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Prehistories of Commodity Branding

by David Wengrow

Commodity branding has been characterized as the distinguishing cultural move of late capitalism and is widely viewed as a historically distinctive feature of the modern global economy. The brand's rise to prominence following the Industrial Revolution and the attendant shift of corporate enterprise towards the dissemination of image-based products have been further cited as contributing to the erosion of older forms of identity such as those based on kinship and class. However, comparisons between recent forms of branding and much earlier modes of commodity marking associated with the Urban Revolution of the fourth millennium BC suggest that systems of branding address a paradox common to all economies of scale and are therefore likely to arise (and to have arisen) under a wide range of ideological and institutional conditions, including those of sacred hierarchies and stratified states. An examination of the material and cognitive properties of sealing practices and the changing functions of seals in their transition from personal amulets to a means of labeling mass-produced goods helps to unpack the interlocking (pre)histories of quality control, authenticity, and ownership that make up the modern brand.

The insights to be gained from comparing episodes far separated in time are reciprocal ones: knowledge of the Urban Revolution informs interpretation of the Neolithic Revolution, and vice versa. . . . Might not historians of the Industrial Revolution, in their turn, profit from learning of these earlier transformations?

—Andrew Sherratt

Approximately two decades ago Gary Hamilton and Chi-kong Lai (1989) remarked upon the absence of branded commodities from research in the social sciences. The context of their observation was a study of consumer culture in late imperial China, in which they traced a complex system of commodity branding back to the beginning of the Sung dynasty in the tenth century AD. They concluded that “the symbolic values embedded in market economies need not be construed as being simply a function of capitalist production or a result of a consumer psychology created by factory owners manipulating symbols for their own profits” (p. 268). The aim of this article is to explore the implications of this statement for current understandings of the Urban Revolution in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) during the fourth millennium BC, thereby extending the study of commodity branding far beyond its current scope into phases of social and economic transformation known primarily from archaeological sources.

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In doing so I expand upon Hamilton and Lai's critique of the notion that commodity branding is a unique feature of Western capitalist societies. I depart, however, from the alternative equation they draw between brand economies and conditions of high social mobility. Rather, I suggest, systems of branding address a basic paradox in the functioning of economies of scale and are therefore likely to arise (and to have arisen) under a wide range of ideological and institutional conditions, including those of sacred hierarchies and stratified states. In making this case I build upon Frank Fanselow's (1990) definition of the “brand economy” as a distinct type of transactional system based upon the circulation of substitutable (i.e., standardized) goods and labor. Systems of this kind have emerged quite frequently over the past six millennia of human history, often in the absence of private control over the means of production. I also develop Raymond Williams's (1980[1960], 190) observation that in considering the organized investment of core symbolic values in mass-produced goods “we are looking at attempts to express and resolve real human tensions which may be crude but which also involve deep feelings of a personal and social kind.”

The substance of my argument derives from a reconsideration of the role of sealing and labeling practices in prehistoric and early complex societies, specifically those of the Middle East. Recent work by Colin Renfrew (2001, 2005), which reviews early uses of material culture in defining processes of commoditization, makes no mention of such practices, despite their attestation in Bronze Age societies from the Indus Valley to the Aegean Sea. This is symptomatic of a widespread tendency to view specialized forms of product

labeling in pre-capitalist societies as pertaining solely to the realm of administration. Sealing practices, in particular, have been studied either as a means of reconstructing the organization of ancient bureaucracies or from an art-historical perspective which focuses upon the iconographic analysis and stylistic classification of seal designs. Accordingly, systems of sealing and labeling remain at the margins of current debates concerning the role of commoditization in the emergence of complex societies (e.g., Rothman 2000).

Here I argue that systems of commodity branding involving the combined use of seals and standardized packaging played a central role in the emergence of the world's first large-scale economies. Specifically, I propose that the existence of such systems should be incorporated into current models for the unprecedented expansion of urban cultural networks in Mesopotamia and surrounding regions during the fourth millennium BC, an episode often referred to as the "Uruk expansion." This view is not developed in outright opposition to the accepted interpretation of sealing devices as administrative tools. Rather, it is argued that seals operated simultaneously across these spheres of activity, acting as components of bureaucratic systems and as charismatic signifiers of product identity the efficacy of which was rooted in their earlier use as personal amulets. Comparative analysis of more recent branding practices suggests that these functions may necessarily be intertwined, since the enchanting properties of branded commodities are grounded in guarantees of quality, which in turn are based—paradoxically—upon the disenchantment of production.

Branding and Modernity: Setting the Terms of the Debate

In defining the broader terms of this study it is instructive to compare the research context of Hamilton and Lai's essay with that of today. At the time they were writing, economic historians were becoming increasingly interested in consumption as a lens through which to understand the emergence of modern social formations in Europe and America (e.g., McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982; Marchand 1985). In this they were preceded and influenced by two important strands of research, based respectively in Germany and France: the social philosophy of the Frankfurt School (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno 1996 [1944]) and the semiotic analysis of advertising images (e.g., Baudrillard 1968, 1970). Both implicated branded commodities in the decline of modes of subjectivity based upon kinship and class relations, arguing that mass consumption had created a new set of normative identities that tied consumers to the exploitative conditions of capitalist production.

Today, as Craig Clunas (1999) observes, an unrivaled capacity for consumption has become the leitmotif in histories of European modernity, occupying a place once reserved for production and technological progress. Commodity branding, in turn, is studied from a variety of theoretical, disciplinary,

and applied perspectives, including that of a specialized body of academic research on consumer culture and marketing (for a detailed retrospective of the past 20 years, with references, see Arnould and Thompson 2005). Brand names have also become a focus for grassroots activism against monopoly capitalism, generating a new critical literature that includes best-sellers such as Kalle Lasn's (2000) *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*™ and Naomi Klein's (2000) *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (for further references and critical discussion see Holt 2002). Heightened critical interest in commodity branding, however, has only served to reinforce its association with "late capitalism" and Western societies (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Goldman 1994; Wernick 1991; Carrier 1995, 99–104). Even analyses of contemporary non-Western branding practices such as those compiled in Joseph Tobin's (1992) *Re-Made in Japan* tend to take the rejection or adaptation of Western marketing strategies as a guiding concern rather than pursuing historical continuities—of the kind described by Hamilton and Lai—in local or regional contexts (cf. Tse 1996).

A possible objection to a more catholic approach to commodity branding—one which steps outside the framework of wage-labor capitalism—is that commerce (along with, by extension, consumer choice) was tangential to the organization of pre-modern economies (Polanyi 1957). For adherents of this view some tyranny or other can always be invoked to explain the uniqueness of modern consumption patterns: the tyranny of gift exchange, of sacred economics, or of the hierarchical state. Yet there are many reasons to doubt this evolutionary scenario, some of which arise from the recent experience of mass consumerism itself. The intractable consumer who rejects choice in favor of conformity, who chooses brand loyalty over brand novelty, is an undeniable part of the modern scene (Miller 2001). Frederic Jameson (1991, 266) goes so far as to suggest that "market as a concept rarely has anything to do with choice or freedom, since those are all determined for us in advance"; we select among commodities, "but we can scarcely be said to have a say in actually choosing any of them."

As Williams (1980 [1960], 180) pointed out, the relationships and sentiments that marketing companies seek to cultivate are comparable to those that legitimate hierarchical social forms, amounting to a form of "psychological warfare" in which the price of defeat may be pollution and exclusion from society. Susan Buck-Morss (2000, 203) observes that the attempt to conflate consumer choice with modern notions of political democracy comes up against a further, simple obstacle: "the fact that those who have the most need of commodities have the least money to buy them" (and for a revealing account of the relationship between mass consumption, top-down notions of citizenship, and government policies on urban planning in post war America, see Cohen 2003).

In pursuing the practice of commodity branding back to the beginnings of urban life in the Middle East, this article builds upon an established set of comparisons between the former episode and the emergence of industrial capitalism in

Europe. The very term “Urban Revolution,” as first applied to Mesopotamia by V. Gordon Childe (1936), was defined in relation to the Industrial Revolution of recent times. Current anthropological models for the precocious development of urban societies there during the fourth millennium BC (notably Algaze 1993) derive from the work of development economists and world-systems theorists, whose own models were designed to account for the global spread of capitalism since the sixteenth century AD. In extending these comparisons to the development of commodity marks and labels, I use types of data that are conventionally divided between specialized fields of epigraphic, art-historical, and archaeological study. Only by trying to put these strands of evidence back together can we begin to see both what is distinctive about early forms of commoditization and how, in some respects, they foreshadow more recent developments.

Two Commodity Labels: A Preliminary Comparison of Ancient and Modern Forms

To bring these issues into clearer focus I begin by comparing two small objects (figs. 1 and 2). Other than the fact that both are designed for attachment to some other object—one by adhesion, the other via a perforation in its top-right corner—they may appear to have little in common. The object in figure 1, which measures about 8 cm across, was found in the subterranean part of a royal tomb at Abydos in southern Egypt and dates to around 3000 BC (Petrie 1900). Inscriptions on the lower left-hand section of its surface denote a specific quantity of “finest oil of *Tjehenu*,” a region in the vicinity of modern-day Libya and therefore exotic to the Nile Valley,

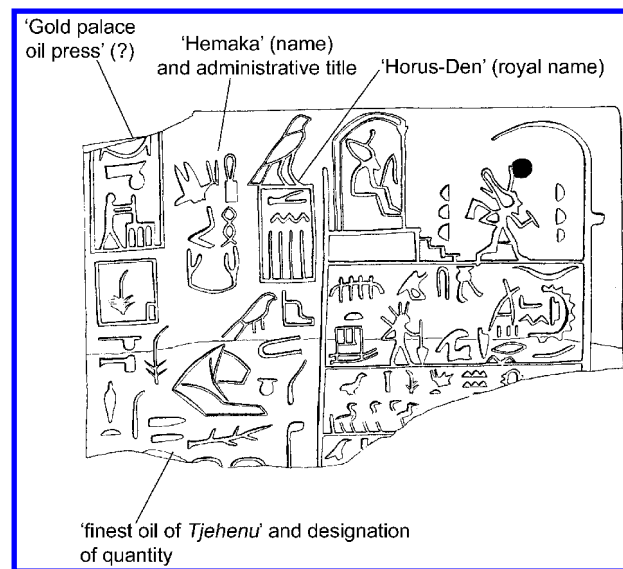


Figure 1. An ancient Egyptian commodity label (after Petrie 1900, pl. 15.6).

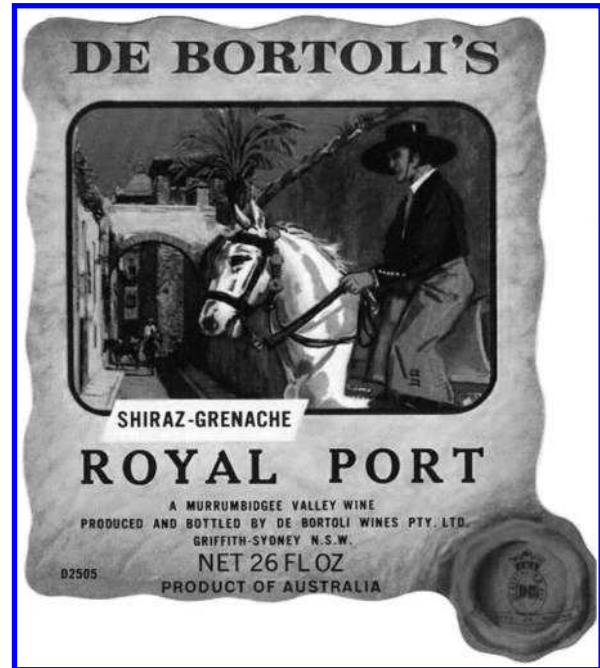


Figure 2. A modern Australian commodity label (courtesy of De Bortoli's Ltd.).

where the label and its associated goods were deposited as part of a royal burial rite. That ritual also involved the carefully administered sacrifice of human life and many other material goods on a ceremonial scale (Wengrow 2006, 218–58).

