypothesis. The idea that Afrikaans is a creole language has also been tested and rejected by academics whose speciality is creole and pidgin languages wherever in the world they occur. I suggest Lucas familiarize himself with this work.

Lucas mentions several valid reasons for the difficulties archeologists experience in identifying a Cape slave signature in the historical record. The most important is the fact that separate living space for slaves, such as the slave quarters on American plantations, were rare at the Cape, so there are very few locations where archeologists can expect to find "slave deposits." Lucas has little to say about slave resistance besides mentioning that opportunities for resistance were limited. Here, again, I feel he could have relied less on the work of historians (such as Robert Shell and Kirsten McKenzie) and more on archeological work, for example, Martin Hall's elegant and sophisticated use of James Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts" for understanding slave resistance.[1] One begins to ask the niggling question of whether this kind of work is not fuel for the fires of critics of historical archeology who look upon it as merely a "handmaiden to history."

Nevertheless, there is much that is positive in the chapter on slaves. For instance, instead of simply looking at their lot after arrival at the Cape, Lucas looks back to their lives before European enslavement; that is, he examines slavery at its African and, to a lesser extent, Asian sources. This side of the story is not often told -- perhaps because it is a story not a lot of people want to hear. Here we do have discussion of debates ensuing from the meager research undertaken thus far. An important issue is whether there is justification for seeing indigenous African slavery as absorptionist (slaves are assimilated into the owner's household and culture), whereas European slavery is the greater evil because it is capitalist (slaves are commodified). His overall (and probably correct) conclusion is that European slavery was worse because it acted as a spur to indigenous slavery in that it brought additional wealth, status, and power to the chiefs, thus breaking down an existing ethics of African slavery.

Returning to the archeology of the Goede Hoop farm, Lucas compares the building he has interpreted as a nineteenth-century slave lodge to the very early eighteenth-century lodge excavated by Anne Markell at the governor's farm Vergelegen. Once more, he sees

similarity in the layout, describing the slave lodge at Goede Hoop as situated behind the main house, "squeezed out of sight . . . along with the garbage" (p. 139). Similarity is again debatable. I do not see the Vergelegen lodge as "squeezed behind the main house." I am also not convinced that the Goede Hoop building was for slave accommodation. The building is only about one meter shorter than the one at Vergelegen, where there were over one hundred slaves. Goede Hoop would have had vastly fewer slaves, although we are not told how many. A 1736 probate inventory of the wife of Abraham de Villiers lists seven male slaves and one female (p. 93). Lucas notes that generally "slaves lived in small groups of less than ten on individual farms. Only 1 percent of slave owners had more than fifty in the mid-eighteenth century" (pp. 125-126). There is no argument for Goede Hoop falling within the 1 percent, although Lucas does point out that more slaves would have been purchased with the increasing wine production during the nineteenth century. I believe that more research is necessary before the building can unequivocally be interpreted as exclusively a slave lodge.

What I can agree with is that slaves would have perceived the landscape differently from the gentry. For the latter the landscape would, as Lucas says, have been constituted as a material inscription of family relations and alliances -- a landscape of property and status articulated through kinship. Slaves, on the other hand, would have been much more aware of the fragmentation of the landscape into plots and farms with spaces between and land outside of private ownership. Lucas sees these as spaces into which they could at times escape the power network which held them constantly captive and where they could, perhaps, fashion a sense of identity different to that prescribed by the owners. Lucas argues intriguingly that the derelict mine, and its abandoned buildings, would have had even more to offer than the natural bush for temporarily escaping control and exploring an alternate sense of identity.

The last part of the slavery chapter is devoted to the post-emancipation period, taking the story through into the twentieth century. Largely, it is the story of the founding and flourishing of the Pniel Mission Station under the auspices of the Apostolic Union. It is a fascinating tale, pieced together more than adequately from the source material, including interviews with present day residents. As opposed to the leading, land-owning De Villierses, we are introduced to the Cysters family who, in their own way, attained a status position in the village and hold it to this day. Interestingly, Lucas informs us that the Cysters's house is somewhat different than the rest and resembles the Cape Dutch style more closely than do the others. This section marks another high point in the book, not least because it devotes most attention to the material culture. We are offered a reasonably comprehensive general overview of house styles with diagrams indicating changes through time. There is also a closer scrutiny of one individual "werf."

Most Pniel residents are descendants of slaves, or connected to slavery in some other way. One particularly interesting observation is that in earlier years, they were loath to admit to their slave connections, but this has changed. They now reminisce more freely and retell stories told by grandparents and other older people. It is possible that Pniel's incorporation into UNESCO plans for preserving the slave heritage and the establishing of a slave route for tourists is playing an important part in this change. But the village itself has played a

major role too. From the beginning, it allowed freed slaves to experience family life differently, since they could bring up their children in their own way in their own homes without interference from owners. They could keep livestock and grow crops in their own gardens. Many continued to work for the farmers, assuaging the latter's concerns about labor shortages after emancipation, but now they were paid, worked on a day-to-day basis, and were free to leave if they so chose.