Like the modern wine label of figure 2, this perforated wooden label conveys its message through a combination of written and pictorial elements, as well as certain formalized divisions of space. Among the captioned inscriptions is the name of a particular oil press, which finds its parallel in the statement of provenance on the wine label, perhaps acting in a similar fashion as an additional mark of quality. The top register on the right side of the Egyptian label contains a scene which is an abbreviated version of more monumental forms of royal display. It depicts a ceremony of renewal of the kind later enacted in the Step Pyramid complex of Djoser at Saqqara, during which the king's body circumambulated territorial markers signifying the extent of his political domain. The hook-shaped sign that encloses the pictorial registers indicates that they form the name of a year, constituting part of a larger series of annals that demarcated time according to designated royal actions (Redford 1986).

The core message of both the depiction and the ceremony might be rendered as something like “Kingship gives life to the land.” It is significant, however, that this message was conveyed not through writing but through images and ritual action. In the early stages of its development the Egyptian hieroglyphic script, like the scripts of other early states, was not designed to convey the syntax or grammar of spoken language in visual form (Houston 2004). Rather, it was used,

much as on the wine label, to notate restricted elements of language such as the names of people, places, and things articulated through their non-sequential arrangement within the overall composition and through their relationship to pictorial symbols and objects.

Modern brand labels tend to have a similarly attenuated relationship to spoken language. We can read on a company web site or on a secondary label placed on the reverse of the wine bottle that De Bortoli Wines is in origin a family business with a venerable lineage, established through the enterprise capitalism of Vittorio De Bortoli, an Italian immigrant to Australia. The core message of the brand that now bears his name is that “wine should have a sense of regionality and be an expression of the soil in which it is grown.” This is a quality referred to by manufacturers as *terroir*: the notion of a particular environment as a repository of cultural values and life-bestowing forces that combine to form a unique product (Beverland 2005). The web site emphasizes that De Bortoli products, though made in Australia, are rooted in Mediterranean soils and customs, embodied in the history of the De Bortoli family, to which a special section is devoted. As with the Egyptian label, ideas of fecundity and ancestry are being extended from cultural landscapes and human beings to the things they consume. The primary label on the bottle manages to imply some of these values while making little direct use of written language.

There is also a more specific similarity between the two labels. The modern wine label carries an image that alludes to the practice of sealing; specifically, a wax seal is depicted as though it had been stamped over the surface of the label as a mark of authentication. A relationship to the practice of sealing can also be detected in the upper part of the Egyptian label, which carries the official names of a king (Horus-Den) and an administrator (Hemaka) part of whose title is written with a hieroglyphic sign that also depicts a cylindrical seal. Hundreds of impressions from actual cylinder seals carrying these two names, written in an identical manner, were found within the same tomb, rolled onto the clay stoppers of wine jars and other containers deposited there *en masse*. Like their modern glass counterparts, the ceramic wine jars to which these names were attached were produced in large quantities to standard sizes and volumes and typically bear little or no surface ornamentation (fig. 3).

Clearly these two labels were created by very different means and for very different audiences. One bore writing at a time when literacy was a new and highly restricted cultural resource, developed by and addressed to an inner elite as well as to the gods; the other was made for a society in which the majority of people can read and have access to such products. One was carved by hand, but its repertoire of images includes signs that were mass-produced through the practice of sealing. The modern label, by contrast, is itself the result of mass production but carries an image that nostalgically evokes sealing on wax as an earlier mode of mechanized image making. One relates to commodities ceremonially deposited in a sac-

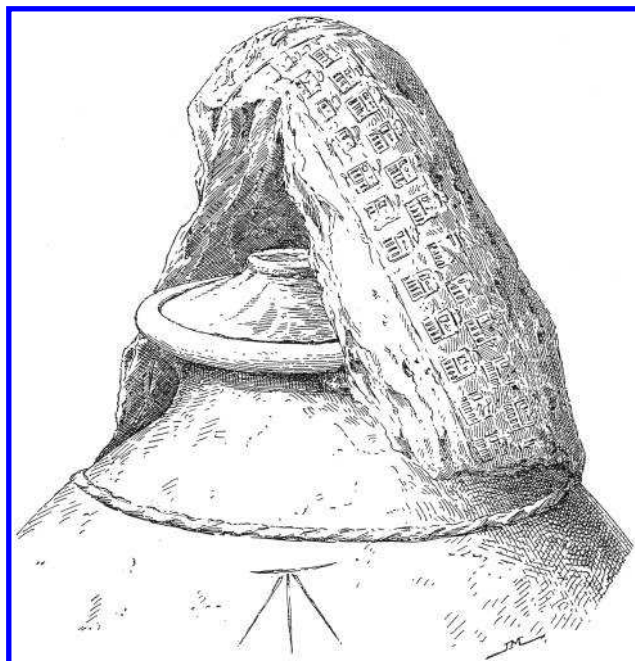


Figure 3. Section through the mud sealing of a First Dynasty Egyptian wine jar, impressed with a royal cylinder seal (Morgan 1897, 166, fig. 527).

rifical space, while the other signifies products intended for the shop shelf and domestic consumption, although modern wine of an equivalent value to Egyptian “royal” wine is just as likely to be stored in subterranean vaults and only rarely, if ever, consumed.

In view of the tendency to divide evidence for early writing systems along functional lines—following a Weberian dichotomy between bureaucracy and charismatic display (e.g., Postgate, Tao, and Wilkinson 1995)—it is noteworthy that neither of these objects can be satisfactorily classified as either administrative or display-oriented in function. Both carry information of bureaucratic value as part of a wider aesthetic code, which could be extended in scale and medium to encompass more obviously display-centred practices such as respectively the decoration of a temple wall or a section of advertising hoarding. Given that they are separated by approximately 5,000 years and are products of very different regimes of value and consumption, what seems intriguing is the similarity between them and specifically between the visual codes they employ to convey strong positive messages about the goods with which they are associated: messages of exclusivity, authenticity, and potent exoticism.

Approaches to Commodity Branding: From Semiotics to Global History

An exhaustive attempt to extract general cultural principles from the semantic content of brand signs was undertaken by

the philosopher and semiotician Jean Baudrillard (1968, 1970, 1981). Modern forms of advertising, he pointed out, do not follow robust rules of communication analogous to those of a language system. Brands signal products, tap into emotions and desires, and answer and direct personal needs, but they never amount to more than a system of classification, forming hierarchical categories of objects which, as he puts it, “tyrannically induce” particular categories of people. The objects of modern mass consumption therefore constitute a “repertoire” with no “syntax” and their consumption a process of signaling through which individuals are able to recognize one another as belonging to one or another category and status. Baudrillard saw modern branding practices as a form of cultural alchemy unparalleled in earlier social formations. The brand sign, he argued, brings together in an ephemeral material form two conflicting psychological tendencies: the drive for short-term gratification and the long-term need for transcendence—what we might call, for brevity’s sake, the “*Coca-Cola is Life* effect.” The intended outcome is a short-lived transcendence of self that can only be sustained through further acts of purchase and consumption, so that commodity branding ultimately seeks to define a whole pattern of social and economic dependency (cf. Holt 2002, 87).

For Baudrillard, the ascendance of commodity branding as a mode of socialization marks a rupture with the past, rendering obsolete the codes and rituals that maintained earlier types of social order. Yet, as I have indicated, it is precisely their attenuated relationship to the workings of natural language—upon which he placed such emphasis—that renders modern commodity signs so comparable in form and structure to much earlier techniques of product identification such as those associated with the emergence of the hieroglyphic writing system and sacred kingship in Egypt. Such similarities prompt us to rethink the potential for a comparative approach to commodity branding. Rather than hindering such an attempt, the fact that commodity brands do not communicate in a language-like way means that the basis for comparison must shift away from linguistic models and towards a more encompassing analytical framework (cf. Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Carrier and Heyman 1997).

More recent studies explore the particular historical and social conditions under which modern brands emerged. Erika Rappaport, for example, highlights the origin of major Victorian tea brands in public fears about the fraudulent and unhygienic practices of Chinese merchants. The practice of selling tea in pre-weighed and sealed packages was introduced by John Horniman in 1826 as an alternative to the locally blended varieties sold by small retailers, and its initial outlets were chemists’ shops rather than grocers’. The value of the Horniman brand was cultivated both through romantic images of rural production in pre-modern China and by emphasizing the sophistication of mechanized packaging techniques, “thereby suggesting that the local ‘ancient’ mode of production now served and was subservient to world markets” (Rappaport 2006, 136).

The growth of long-distance trade and a related concern with the purity of imported comestibles are similarly central to Richard Wilk’s (2006) account of the adoption of branded goods in nineteenth-century Belize. During this period Parmesan cheese, Yorkshire hams, Madeira wine, and a bewildering variety of other European products were shipped in increasing volumes to the Caribbean, where their consumption was central to the social aspirations of British settlers for whom they represented a civilized way of life. Successful brands were sold in sealed and standardized containers labeled according to provenance, and the commercial profile of packaging companies sometimes rivaled that of producers. Such was their cultural capital that canned British lobster was sent to “a country where the waters swarmed with the fresh sort,” locally made tapioca was rejected in favor of “cassava starch . . . extracted somewhere distant in the empire, then cleaned and packaged in England,” and Jamaican condiments traveled to packing plants on the British coast only to be shipped back to the Caribbean for consumption. Towards the end of the century more aggressive branding campaigns appealed to growing national sentiment, deploying “images of triumphant white people and defeated, cowering or exaggerated natives” on packets of biscuits, tobacco, and coffee (Wilk 2006, 97).

Structural Characteristics of “Brand Economies”

An ethnographic perspective on the emergence of “brand economies” is provided by Frank Fanselow’s (1990) study of a commercial town in Tamil Nadu, southern India, where the coexistence of outlets specializing in branded and non-branded commodities provides insights into their different transactional properties. Fanselow argues that these properties are best understood in terms of a contrast between substitutable (i.e., homogeneous) and non-substitutable (i.e., heterogeneous) goods.

In what he terms the “bazaar economy,” in which goods are predominantly heterogeneous, unbranded, and ungraded, consumers have few opportunities to assess quality and quantity before purchasing. There is an asymmetry of knowledge that works to the advantage of the distributor and is often reflected in the physical layout of shops, which are designed more for storage than for display. The acquisition of stock is in the hands of specialized brokers whose success depends upon “their ability to pass on goods of uncertain provenance, dubious quality and indeterminate quantity to each other” (Fanselow 1990, 257). Since quantities are not standardized, each sale involves procedures of weighing and measuring, which are open to human error and manipulation. Relations of personal trust and loyalty are therefore critical to the expansion of trading networks, and their most enduring source is kinship. This combination of factors imposes structural limitations on the expansion of such economies, just as the culture of secrecy adhered to by successful bazaar traders constrains their ability to attract outside investment. The logic

of the bazaar economy is not particular to any cultural group or type of society but arises from the ambiguous and variable nature of the commodities transacted. The same kind of rationality is to be found, for instance, in European markets for second-hand merchandise—goods which are no longer “brand” new (p. 262).

Branded commodities—homogeneous, standardized, and substitutable—generate very different flows of information among consumers and producers, and these in turn favor particular sorts of trading structures and procedures. Because the quality of such goods remains stable within a given genre, consumers are able to exchange knowledge about the merits and deficiencies of particular products. This allows for the growth of information networks based on consumption practices along which other kinds of social knowledge may flow. Product value is generated not by the withholding of vital information but by the display and dissemination of knowledge about commodities. Shops selling branded goods in southern India tend to be open-plan, sometimes spilling out onto the street to show their stock. Their owners invest in advertising boards, logos, printed wrapping paper, and sponsorship of public events such as temple rituals. The physical point of distribution becomes a “central-place institution” rather than being epiphenomenal to a network of personal contacts.

As Fanselow (1990, 260–63) points out, institutions dealing in branded goods are also better able to absorb new sources of labor than their bazaar-type counterparts. Sealed packaging obviates the measurement of individual products at the point of purchase and also reduces opportunities for manipulation prior to exchange. Since personal loyalty and trust are generally less essential to the conduct of business, the labor involved in preparing, packaging, and disseminating commodities itself becomes increasingly substitutable. Management of goods and personnel may therefore develop into a specialized operation based on their reduction to numerical values. This in turn may generate an open-ended pattern of economic growth as transparency of accounting encourages further capital investment. In combination these structural properties of the brand economy foster a tendency towards large-scale expansion and centralization of resources of a kind that is neither feasible nor rational for trading systems based upon non-standardized goods.

Commodity Branding as Material Culture

In focusing upon the transactional properties of commodities, Fanselow gives only brief consideration to the material processes involved in creating branded products: “Once the buyer is able to identify the provenance of a commodity, it is in the producer’s interest to protect the integrity of his products against deceptive manipulation by intermediary traders. Brands are therefore always associated with the prepackaging and sealing of products” (1990, 253). Seals, however, can

themselves become subjects and surfaces for representation, just as the process of applying and breaking them is often a fertile source of cultural metaphors.

An anthropological approach to the materiality of branded goods might usefully begin with Igor Kopytoff’s (1986, 64) observation that “the production of commodities is . . . a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must not only be produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing.” Paradoxically, however, his own influential discussion of the “cultural biography of things” gives little attention to actual processes of commodity marking. Rather, it endows social relations with an almost magical power to alter the status of objects and the status of human beings who have been objectified in certain, often traumatic ways—as if, simply through a shift in collective consciousness, a gift could become a commodity or a slave be transformed into a fully emancipated citizen despite the emotional legacy and indelible marks on the body left by the experience of slavery (cf. Kopytoff 1986, 64–65).

In a short study called “Branding and the Scars of Memory,”¹ the historian Lowell Gudmundson offers a very different account of the commodity stage and its long-term impact on the formation of identities. He envisages a disturbing genealogy for the modern practice of commodity branding, rooting it in the enforced marking of slaves’ bodies with signs of ownership. “Far from an antiseptic marketing term for today’s consumer society,” he notes, branding has become an obsession among certain people of African descent in the Americas, mapping out “both a shared communal history and, paradoxically, a way to honour its victims, their own forebears.” By anchoring the concept of branding in a traumatic physical process enacted on a body that has already been socially devalued, Gudmundson seems to suggest something more general about the material and cognitive processes involved in creating commodities. One way of beginning to explore these processes is to take literally some of the guiding metaphors that feature so often in discussions of commodity relations—metaphors of stamping, labeling, and sealing—and see where they lead in terms of long-term cultural development.

Cognitive Aspects of Sealing Practices, Ancient and Modern

Mass-produced replicas of seal impressions feature on labels for a wide range of modern commodities (e.g., fig. 2). Including such an image within or around a logo conjures a fiction of object marking as a unique and personal act, something that is in reality incompatible with the scale of modern mass production but may nevertheless be extended, as an illusory presence, to the product-sign as a whole. Perhaps this modern use of seal imagery to evoke nostalgia and authenticity is in part responsible for obscuring the fact that sealing

1. Available at http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/latam/branding_eng.htm.

constitutes the earliest known technique for mechanically reproducing a crafted image.

The seal is to surface imagery what the casting mould was to the production of three-dimensional objects. Nevertheless, sealing practices are strangely absent from Walter Benjamin's famous discussion of this theme, which looks no farther back than the ancient Greeks and asserts that bronzes, terracottas, and coins were "the only art works which they could produce in quantity" (1999 [1936], 212). Today, in museum exhibitions and catalogues, carefully executed modern impressions from ancient seals are used to display the seal carver's artistry to full visual effect. Ancient sealings, by contrast, were often hastily executed, in some cases reproducing only some part of the seal design, and were sometimes just as hastily broken or erased. In a striking vindication of Benjamin's central claim, modern tastes and intellectual concerns have produced singular, durable art objects from the components of an ancient system of mechanical image production.

Ancient seals have long enjoyed high status as a collectible art form, and this has undoubtedly had an effect upon modern interpretations of their use. To take a particularly influential example, Henri Frankfort's (1939) *Cylinder Seals*, published three years after Benjamin's essay, has the subtitle *A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East*. Frankfort begins by defining cylinder seals in terms of their primary function in marking and safeguarding "possessions or merchandise" (p. 2). Yet these functional considerations play no part in his interpretation of Mesopotamian seal imagery from prehistory to the Persian conquest, which forms the main part of the book. It remains unclear how the rich surface imagery that Frankfort describes—the comings and goings of gods and goddesses, monsters and kings, the intricate scenes of industry and travel, feasting and worship, conquest and submission—would have related to the opening and closing of containers or to the consumption and dispensation of their contents. His, like most later art-historical approaches, explores the relationship between seal imagery and cultural change on a metaphysical plane rather than in terms of material practice.

On reflection, sealing practices turn out to be surprisingly complex cognitive procedures. Their effectiveness in protecting an object or space is rarely just physical: rather, it derives from a subtle combination of material, social, and psychological processes. Opening a seal is an act that cannot be reversed, except by the owner of the seal. Like the untying of knots, which were often used in conjunction with seals and are sometimes evoked in seal imagery, the breaking of a seal always disturbs some prior set of relationships and past intentions and is therefore both something of a violation and something of a temptation (cf. Kuechler 2001). The breaker of the seal, once the act is complete, is no longer quite the same person he or she was before.

Simply by being present, the sealing therefore evokes a web of possible relationships and consequences in the mind of the beholder. Only a fraction of these possible relationships is

likely to be salient in any particular context, but it is worth considering the potential variety of actors and types of agency they might encompass. These include the owner of the sealed object, the owner of the seal used to fasten the object, and the agencies evoked by the image on the sealing, which may be of a supernatural or otherwise transcendent nature. The fact that multiple, overlapping agencies are involved and that not all of them are readily identifiable with human actors may engage the opener of the seal in a difficult psychological process—difficult because it sets in motion a chain of social consequences the ultimate outcome of which cannot easily be foreseen and may lead to misfortune. Seals have the potential to rewrite social history, and as such they have often been viewed as portentous and dangerous objects (Gorelick and Williams-Forte 1983; Pittman 1995, 1600; Collon 1997, *passim*).

In the Middle East the sealing of containers with impressed images can be traced back to the late seventh millennium BC. It involved two essential material components: the seal itself, often a highly crafted object made of some hard substance (usually stone, but perhaps also less durable materials such as wood), which carried an intaglio design that could be impressed by rolling or stamping, and the sealing, made of a soft adhesive material (clay) which served the dual functions of receiving the seal image in raised relief and holding fast the closure of a container. Clay vessel sealings varied in size from extensive wrappings to small attachments placed over the lip. Throughout this region and in adjacent parts of Eurasia, the use of seals to mark portable goods in this way is closely bound up with the expansion of urban economies and palatial states during the Bronze Age (see Ferioli et al. 1994; Collon 1997). Beyond this core zone of centralized societies the adoption of such practices was often a much later development; in Europe north of the Alps, for example, they are not documented until the Roman conquest. In origin, however, image-based sealing practices are a village, not an urban, phenomenon. Contextual analysis of their earliest uses in late Neolithic Mesopotamia therefore serves both as essential background to their later development and as a platform for considering the role of sealing practices (more broadly conceived) in defining the relationship between gifts and commodities.

Household Sealing Practices in Prehistoric Mesopotamia and Twenty-first-Century America

The setting in which sealing practices developed during the late seventh and sixth millennia BC was one of small but densely networked farming villages distributed across the steppe between the Upper Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Household industries included the production of elaborately painted ceramics, crafted and ornamented by hand, which appear to have replicated the appearance of decorated baskets

(fig. 4, 1; Wengrow 2001). These were highly individualized objects, including a wide range of domestic serving vessels the forms of which suggest specialized roles in the presentation and consumption of food and drink. Examples may be found of their humanizing and gendering through the decorative addition of female sexual organs, types of ornament and clothing, or facial features above the neck. Their uses in funerary rites—both as containers for cremated or dismembered bodies and as objects deliberately smashed and distributed around the dead (Tobler 1950, 49; Akkermans 1989)—suggest a close relationship to particular people and life-trajectories. In addition to household goods, small but consistent quantities of exotic materials such as obsidian and metals, obtained from highland regions to the north and east, are also frequently attested in lowland villages, indicating networks of procurement that extended far beyond the context of domestic life (Wengrow 1998, 785–89; Matthews 2000, 70–120).

Stone seals dating to the Halaf period (ca. 6000–5000 BC) are found across a wide swath of northern Mesopotamia and were designed for stamping rather than rolling (fig. 5). They were perforated for suspension and bore complex linear patterns on the stamping surface, which was applied to the clay sealings of mobile containers such as pots, baskets, and sacks. Figural images are, by contrast, rare. In the making of seals, variability of surface pattern was combined with variability in the form of the seal itself to produce, in each case, a unique object, an image of which could be more widely distributed among other objects. Some seal shapes echo older types of body ornament such as animal teeth and bones, and one example has the form of an open palm (Wickede 1990).

Petr Charvát (1994) has argued that the efficacy of these early seals in safeguarding objects was closely related to their protective function as personal amulets kept close to the body. Through a process akin to sympathetic magic, he suggests,

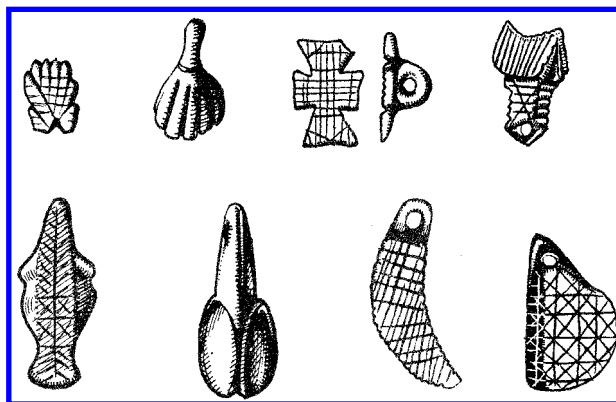


Figure 5. Stamp seal amulets of the Halaf period (sixth millennium BC; after Mallowan 1935, figs. 50.8, 25; 51:1–4, 6, 9).

they were able to confer part of the bearer's personality on inanimate things (for an ethnographically based analysis of the relationship between amulets and commodity fetishism, see Tambiah 1984). This formulation undoubtedly captures a key aspect of Neolithic sealing practices, the social meanings of which should be considered in terms of wider symbolic equivalences between vessels and human bodies (e.g., in representing states of closure or liminality by covering the “mouth” or “lip” [see David, Sterner, and Gavua 1988]). Nevertheless, it misses some of the novel features that distinguish sealing practices from earlier ways of marking objects. These include the reversibility of the seal image, the precision and speed with which it can be reproduced, and its independence from the form and texture of the object sealed.