As Pniel flourished and grew, so too did developments in the land-owning section of the valley. Farming on an industrial scale began in earnest when large farms purchased by C. J. Rhodes were taken over and extended by two successive giant corporations. The second, Anglo-American, is still operative in the valley landscape, now transformed by encroaching capitalism. Today company executives occupy old Cape Dutch country manor houses once dwelt in by local farmers.

The chapter ends with Lucas's views of the beginnings of Apartheid under the British. It was during British rule that the seeds for the policies of Apartheid were sewn as they were an extension and adaptation of pre-existing strategies written into the 1910 constitution of the Union of South Africa. Similarly, the early segregationist laws of 1913 and 1923 are seen as tied to British imperialist ideals. It was against this background that Pniel was later designated a "rural Colored area," in the midst of agricultural land designated "white" (p. 173). Here, too, Lucas offers us food for thought.

The final chapter contains a theoretical discussion and introduces stimulating new ideas. Lucas shows how landowners grown wealthy through agricultural production, in which slaves played an enabling role, forged a high-status class of landed gentry. Largely through architecture and cultivated land, this superior identity was put on display so that landowners could be "seen" to be an elite. Underclass laborers, who had no wealth to display, built a different identity based on their affiliation to the church and its high moral values, on their freedom (albeit as laborers), and, later, on a certain pride in their slave heritage and the fact that they survived and overcame the demeaning difficulties of the past to emerge as worthy human beings. Ironically, it is the very slave heritage that they now seem keen to display through participation in the Slave Route Project, through genealogical research, and through writing and recounting memories from the past.

In the theoretical discussion, Lucas returns to the question of globalization and summarizes the way in which events in the insignificant little valley tied in with the larger themes of colonialism and capitalism. He explains how studying such small places can contribute to "a global historical archaeology" (p. 178). While critical of some earlier forms of Marxism, he nevertheless still takes a predominantly Marxist stance as he discusses the intricately interwoven web of relations between race, class, and gender. These are big issues, which Lucas tackles boldly, leading the reader on to re-confront some of the controversies surrounding these matters in a global as well as a local context.

As though saving the best for last, the final few pages offer us a gem of material culture studies. Wanting to keep the newly discovered mineral wealth of the Transvaal in British hands, British forces embarked on a failed raid that triggered the Anglo-Boer Wars at the

end of the nineteenth century. It is against this background that Lucas tells the engaging story of a republican coin that a soldier relative brought back to England and which was subsequently framed, thus gaining the status of a badge. While contemplating the badge, Lucas explains how mass production of "small things" reminiscent of the buttons, broken bits of pottery, and food remains studied by James Deetz, can give us insight into past lifeways.[2] For Lucas it is postcards; cigarette and other collectible cards; and a whole variety of everyday objects decorated with emblems that became bound up with ideas of colonialism, "empire," and what it meant to be British. The ideology embodied in material things was extended to cover almost all walks of mundane life and to include the whole British value system as well, so that ideals such as the respectability of the clean British home became part of it. For me, Lucas is at his most eloquent here, as he offers readers this clear and concise illustration of the close connection between values, identity, and material culture.

The book, then, has its ups and downs. Besides ending on a high note, it is dotted with provocative ideas requiring careful reflection. It is certainly worth reading, provided one can overlook the rather skimpy archaeology, too much uncritical reliance on the opinions of others regarding important issues still under debate, an over-reliance on historical as opposed to archaeological information, the nuisance of not having a list of illustrations, and shoddy editing. Astonishingly, the first sentence reads: "This book is the based on the work of many people" (p. vii). After reaching thirty-six errors, I gave up counting. Several names are occasionally spelt incorrectly, but "Meerrust" is always printed "Meerust." We find "Hendrik" for "Hendrik" (p. 29), "Shrire" for "Schrire" (p. 69), and "Kelson" for "Kelso" (p. 215). The rest comprise a variety of types of errors too numerous to mention. As far as apostrophes are concerned, I get the impression that they were randomly added as an afterthought -- just to have some. This is unfortunate and simply not good enough for an expensive book in a prestigious series.

### Notes

[1]. Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994); Kirsten McKenzie, *The Making of an English Slave Owner: Samuel Eusebius Hudson at the Cape of Good Hope 1796-1807* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press in association with Centre for African Studies, 1993); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); and Martin Hall, *Archaeology and the Modern World: Colonial Transcripts in South Africa and the Chesapeake* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[2]. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977).

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