The impact of sealing practices upon Neolithic societies may be further considered in relation to ethnographic work on the materiality of gift exchange, which illustrates the role

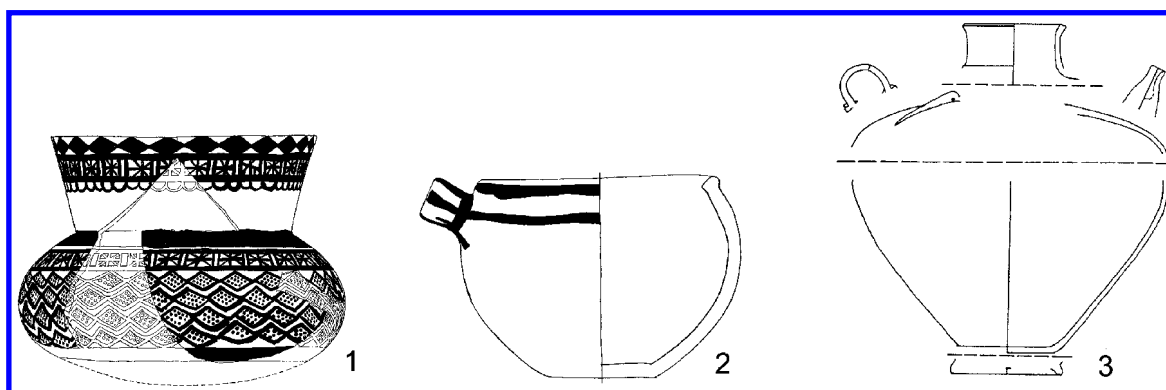


Figure 4. Towards mass production: characteristic Mesopotamian vessel types of the sixth (1), fifth (2), and fourth (3) millennia BC, showing the progression from coil-built to wheel-made and modular forms (after Mallowan 1935, figs. 67:1, 30:6; Sørensen 1978, fig. 49; not to scale).

of the addition of layers, coverings, and bindings in distinguishing gifts from commodities. James Carrier (1993, 62), for instance, discusses how wrapping gifts, tying bows, and attaching greeting cards works to overcome a contradiction between the generic qualities of branded products (which signal “types” of person) and the emotional requirements of festive exchange in contemporary American households, where goods should “bear a distinct personal identity and embody distinct social relations.” The use of domestic sealing practices to subvert the commodity status of goods recalls Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977, 71) observation that gift exchanges can be understood as commodity relations slowed to a snail’s pace and filtered through a series of reciprocal performances that deny the self-interested nature of the transaction. As techniques for the public enactment of what Annette Weiner (1992) calls “keeping-while-giving,” the application and removal of seals and wrappings plays a special role in such performances.

Things, however, are not quite so simple. More often than not, modern types of patterned wrapping paper and greeting cards are themselves generic rather than homespun products, the specialized role of which is to signal the place of other generic products within the ceremonial life of the household. The manner in which they do this is more complicated than Carrier implies. It relates, first, to a change in the temporality of exchange, which is extended by the process of unwrapping or untying and thus differentiated from the performance of ordinary commercial transactions (cf. Hendry 1993 on wrapping customs in modern Japan). Secondly, the addition of an intermediate layer of patterned material preserves the visually alluring character of the object while preventing any direct visual clash between the generic identity advertised on its surface packaging and the specific identity of the giver inscribed on an accompanying card. It is by rendering the branded object temporarily anonymous but still attractive that wrapping makes possible its reinscription and rebirth in the form of a gift. To reverse Kopytoff’s formulation, in a social world saturated by branded commodities it is gifts that must be culturally marked as being “a certain kind of thing.”

The Neolithic villages in which specialized sealing practices first developed constituted a very different kind of social and material world from that just described. The household was a primary locus of production as well as exchange, and material goods were often highly individual objects with personalized histories of making and ownership. One of the earliest archaeological attestations of systematic seal use in such a context derives from the Balikh Valley of northern Syria. The village in question was destroyed a little over 8,000 years ago by fire, preserving an assemblage of clay objects, including hundreds of sealings formerly attached to mobile containers. Today its mud-brick remnants form part of the ancient site known as Tell Sabi Abyad (Akkermans 1996). The distribution of clay sealings in the remains of the village suggests that, once broken and removed from their containers, they were retained as archival records of transactions. The great majority

were concentrated within a single complex of small rooms near the centre of the settlement differentiated both in form and function from the domestic structures that surrounded it—an economic space located at the heart of the community but organized according to principles of movement and visibility distinct from those of the household. Goods passing through this space were not just rendered spatially separate from the ordinary sphere of domestic interaction but also sealed with a personal image that marked their transitional state as neither used nor abandoned, neither fully given nor fully received—a moral status perhaps akin to that of things placed with the gods or with the dead (cf. Gregory 1980).

The contextual evidence from Tell Sabi Abyad suggests that the inception of sealing practices was linked to the conduct of transactions that lay beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of domestic life and—by implication—outside the social norms of household reciprocity (cf. Bloch and Parry 1989). By sanctioning a separation between objects and persons that was both temporary and reversible, prehistoric village institutions of this kind would have accorded their affiliates unprecedented control over the timing of exchange and consumption and hence over the strategic dispensation of resources (cf. Lesure 1999; Fotiadis 1999, 392). A feature of such transactions is likely to have been the exchange of accumulated local products for exotic goods that were only periodically available, perhaps involving their presentation in ceremonial contexts such as feasts where they could be mobilized to maximum effect (cf. Hayden 1996). Collection and storage of broken seals further suggests possibilities of control over a vital social commodity: the memory of relationships formed through the exchange of goods.

Towards a “Brand Economy”: The Transformation of Village Life in Chalcolithic Mesopotamia

The fifth millennium BC (‘Ubaid period) witnessed major changes in the structure of village life throughout lowland Mesopotamia and in the neighboring uplands of southern Turkey (Wengrow 1998, 790–92). Shared characteristics of ‘Ubaid settlements include the replacement of highly individualized ceramics with a new range of loosely standardized forms decorated on a slow wheel with simple and homogeneous designs (fig. 4, 2; cf. Nissen 2001, 168–69). These vessel forms include a variety of handled drinking cups and spouted jars, which signal the adoption of new domestic consumption routines and may reflect a diversification in the range of liquid comestibles available to lowland societies (Sherratt 1999 and below). Widespread intensification of household production is also indicated by the concentration of evidence for particular crafts, such as potting and weaving, within designated domestic spaces, prompting comparisons with the growth of “cottage industries” in proto-industrial Europe (Rothman 2001a, 363).

By the early fourth millennium BC (Early Uruk period) these structural transformations had set in motion a process of regionwide economic centralization. This is evident both in settlement patterns, which became increasingly hierarchical (Wilkinson and Tucker 1995), and in the appearance of central places distinguished by monumental public buildings commonly identified as temples (Stein 2001, 271). As well as providing loci of ritual authority, these focal institutions—which often replicated the plan of contemporary domestic structures—played important administrative roles (Frangipane 2001, 327–29). As in later times this intense fusion of economic and ritual activities probably centred around a notion of the temple as a sacred estate housing a local deity (Adams 2004, 45).

In the course of this period (ca. 5000–3800 BC) sealing practices underwent significant transformations. Stamp seals were increasingly used within individual houses, marking door locks as well as portable containers and thereby creating traceable links between particular buildings and mobile products (cf. Oates 1993; Frangipane 2001, 321–22; Rothman 1994). Evidence from Tepe Gawra, located near Mosul astride an important route into the Zagros, suggests that by the early fourth millennium certain households were taking on specialized managerial (and perhaps also ritual) roles. This is indicated by the concentration within them of large and varied sealing assemblages and by the division of specific craft activities among neighbouring residences (Rothman 1994; 2001a, 387–90). Seal forms and imagery also changed significantly and in similar ways across a large swath of northern and eastern Mesopotamia and in neighbouring Khuzistan (Pittman 2001). Increasing standardization of seal shapes was accompanied by a shift from linear surface patterns to a more fixed repertory of figural images. They included animals, humans in striking poses of violence and copulation, (?beer) drinking scenes, and also hybrid characters such as a widely recurring figure with a human body and the head of a ram, often shown grasping two snakes or other animals which coil up either side of it (fig. 6). This new repertory of ('Ubaid/Early Uruk) seal images, known largely from impressions on jar sealings (Amiet 1980), was inherently more memorable and transmissible than its Neolithic predecessors. As was pointed out long ago by David Caldwell (1976), its spatial distribution closely follows expanding arteries of trade between lowland Mesopotamia and the surrounding highlands.

The importance of these routes in the acquisition of minerals and metals from more distant sources is evident in the remarkable range of finished goods preserved in burials at Tepe Gawra. Among them are small, sometimes highly crafted items made in a variety of colored stones (lapis lazuli, turquoise, obsidian) and metals (copper, gold, and silver [Rothman 2002, 171–234]). By the beginning of the fourth millennium BC and perhaps considerably earlier, lowland societies appear to have been acting as a hub of labor and capital, drawing resources from surrounding regions into new productive settings, combining and packaging them in novel

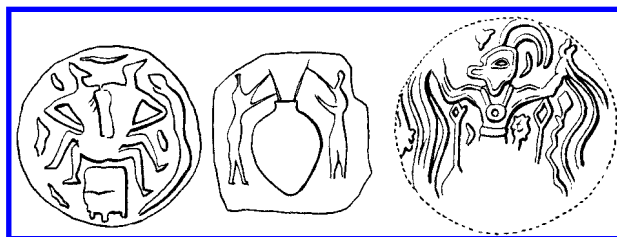


Figure 6. Reconstructed stamp seal impressions of the Late 'Ubaid and Early Uruk periods (late fifth to early fourth millennium BC; after Amiet 1980, pls. 2:42, 45; 6:118).

ways, and altering their social meanings in the process. Such transfers are likely to have involved the adoption of new dietary practices and forms of commensality, such as those associated with the consumption of grape wine, which may have been locally produced in highland Iran as early as the sixth millennium BC (McGovern et al. 1997; Sherratt 1999).

These related processes led to the emergence of contiguous and perhaps competing cultural networks extending across the piedmont zone of northern and eastern Mesopotamia (Rova 1996). Beginning around 3700 BC and continuing into the later fourth millennium, both large and small settlements in this region exhibit varying quantities of intrusive ceramics and seal impressions of types that originate on the alluvial plains of southern Mesopotamia. The ceramic forms—which include a range of spouted liquid-containers—are easily distinguished from local assemblages by their rigid standardization and techniques of manufacture, involving mass production on the fast wheel and systems of modular assembly (fig. 4, 3; Potts 1997, 150–54; Wright 2001:136–37, table 4.2). The clay stoppers of these vessels were also marked in a distinctive way, using engraved cylinders continuously rolled onto the sealing. This innovative sealing technique left a sign that was instantly distinguishable in form and extent from the impressions of local stamp seals (e.g., fig. 7). Certain types of standardized liquid-container appear to have been designed with the display of these rolled seal impressions specifically in mind (Badler 2002, 86). In the following section I review the wider context in which these products came to be adopted at northern sites and the main hypotheses currently offered to explain their appearance there.

A Large-Scale Economy: The Uruk Expansion

The northward dissemination of new types of sealed vessels and their contents, along with other elements of material culture derived from southern Mesopotamia, has come to be known as the “Uruk expansion.” The term implies a commonly accepted point of origin for this phenomenon at or around the site of Uruk (Warka), today in southern Iraq, which witnessed a continuous influx of settlement from surrounding parts of the alluvium during the mid-to-late fourth

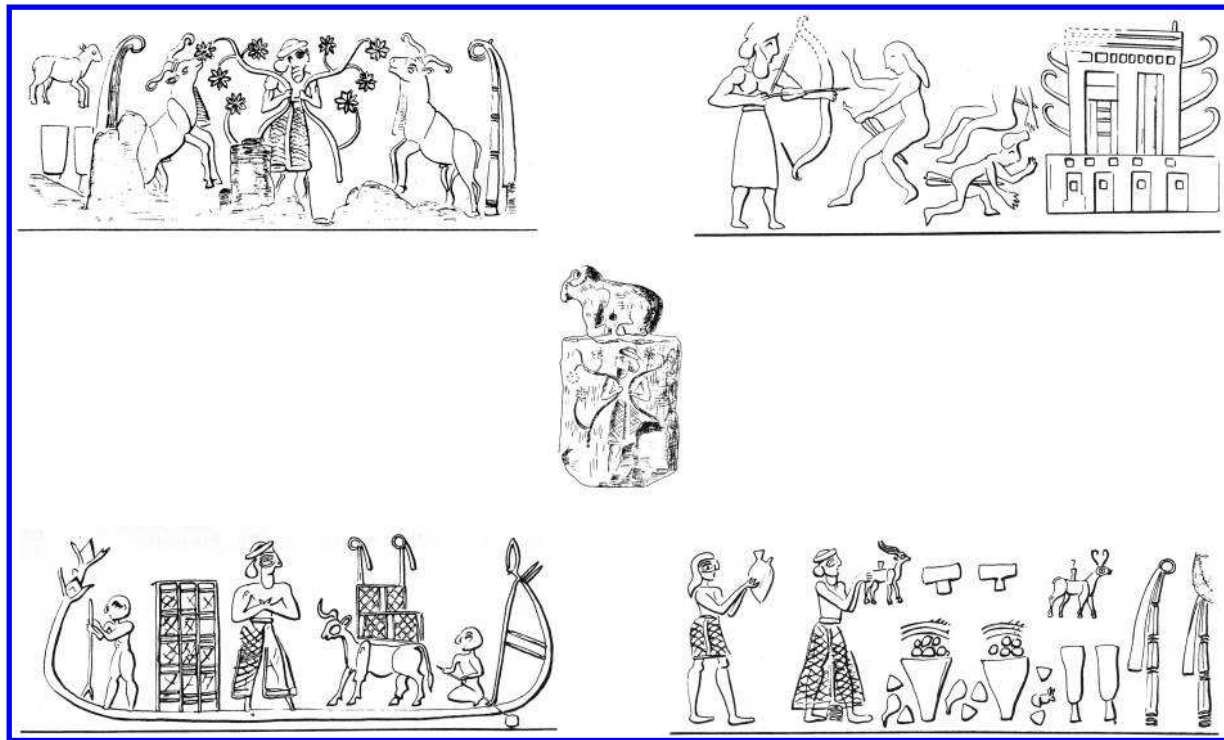


Figure 7. Reconstructed cylinder seal impressions and seal of the Late Uruk period (late fourth millennium BC; after Amiet 1980, pls. 43:636A/b, 44:643, 46:655, 659).

millennium BC (Adams and Nissen 1972; Adams 1981, 67–94). By the Late Uruk period (ca. 3350–3100 BC) the core habitation area of Uruk exceeded 250 hectares and had an estimated population of 20,000 (Nissen 2002).

Aside from regional surveys, much of what is known about this early city derives from investigations of its central precinct, which consisted of a series of monumental temple complexes constructed on a scale unknown in northern Mesopotamia (Nissen 2002; cf. Stein 2004, 74). Later construction fills from this area produced a large corpus of discarded material relating to administrative procedures, much of which can be broadly dated to the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods (ca. 3200–3000 BC [Nissen, Damerow, and Englund 1993, 4–7]). It includes clay sealings bearing cylinder seal impressions, which had been removed from ceramic jars and door locks (Brandes 1979), and also some 5,000 clay tablets bearing proto-cuneiform inscriptions and numerical notations. The great majority constitute written records of economic transactions, ranging from short receipts to consolidated accounts (Nissen, Damerow, and Englund 1993).

The invention of the proto-cuneiform script marks the culmination of a gradual process of innovation in southern Mesopotamia which began around the middle of the fourth millennium BC. Its early stages are characterized by the supplementation of tangible commodity signs with forms of eco-

nomonic notation based upon surface markings. In representing transactions, clay tokens, figurines, and detached vessel sealings (used in this manner since Neolithic times) were increasingly replaced by pictographic and numerical signs impressed onto clay envelopes, tags, or tablets (Schmandt-Besserat 1981; cf. Wengrow 1998). The coevolution of sign systems denoting properties of form and number laid the basis for a new order of representational abstraction in which individual signs could stand for multiple units of their real-world referents. It also allowed for the incremental addition of new values to the recording system through the modification of existing signs or the introduction of new sign combinations (Damerow 1996, 2006).

A primary application of the proto-cuneiform writing system lay in distinguishing between subclasses of products on the basis of their constituent materials, ingredients, and labor (Englund 1995, 1998). Cheese, butter, oil, and fat were enumerated in various grades and flavored varieties, and fish (of which some 80 types are recorded) appear as sources of oil and meat (preserved through drying), while the most ubiquitous texts record movements of grain—including semi-processed forms such as barley malt, groats, and flour—used to produce fermented cereal products (types of bread and beer). Fine-grained classifications of finished goods presumably reflect distinctions of purity, strength, and taste, further en-

hanced by the use of (largely unidentified) condiments and spices. Woven products are similarly differentiated in the proto-cuneiform texts by fineness of mesh and weight, and certain high-quality types of wool and finished textiles were designated “fit for the EN” (Englund 1998, 152, n. 349; EN = “chief administrator,” a status perhaps represented by the standardized male figure that appears on Late Uruk cylinder seals wearing a woven garment; fig. 7; see Schmandt-Besserat 1993 and below).

From the content of these texts it can be reasonably inferred that a principal function of the institutions that produced them was to control the flow of labor and resources between various sectors of the productive economy. Products passing through such institutions were thereby subject to systems of quality control that differentiated them from less regulated varieties of the same goods widely available elsewhere. It is significant, in this context, that the written signs used to denote comestibles are graphic renderings of the ceramic vessels in which they were stored and transported, suggesting close practical and symbolic relationships between particular forms of standardized packaging and their contents (Potts 1997, 141).

In addition to the centrifugal growth of urban settlement on the southern alluvium, its main centres formed the hub of a centripetal process of cultural expansion. The initial stages of this process, during the Middle Uruk period (ca. 3800–3350 BC), involved the establishment of southern communities and institutions within existing population centres as far north as Hacinebi in the Şanlıurfa province of southeastern Turkey (Stein 2001). By the late fourth millennium, sites such as Habuba Kabira on the Middle Euphrates attest to the foundation of entirely new (“colonial”) settlements along key arteries of river-based and overland transport, linking the resource-poor alluvium to supply routes along which prestige materials such as metals, timber, and hard stones traveled (Algaze 1993). Recent excavations at regional centres such as Arslantepe, in the highlands of Malatya (Frangipane 1997), Hacinebi (Stein 1999), and Tell Brak in the Khabur Valley of northeastern Syria (Oates and Oates 1994) illustrate a diversity of local responses to southern expansion. While the consequences of these encounters remain poorly understood, they appear to have ranged from stable coexistence with minimal acculturation to the adoption of southern goods and practices in varying degrees by northern populations.

Current Hypotheses for the Uruk Expansion: An Impasse?

The most encompassing explanation of the Uruk expansion remains that developed by Guillermo Algaze in a series of much-debated studies (e.g., 1989, 1993, 2001). By investing in the mass production and export of commodities, he argues, urban societies on the southern alluvium were seeking to alter the flow of prestige materials—sources of which lay far to the north and east—in their own favour. In doing so they were

able to exploit a unique combination of strategic advantages: (a) the extraordinary fertility of alluvial soils under conditions of irrigation, providing agricultural surpluses for transformation into manufactured products, and (b) their nodal position at the meeting point of three major axes of water transport—the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and a network of lateral contacts across the marshy profile of the Persian Gulf, which lay some 200 km inland of its present location (Adams 2004). The scope for trade beyond the immediate reach of water-going craft was further increased by the domestication of the pack donkey around the middle of the fourth millennium BC (Wright 2001, 127).

According to Algaze (2001, 200), the transformation of these advantages into economic capital hinged upon “the emergence and rapid diffusion of innovative mechanisms of commodity production, labor control, and information processing.” He envisages this process as taking place simultaneously among rival centres of the southern alluvium—such as Uruk, Ur, and Eridu—where economic and political centralization were driven by the competitive export of labor-intensive, value-added goods (p. 207):

No doubt, woven and dyed textiles were the principal commodity fulfilling this double role in the 4th millennium, as they were later on in the historic periods. Other exports of the time are more easily documented in the archaeological record. These include bitumen from southern Iraqi and southeastern Iranian sources [which traveled as far north as southern Turkey, presumably as packaging or insulation for other goods (Schwartz, Hollander, and Stein 1999)] . . . and processed agricultural (wine, unguents, aromatic oils?) and pastoral (animal fats) commodities contained within the various types of Uruk ceramic containers (four-lugged, spouted, and pear-shaped jars) that are often found in many indigenous . . . sites across the Mesopotamian periphery.

Critics of Algaze’s “export-driven” model of the Uruk expansion have highlighted the economic autonomy and complexity of local societies in northern Mesopotamia. Gil Stein (2001, 299), the excavator of Hacinebi, finds it implausible that a small group of Uruk settlers many hundreds of kilometres from home would have been able to extract metal supplies from local populations in the apparent absence of “any evidence for political, military, or economic domination.” Marcella Frangipane (2001, 315–16) emphasizes the lack of evidence for specialized craft production and storage facilities at Uruk colonies such as Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda on the Middle Euphrates, indicating that they could not have been established solely for trading purposes (cf. Charvát 2002, 124, 133). She points instead to the co-occurrence of mass-produced bowls and sealing archives in large public buildings as evidence that such sites (and other regional centres) were engaged primarily in the management of local resources, including the control of labor through centrally administered systems of food rationing (Frangipane 1994, 2001).

A more complex picture is suggested, however, by chemical analyses of clay sealings from Hacinebi, which demonstrate that closed vessels bearing cylinder seal impressions sometimes traveled over very considerable distances (in this case from the Susa region of southwestern Iran to southeastern Turkey [Blackman 1999]; for evidence of non-local sealings at Tepe Gawra and Tepe Sharafabad, see Rothman and Blackman 1990; Wright, Redding, and Pollock 1989, 110). Stein (2001, 291) concludes that the “people using Uruk-style cylinder seals [at Hacinebi] were both receiving sealed goods from southern Mesopotamia and also sealing containers and keeping records on local clays” (cf. Wright 2001, 142). The discovery of tartaric acid, a chemical trace of grape wine, within a spouted vessel at Uruk further suggests that the flow of packaged commodities was not all one-way (Badler, McGovern, and Glusker 1996).

These contrasting perspectives indicate something of the diversity of material transfers—horizontal and vertical—lying behind the apparent uniformity of the Uruk expansion. Movements of liquid commodities over any distance would have required the use of closed ceramic forms such as four-lugged and spouted jars, among the most widely distributed and rigidly standardized components of the Uruk ceramic assemblage (Algaze 1995). The open bowls—mass-produced in moulds or on the wheel—which form the focus of Frangipane’s interpretation are, by contrast, unlikely transport vessels. A more probable but as yet unproven function for these ubiquitous vessels lies in the centralized production of pot-baked bread in large communal ovens (Millard 1988). Whether or not this was the case, it seems clear that the economic basis of the Uruk expansion cannot be adequately characterized in terms of either local resource management or the mass export of commodities.

Sacred Commodities: The Role of Branding in the Urban Revolution

At the heart of these debates lies a set of highly divergent views concerning the role of commoditization in early complex societies. One current position has been succinctly set out by Mitchell Rothman (2001a). He notes that many of the core industries of the southern alluvium—intensive textile manufacture (based on wool rather than linen), metallurgy, stone crafting, and large-scale ceramic production—are attested in northern Mesopotamia some centuries prior to the Uruk expansion. “In short,” asks Rothman (2001a, 363), “what was the advantage of exchange for the northerners and easterners, who do not seem to *need* any of the suggested southern exports?” The question may be plausibly extended to comestibles such as fermented cereal and dairy products, as well as grape wine and tree-crop oils, which—as outlined above—may already have been widely consumed in the piedmont zone by the fifth millennium BC.

An alternative point of view, recently articulated by Andrew Sherratt (2004, 97), focuses upon the social and symbolic

value added to such products through “specialization in primary production and lengthened chains of transformation,” which, as is suggested by the proto-cuneiform sources, reached new heights on the southern alluvium. Mass-produced textiles, alcoholic drinks, and foodstuffs are also likely to have been associated with urban social practices that expressed particular forms of communal identity and perhaps also particular notions of the sacred (Sherratt 2004; cf. McCorriston 1997; Joffe 1998; Charvát 2002, 124). What surely mattered to consumers—both in the heartlands of urbanization and beyond—was the purity of the oil, the quality and provenance of the wine, the fineness of the textiles, and the wider cultural values accessed through their consumption. Commoditization, in short, was a process of generating (rather than merely responding to) demand through “the creation of products embodying added value” (Sherratt 2004, 96).

An essential feature of this process, I suggest, was the unrivaled ability of centres on the southern alluvium to monitor and therefore guarantee the quality of mass-produced goods. These possibilities of regulation arose from two interdependent developments which—following Fensholt’s (1990) distinction between bazaar and brand economies—would have set this region upon a path of economic evolution qualitatively distinct from its northern counterparts, creating unprecedented potential for structural asymmetries between them. The first was a decisive shift towards the production of rigidly standardized (i.e., substitutable) goods, which in turn made possible the development of specialized managerial systems dealing with *types* of things (and *types* of labor) rather than individual products and producers.

Proto-cuneiform texts demonstrate that these systems of management were applied to multiple spheres of economic activity ranging from the allocation of land, herds, and labour to movements of raw materials, semi-processed ingredients, and finished goods. Only rarely, however, do they allow the reconstruction of complete chains of transformation between these spheres (e.g., from the control of sheep herds to the production of woollen garments [Englund 1998, 152]). While this may reflect the incompleteness of the written record, there are independent indicators that the productive economy of the Uruk cultural network was decentralized, with urban centres acting primarily as points of coordination, quality control, and transshipment (Charvát 2002, 133)—a view reinforced by the absence of specialized manufacturing facilities and large storage areas within temple complexes at Uruk, Habuba Kabira, and other nodal settlements (Frangipane 2001, 314).

There is a long-standing consensus that the use of seals to mark the flow of goods in and out of such institutions reflects their internal organizational dynamics and bureaucratic needs. As Rothman (1994, 100) puts it, sealing practices “speak of the relationships among groups or among institutions and offices within them” rather than of “the particular goods received or disbursed” (cf. Nissen, Damerow, and Englund 1993, 15). Working from this premise, earlier studies

have related variability among Late Uruk cylinder seal designs to distinctions between particular administrative sectors and personnel (e.g., Nissen 1977; Brandes 1979; Dittman 1986). As Holly Pittman (1994) points out, such interpretations fail to address certain basic visual properties of the designs themselves, which consist of pictorial scenes and image sequences that are often distinguishable only under close scrutiny. Had the rapid identification of individual administrative departments and positions been the primary function of cylinder seals, it seems difficult to understand why they were not simply inscribed with personal names and/or professional statuses as were later objects of the same type and contemporaneous written sources (cf. Englund 1998, 103–6).

An overarching theme of Late Uruk seal imagery which may say more about its immediate communicative functions (Pittman 1994) is the production and movement of manufactured goods and live resources. Scenes of work—including textile weaving, potting, and herding—are particularly common on seals and impressions from Khuzistan (Amiet 1972; Delougaz and Kantor 1996), while finely engraved seal designs from the Uruk region often feature a standardized male figure with beard, turban, and woven skirt (fig. 7, and see Pittman 2001). He is depicted in the course of various activities linked to the collection, transport, and ritual dedication of finished goods and is also shown in the role of provider (feeding animals) and protector (hunting and vanquishing enemies). These scenes suggest the outlines of a moral framework for the giving and taking of life, set within the distinctive cultural landscape of the southern alluvium, images of which were attached to the surfaces of mobile commodities through the application of seals.

These developments in sealing practices represent an investment by increasingly centralized societies in image-based systems of commoditization which seem best understood in relation to wider alterations in the nature of consumption that accompanied the process of urbanization. One feature of that process was a diversification of diet that is likely to have begun on a more localized scale during the fifth millennium BC and that centred upon comestibles requiring extended chains of preparation and increasingly complex ingredients (Sherratt 1997, 9–11). When appropriately packaged and sealed, these processed products remained edible for longer than earlier foodstuffs and were therefore more amenable to storage and trade. To a greater extent than Neolithic comestibles they could also be produced to varying degrees of quality and purity, absorbing the added value of skilled and intensive labor (Sherratt and Sherratt 1991). This combination of factors rendered such goods susceptible to various forms of adulteration but also to specialized modes of marking and packaging that ensured quality and signaled relationships of exclusivity across shared scales of sumptuary value.

I have argued that the standardization of sealed packaging for processed consumables in early Mesopotamia formed the basis of a brand economy—with its attendant properties of horizontal and vertical expansion—in which both commod-

ities and labor became increasingly substitutable. Within the bounds of this economy, commoditization appears to have been a ritually mediated process associated with the passage of goods, animals, and people through sacred institutions of the kind represented on cylinder seals and more fully on the Uruk Vase, which shows a procession of livestock, agricultural produce, and finished goods borne by undifferentiated nude males towards the clothed figure of a female goddess (see Brandes 1986). This process of commoditization followed a classic pattern of ritual transformation (see Bloch 1992) applied equally to objects and sentient beings, which were temporarily reduced to a state of social anonymity and uniformity—the privileged space of bureaucratic activity—and subsequently reintroduced to society in altered and elevated forms (for further discussion of the historical and structural interface between bureaucracy and religious ritual, see Herzfeld 1992; Wengrow 2006, 267–69).

The role of sealing practices in this transformative process was at once practical and symbolic. Seal impressions acted as marks of quality and provenance and as a means of guaranteeing the pristine condition of perishable goods. As secondary surface images the breaking and removal of which was a necessary precursor to consumption, they also helped to resolve a paradox common to ancient and modern economies of scale: the reincorporation of homogeneous goods into a world of complex personal relationships. Albeit in a less explicit manner than the Egyptian label with which I began, seal imagery linked these goods to central cultural concerns, including ceremonial transactions that reproduced an overarching order of relations between humans and the sacred. Production had itself become a subject for standardized representational schemes which were mechanically transferred to the surface of mass-produced goods in a process of limited decommoditization best described as branding.

Conclusion

“Value,” wrote Karl Marx (2000 [1857–67], 475), “does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language.” Nothing, I am sure, could have been farther from Marx’s mind when he wrote this passage than Egyptology. The “hieroglyph of value” is a poetic symbol for the mysterious quality which surrounds both commodities and objects of religious worship—which renders invisible their true histories of production and makes them appear to originate outside the ordinary realms of human labor and exchange.

In reality, however, value does very often stalk about with a label describing and sometimes loudly proclaiming what it is; yet this surface reality has often remained absent from anthropological accounts of the social construction of value. As I have tried to demonstrate, anthropological perspectives—

both ethnographic and archaeological—can offer new insights into the nature of commodity marking and its role in the development of human societies. Many of these insights arise from traditional anthropological concerns that have usually been pursued in mutual isolation but are brought together through a focus upon concrete practices of marking and labeling. The study of exchange has too often ignored the rites of passage—and their attendant forms of surface marking—through which objects are constantly made to pass in their transition between different states of social belonging (cf. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). There are structural continuities between the processes undergone by initiates in small-scale societies—which Pierre Clastres (1989, 188) referred to as “societies of the mark”—and the procedures through which human beings in large-scale economies try to cope with the paradoxical realities of everyday life: the realities of living in a community of individual actors formed and sustained through the circulation of impersonal objects.

As an organized response to these realities, commodity branding—famously described by Raymond Williams (1980 [1960], 185) as a “system of magical inducements and satisfactions”—is specific neither to modernity nor to capitalist societies. Rather, it has been a long-term feature of human cultural development, acting within multiple ideological and institutional contexts including those of sacred hierarchies and sacrificial economies of a certain scale. What *has* varied significantly over time and space is the nexus of authenticity, quality control, and desire from which brand economies draw their authority; the web of agencies (real or imagined) through which homogeneous goods must be seen to pass in order to be consumed, be they the bodies of the ancestral dead, the gods, heads of state, secular business gurus, media celebrities, or that core fetish of post-modernity, the body of the sovereign consumer citizen in the act of self-fashioning.

Recognizing that the appearance of systems of commodity branding in Europe is, by global standards, a recent phenomenon has broad implications across the social and historical sciences. It suggests that what has conventionally been regarded as an organic development—the coevolution of brand economies and capitalist modes of production—in fact constitutes the coming together of processes that belong to quite different orders of historical and social transformation. From this perspective, the complexity of contemporary relationships between commoditization and cultural identity may become increasingly comprehensible as the intersection between branding—a phenomenon common to large-scale economies since the Urban Revolution—and its particular manifestations under the current conditions of global capitalism.

Acknowledgments

An outline of this paper was presented at research seminars in the universities of Durham, Oxford, and Bristol and at University College London. I am grateful to the various organizers, colleagues, and students who attended for their feed-

back. Suggestions by Andy Bevan and Danny Miller were particularly valuable in broadening the scope of my argument, as were the highly informative criticisms of six anonymous CA reviewers, from which I learned much. Many of the points made here originate in discussions with Andrew Sherratt, whose comments are sorely missed and to whose memory the paper is dedicated. I thank De Bortoli's Ltd. for permission to reproduce the wine label in figure 2.

Comments

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Wengrow correctly notes that existing studies of seal use in ancient civilizations and of the images on ancient seals and sealings overwhelmingly tend to look at the evidence either from an art-historical perspective that focuses on the meaning of the visual narratives depicted in the glyptic or from the perspective of what the devices themselves and their mode of use tell us about ancient bureaucratic practices and hierarchies of commodity control. To this Wengrow now adds an entirely complementary perspective that looks at ancient sealings also as an easily recognizable form of commodity “branding” associated with economic systems in which value-added goods amenable to economies of scale in their production regularly change hands. This is, in my opinion, a welcome addition to the range of socioeconomic and behavioral inferences that we may derive from glyptic data, and I suspect that Wengrow's perspective will spur much new research by scholars working in premodern societies elsewhere.

The concept of “modernity,” raised by Wengrow himself, brings me to what I consider to be the most important contribution of his paper. Implicitly or not, most scholars working on topics related to the emergence of early Near Eastern civilizations assume that ancient socioeconomic phenomena relating to that emergence were of an *essentially* different nature from modern ones. This is an assumption that is ultimately derived from Marxian conceptions of history, which see capitalism as a uniquely modern historical phenomenon based on behaviors, institutions, and technologies that did not exist prior to either the end of the Middle Ages (Polanyi 1944), the sixteenth century AD (Wallerstein 1974), or the Industrial Revolution (Landes 1998). This assumption is partly incompatible with Wengrow's view of the role of ancient sealings as a form of branding for mass-produced commodities. If he is correct, as I suspect he is, it follows that, as Jack Goody (2006) has recently argued, there is no clear line separating the economies of the modern (i.e., capitalist) and premodern (i.e., precapitalist) worlds. Indeed, I would

argue that if such a line exists, it is far from as sharp as Marxian-derived modern economic theory would have it and that it is to be found exactly where Wengrow places it—at the dawn of history in the ancient Near East, where it divides what we commonly refer to as prestate and state societies.

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Wengrow uses this revisionist account of Southern Mesopotamian seals as brands to argue that the conventional conception of branding as a distinctive feature of modern capitalism is wrong. Instead, we should focus on the continuities between Uruk brands and contemporary brands. But the idea that academics believe that branding is a distinctive feature of capitalism is a straw man. Wengrow relies on quick references to the pantheon of critical philosophers and literary critics who have written damning critiques of consumer capitalism. These impressionistic critiques only tangentially reference brands, never to my knowledge make the argument that brands are a capitalist invention, and lack the systematic empirical theory building that Wengrow insists upon for his Mesopotamian research. Rather, in my view, academics conventionally assume that brands “have been elemental to markets since traders first marked their goods as a guarantee for customers who lived beyond face-to-face contact” (Holt 2006, 299). Likewise, those working in the sociocultural wing of marketing take as axiomatic that contemporary brand symbolism has evolved as a variant of prior material culture. Nailing down the particulars of this trajectory is a valuable contribution, to be sure, but that is quite a different project from Wengrow’s black-or-white claims.

To support his claim that there are important similarities between Uruk branding and contemporary branding, Wengrow relies on a single brief Australian example—a De Bortoli wine label. He finds that the Uruk seals and the De Bortoli label rely on similar image-driven communication codes that convey similar meanings to consumers, but this is a cherry-picked example. Of the many brands reproduced by De Bortoli on its web site, most have very different graphics. The fact that the winery sees fit to produce several dozen different brands—an example of segmentation and targeting which is a distinctive feature of contemporary branding not found in his Uruk evidence—escapes Wengrow’s attention. He is also not interested in reporting that the [*yellowtail*] brand has become the most successful Australian wine brand by rejecting the aestheticized artisanal rhetoric that he emphasizes in favor of vaguely Aboriginal graphics dominated by a colorful wallaby. Nor does he consider that artisanal categories like wine contribute only a small percentage to the universe of brands. What about today’s dominant brands: Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Intel, BP, Toyota, Wal-Mart, Apple, Nike? What about branding activities beyond just labels? A compelling comparison

would require a very different study: developing a synthetic model of contemporary branding based upon a wide variety of analytically divergent examples that have been studied carefully and comprehensively.

The key question is not whether branding is a unique feature of capitalism but, rather, what particular features of contemporary branding distinguish it from that of previous eras. A brief scan of branding in academia and practice provides a sampling of arguments missing in Wengrow’s article:

1. Mass culture. Contemporary brands are distinctive because they are mediated by mass culture. Whereas premodern brands developed primarily in the lifeworld, through consumer experiences, retailer recommendations, and word-of-mouth, in consumer capitalism brands are woven into mass culture through advertising, product placements, sponsorships, and the Internet.

2. Cognitive heuristics. Consumer capitalism is distinctive in the massive proliferation of products designed to appeal to every micro-segment and change in tastes. It is impossible for most people most of the time to keep up with the particulars, and so a key modern function of brands is as a heuristic shortcut in buyer decision making.

3. Consumerism. Perhaps the central academic argument regarding contemporary branding is the social power that brands hold over identity construction. Companies have been very successful in making their brands ubiquitous objects in public culture, and this has led to considerable social power. Is the Mesopotamian use of sealed olive oil as a status symbol comparable to the extraordinary social competition one finds amongst American teens to acquire the right brands?

4. Cultural opportunism. A key feature of modern branding is that companies pursue latent cultural opportunities rather than just act passively to latch onto existing demand. For instance, the branding of drugs often goes hand in hand with the cultural construction of a new medical condition. This cultural opportunism is particularly focused on exploiting tensions concerning class, race, gender, and nation, just the opposite of what Wengrow argues (Holt 2004).

5. Information asymmetries and magic. Consumers of Uruk oil could easily ascertain whether the olive oil was consistently of good quality. In contrast, many modern brands are credence goods—goods for which the efficacy and quality cannot be easily ascertained via consumption. They also often rely on very complex technological features. This makes it impossible for most consumers to understand the relationship between the technical features of the offering and its performance. As a result, a key characteristic of modern branding is to persuade consumers to believe in their product’s efficacy—a modern mode of magic.

While I wholeheartedly support Wengrow’s pursuit of long historical comparisons of branding, such work will be fruitful only to the extent that scholars engage with modern commerce as seriously as they do the more academically acceptable research topics.

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This highly original and significant paper makes abundantly clear that there is a materiality to regimes of value that in various forms have been around for at least 8,000 years and fully deserve to be excavated in their own right. Furthermore, it demonstrates that from earliest times it is possible to encounter in sealings not only an array of properties such as quality, possession, control, order, and worth, which have analogies today, but also more complex contradictions and compromises. Wengrow finds instances of the tension between bureaucratic control and what he calls charismatic signifiers that would be found today in, for example, Victoria Beckham jeans but also between domestic and transactional concerns that have parallels in contemporary tensions between consumers and producers.

If anything, his argument can be pushed still farther for the ancient world. In particular, there is another region, the Indus Valley, where I have argued (Miller 1985, 50–55) that we see perhaps the most extreme form of homogenization of population, precisely through ideologically charged systems of sealing and standardizing of both production and the form of the material object itself. The evidence suggests that the extraordinary uniformity of objects such as stone blades and metalwork but also of the square seals themselves is not a result of internal trade. Rather, it is a result of standardization of production on each and every site, which forms part of a much larger suppression of distinction. So the idea of brands' standing for civilization was not just a conceit of the nineteenth-century British, as Wengrow notes, citing Wilk. Even in the third millennium BC we encounter some probably theistic version of civilization itself akin to Wengrow's ritualized bureaucracy objectified through object standardization and sealings.

An important tension, almost inevitable in an anthropological paper, is between the appeal to commonality between the past and the present by identifying general characteristics of branding and sealing and a relativism that shows the range of differences implied by these practices over time and space. My main concern would be to ensure that this is recognized not just for the past but also for the present. The final line of the paper talks of plural *manifestations* of these material practices within capitalism. I hope this paper will not be misread as suggesting a homogenized branding capitalism assumed to have ended the heterogeneity of brandings and sealings of the past, because one of its major potential contributions is to invite a more nuanced ethnography of contemporary branding as a material practice.

Current anthropological research has confirmed that even at its highest levels, such as banking (Maurer 2005) and derivatives trading (Miyazaki 2005), not to mention ordinary

trading in goods (Miller 1997), we are dealing with capitalisms rather than just capitalism today. We can therefore expect a diversity of branding. When Wengrow points to the richness of sealing as potentially evoking containment, purity, ownership, closure, mysticism, and quality, this should not be seen as an assertion that all sealing has such consequences. As he implies, we do not want to conflate ring-pulls and ribbons. So, for example, if we consider one of the most common forms of contemporary branding, that of designer clothing labels, we see all sorts of complexities. There are regions such as Italy and Spain, where these are mainly respected and carry high brand value, and others such as middle-class London, where they are more usually derided and avoided as vulgar and conformist. Their authority may accrue from claims of individual designer brilliance, historical continuity, authenticity, or simply the endorsement of a pop star. When one includes the global trade in fake branded clothes (e.g., Vann 2006) and the fact that much retail has recently moved from selling brands to becoming brands, it is clear that designer-label clothing is a diverse and contested field in which consumption plays a very active role in the determination of what brands come to stand for (consider, for example, the history of the Burberry tartan).

The critical point for contemporary ethnography, then, is that if the issues raised by seals and branding were diverse prior to capitalism, there is no reason to think that capitalist appropriation either somehow completes, exhausts, or resolves them. Branding is not necessarily or particularly capitalist logo. It could, for example, just as easily be socialist state control of quality or the guarantor of certified environmentally conscious practice. But, as this excellent paper shows, to be clear about these possibilities we need to pay as much attention to its materiality today as we do to sealings of the past. It is therefore to be hoped that this study of the past will inspire some new research into the present.

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Wengrow reminds us of the deep sources of ancient symbolism that, despite the problems of interpretation, we can still tap for insight into past behaviors. As Morphy (1989) has written, we can never fully understand what those symbols meant to people, but in discovering how the ancients used them we can still gain insight into past behaviors that may well encode the ancients' cultural perceptions.

Where I find a problem in Wengrow's analysis is in his selecting one type of symbol from the modern world, branding, and, because it shares some symbolic characteristics with those ancient ones, asserting that the ancients were branding in the commercial sense. In the article on commoditization that Wengrow cites, one of my major points was the need to define such terms carefully so that they can be understood

in different cultural contexts. Contrary to Wengrow, I think that what Polanyi was saying was not that commerce was tangential but that the capitalistic market economies that typify the modern world are not comparable to those of the ancient world, because economies are instituted in forms appropriate to the many underlying social structures of society. Modern capitalism can only really exist in an advanced state society or in a colonial system. Ancient and modern states are different not just in scale but in kind.

To make his point Wengrow asserts that ancient Mesopotamian societies instituted quality controls, for which I cannot imagine any evidence, and, further, that quality control is a reason for buying packaged goods. After decades spent in suqs, bazaars, and *pazars*, I have found that people favor packaged goods in commercial markets as symbols of status, not for their perceived quality. They still buy traditional foods, meat, for example, from the bazaar rather than buying it in shrink-wrap from the store.

In general, I think the problem with using branding as an analogy to ancient seal iconography goes back to the interpretation of symbols *per se*. Sherry Ortner in her article "On Key Symbols" (1979) shows the different uses of symbols, whether simply to sum up or encapsulate the meaning associated with the symbol (summarizing) or as dynamic models of how we are to interpret the world around us and therefore act (elaborating). For example, the United States flag summarizes the ideals of America; it is about identifying, as a brand identifies a product. The flag can become an elaborating symbol when it is put in the context of the rubble of the World Trade Towers or in the famous World War II photograph of raising the flag over Iwo Jima, thus defining our unity against enemies and the nature of the struggle ahead.

Wengrow's comparison of the Egyptian funerary goods and the De Bertoli ad makes more sense, I think, as a comparison of very different kinds of symbols, not two similar brands. The symbol on the ancient jug is identifying not the product but the people involved in the good's use. The Egyptian symbol established the role of kingship and leadership both politically and religiously; it is a summarizing symbol. The Bertoli label is an elaborating symbol. It is making the argument that the origin and associations of this company are the reasons to accept the brand and value the product. It establishes the summarizing symbol of its brand by elaborating on it. Therefore, the seals in the Egyptian case and in the Bertoli ad are unrelated in their meanings. The Bertoli one speaks of tradition, the Egyptian one of identity of an individual person or of a particular office as virtually all ancient seal designs do, whatever other cultural realms they may reference.

Despite these objections, I think Wengrow is onto something here. It is, however, important to remember that "the proper understanding of any symbol lies in a holistic and in-depth study of the cultural context in which it operates rather than in any universal typology or theoretical model" (Lessa and Vogt 1979, 93). It is also essential to be aware of the audiences for these messages (see Rothman 1994). I suspect

that by discovering why branding and ancient sealing design are different phenomena the author may be in a better position to understand what the evolutionary connection between them might be.

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Wengrow compares present-day commodity branding with ancient Near Eastern sealing and labelling practices from a variety of areas and periods. In particular, he argues that both the Urban Revolution of the 4th millennium BC and the Industrial Revolution could be characterized as "brand economies" showing comparable processes of image-based commoditization. Branding would in both cases have fulfilled the society's need to create new forms of cultural identities at a time when traditional ones were being eroded by the increase in scale of political and economic relations.

Comparison of the Urban Revolution with the development of modern capitalistic societies is not totally new. Algaze's (1993) application of Wallerstein's world-system theory to the Uruk period, despite recent critiques (see Rothman 2001b; Postgate 2002), still represents the prevailing interpretative model of the so-called Uruk expansion. This contribution, however, extends the comparison to a hitherto unexplored sector, thereby raising a number of intriguing issues about sealing practices in the ancient Near East.

Wengrow's starting point is a comparison between the label attached to a jar from a 3000 BC royal tomb in Abydos and a modern wine label, which reveals unexpected similarities between these two objects and emphasizes the complex relations between written and visual language which characterize them. As intriguing as this example may be, its connection with the sealing practices discussed later appears somewhat weak. Similarly, the paragraphs that explore commodity branding/marketing/stamping in its multiple manifestations in time and space are rather impressionistic and concern aspects of commodity branding whose relations with ancient sealing are not always straightforward.

The main achievement of second part of the paper is to draw attention to the fact that the act of sealing, in the context of early urban Mesopotamia, marks a change in the status of the sealed ware, which is transformed from an individual product into a "type" of product and can thus become incorporated into an administered flow of labour and resources. This need to reduce individual items to administrable categories appears to have been crucial for Uruk-period society: it is especially evident in the classificatory effort represented by the earliest lexical lists but can also be found in the most varied fields of the material culture—for example, in the standardization of ceramic wares and typologies and of brick dimensions and even in the appearance of a new iconographic repertoire.

A point which remains insufficiently clarified is, however, how this general meaning of the act of sealing is related to the use of individual seals—in other words, what specific meanings the images incised on the seals were intended to convey. Though sealed goods may in some cases have travelled over long distances, seals were used primarily in the management of local resources, and wares were sealed not only in their place of production but mainly in the place where they were stored and redistributed. Therefore, it seems improbable that the main function of seal images was to mark the exotic origin of a ware. Wengrow suggests that they may have acted as a guarantee of authenticity and quality. If quality control was really a crucial issue, however, it must have been achieved exclusively through the community's confidence in the officials who were entitled to use specific seals, since seal images do not convey any specific information about the type and quality of wares. Furthermore, the same seals were used to seal various movable containers (presumably, therefore, containing commodities of different types), the doorways of storerooms, and various types of documents. Finally, it is possible that the "final consumer" was unable to check the mark on the sealed ware because it had been unpacked by the official in charge before he received it.

The specific feature which characterizes the ancient sealing system as opposed to modern branding is, instead, the strict control over the management and distribution of the stored wares that it allows as a guarantee against effraction and as a way of keeping track of the movement of wares. This aspect appears to have been rather overlooked in Wengrow's discussion but could be integrated into his comparison with modern branding. The crucial point here is the power of the institution to control the flow of specific wares which were not readily available to individuals and to grant access to them either in the form of rations in exchange for work or on special ceremonial occasions. "Branding" a ware through the impression of a seal could thus signal restricted access to it and transform it into an object of desire whose possession could be obtained through integration into the central institution. The use of a shared iconographic repertoire emphasizing the ruler's position at the top of the urban organization for the seal designs certainly played an important role in this integration process whatever the individual images used, their main function being to identify the official responsible for a specific administrative action.

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07

This is a fascinating and important paper which demonstrates the power of material-culture studies when they do not start out by chopping up time into segments assumed to be so different that they cannot be understood with commensurate

tools and theories. It is refreshing and heartening to see this kind of work at a time when, in the United States at least, archaeologists and sociocultural anthropologists often talk about going their separate ways.

Nevertheless, I suspect that some archaeologists will find the connection between soft-drink brands and ancient cylinder seals facile. Part of the resistance to an argument like the one made in this paper is the legacy of half a century of substantivist economic anthropology built on Polanyi's (1944) argument that the logic, institutions, and modes of exchange (and by implication the subjectivity) of modern capitalism are fundamentally of a different order from those which came before (Pyburn n.d.). But while archaeologists and anthropologists working on putatively noncapitalist societies continue to use this boundary to justify a kind of exceptionalism which rejects comparisons between ancient and contemporary as simple ethnocentrism, they may not have noticed that the rest of social science and cultural studies has trampled down the fence running in the opposite direction. Recent times have seen an enthusiastic looting of the anthropological and archaeological corpus of concepts and their productive application to an understanding of the putatively "modern" world of commodity capitalism, which turns out to be full of fetishism, magic, kinship, and mystery. The brand has turned into a veritable icon of the "primitive" elements of modern consumer culture, and this makes this paper especially timely and intriguing.

I would argue that part of the reason archaeologists have had a problem thinking productively about labels, brands, seals, and stamps is that they fall uncomfortably across the line between *function* and *style*, another pernicious dichotomy which mirrors the Polanyi divide between tradition and modernity. On one hand, stamps have the simple function of sealing a vessel and attesting to some specific qualities of the contents. On the other hand, they are full of symbolic meaning and cultural significance, since from the time of their invention they have been used not just for common goods but for luxury products, items which are associated with elites, religion, trade, and politics.

I find the same combination of utility and fantasy in the nineteenth-century explosion of branding in the British commercial food trade. Branding has the overt function of marking and certifying qualities and quantities of goods which may not be measurable for intermediate traders or consumers. Initially private brands guarantee quality in an expanding and open trading system in which governments, market officials, and local trade authorities are no longer willing or able to regulate and certify the quality and purity of food and drink. (Why governments are sometimes able to regulate and control quality to the point that brands are not needed or can be suppressed is a question worth pursuing.)

But *quality* is never just a simple measurable and objective attribute of an object, particularly a complex processed food or beverage. The very qualities which give market value to commodities like smoked ham, tea, wine, rum, mineral water,

anchovy paste, and biscuits are their perceptually subjective taste, smell, and appearance, which are open to influence through persuasion, status competition, and emulation—all classic attributes of cultural capital. So while one voice of the brand is always *information* and the implied warranty of objective purity and safety, its other voice is persuasion and uses the iconic and referential language of which Wengrow speaks so eloquently. (And since cultural capital is always involved with social inequalities, which in turn are always justified through some combination of religion, ethnicity, gender, age, wealth, kinship, and mythos, we can expect that brands will always make some kind of iconic connection with those sources of power.) This persuasive power is why, when their favorite brands of beverages are shorn of their branded packaging, people are usually unable to identify them and why children find that carrots served in a McDonald's wrapper taste better than the same carrots without it. One simply cannot separate "function" from "meaning"—they are two sides of the same coin.

I would argue that archaeologists can usefully follow Wengrow's lead and rethink the meaning of other ubiquitous past artifacts and their roles in trade. A recent paper about complex trade systems in prehistoric Arizona seems to assume that the only reason pottery was traded from place to place was that every household was avidly collecting sets of imported decorated earthenware. It is not that I would discount the possibility that prehistoric people were as interested as contemporary consumers in collecting things, but isn't it at least possible that the contents of the pots were the objects of trade and the decoration a sign of the origins of the contents?

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Wengrow's thesis that one can not only better understand the sealing of cultural production in ancient times in terms of discourses surrounding late-capitalist commodity branding but also see the phenomenon as not limited to the modern economy is intriguing and ambitious. Branding, then, serves as a way to indicate origin, authenticity, and value. It is perhaps not surprising that the analytic discourse seems to have begun in France, home of the ultimate authenticating sign "appellation contrôlée." To the discussion of Baudrillard and advertising imagery should then be added the work of Roland Barthes, in particular his study of the semiotics of commodity recognition through effective packaging (1977 [1964]).

Both Baudrillard and Barthes recognized a wide variety of signaling intentions through visual imprint—the larger rubric under which one might pursue "branding." The broader context in which *commodity* marking exists is one in which *marking* per se needs to be considered in order to argue for particular mechanisms operative at a given moment. In addition

to the conditions of seal usage considered here, which are said to signal the shift from domestic to institutional production and storage of goods over the course of the Neolithic through the Uruk period (see also Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997 and Duistermaat 2000 on control and storage with respect to sealings at Tell Sabi Abyad), one might also consider the LMLH ("to/of the king") sealings on Judean storage jar handles in the Israelite Iron Age, now understood to designate provisioning by the centers of fortified towns in anticipation of a siege (Na'aman 1986). Another significant moment of sealing/stamping/labeling on objects in the Near East would be the validating weight-mark, as in first millennium metal ingots stamped LBRKB ("to/of Bar-Rakib," the ruler of the city-state of Sam'al in the eighth century BCE), which is but a small step from formal coinage (Balmuth 1967).

These signs differ from the cases considered, offering more subtle signals in the relationships between mark, control, and jurisdiction, on the one hand, and value, on the other. In addition, the overlap between commodity/brand labeling and other acts of "marking" by seals across the range of ancient production, consumption, and recording suddenly becomes important. The Uruk period is the very historical moment at which writing systems began to be widely employed to record and legitimize economic transactions in general. As one moves from commodity markings by uninscribed seals in the early periods to markings by inscribed seals in the later third millennium BCE, one has to note that the play between state/institution, official, and individual increases (e.g., Cassin 1987 [1960]; Winter 1991 [1987]), particularly as seals are used not only on commodities but on door sealings and, especially, on tablets. In short, if one is going to use the contemporary terminology of "commodity branding" as shorthand for the marking of products in relation to distribution and their subsequent recognition and consumption in preindustrial, pre-capitalist economies, then the phenomenon must be viewed within a larger system of visual signaling through marking in general—considering, for example, how the signal may have changed once inscription, including named authority and office, was added to the seal and how such seals were also used on official tablets of the period.

For the Uruk period, the breakdown of competing models, particularly those articulated by Algaze and Stein, sets the stage for Wengrow's more integrative alternative. Yet, however well the framework may represent the situation in northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia at sites like Habuba Kabira, I wonder how Wengrow feels the contemporary material from Godin Tepe on the Iranian plateau would fit within the larger frame of expanded activity from the Susiana as well as the Mesopotamian alluvium. His citations of Andrew Sherratt's work make the loss of him all the more acute, precisely with respect to the social value accorded recognition of "lengthened chains of transference."

I appreciate Wengrow's insistence that since labels do not communicate in a language-like way, they should be treated not as visual language but as visual signing and that sealing

has to be understood as metaphor as well as practice. Fanselow (1990) is useful on the buyer's ability to identify the "provenance" of a commodity through labeling, but this raises the additional issue of "style" as indicator of provenance. If one looks at studies of provenance determined through visually distinctive features (Wobst 1977; see also Winter 1998), it becomes clear that such recognition makes style and iconography active elements in value/identification no less than labeling (yet another criticism of Alfred Gell's [1998] limited definition of the job of the anthropologist in assessing the social function of artifacts!).

In any case, Wengrow's reflections upon sealing complexity in direct relationship to expanding sociocultural, political, and economic activities, whether due to internal development, external trade, or a combination of the two, is instructive. The full range of significance for product marking and for marking in general, however, remains to be explored.

Reply

One of my primary aims in writing this article was to explore the robustness of branding as an analytical concept for anthropological research and in particular to investigate its applicability to archaeological data from periods of social change for which little or no written documentation is available. Could, for example, ancient sealing practices represent early attempts at regulating not just the movement of goods but also the meanings people attributed to these objects and to themselves? In pursuing this line of investigation my broader purpose was to consider whether—in the process of trying to establish a distinctive body of "consumer culture theory"—certain aspects of contemporary mass consumption have been unnecessarily reified as symptoms of and symbols for "modernity" in the academic literature. No ready-made framework of analysis was available for a comparative study of ancient and modern forms of branding. Accordingly, it was necessary to range widely across existing approaches—semiotic, historical, and ethnographic—and to situate these within the wider anthropological literature on gifts, commodities, and notions of value.

I am grateful to the respondents for their stimulating comments, which show how the approach I develop might be expanded in various directions. The majority (Algaze, Miller, Rova, Wilk, Winter) find nothing controversial or inherently problematic in my attempt to develop a cross-disciplinary framework for the analysis of branding. Their wide-ranging remarks confirm my conviction that such a broad approach is worth pursuing and can provide insight into both ancient and modern cultures of commodity branding and the historical relationships between them. Two commentators (Rothman and Holt) have, by contrast, chosen to focus upon a single strand of my argument: that which addresses the

(limited) relevance of semiotic approaches to brand signs through a comparison of two commodity labels. Neither makes clear the reasons for this selective approach, so it is often difficult to respond to their critical points other than by referring them to the substance of the article. Nevertheless, their comments help to highlight some central features of my argument, if only by way of contrast.

Contrary to the approach taken by Rothman, my analysis does not in fact proceed by treating brands as a "type of symbol." Instead I follow and seek to expand upon Fanselow's (1990) treatment of branding as a distinct type of transactional order based upon the substitutability of standardized goods and labor. The symbolic content of brand signs, as Wilk and Miller concur, responds to a tension between the depersonalizing (bureaucratic) aspects of this transactional order and the consequent need to reintroduce such goods to society by linking them to generic cultural values and aspirations. Rothman's interpretation of figures 1 and 2 seems to me to exclude many salient features of both objects and falls squarely into the kind of function/style dichotomy discussed by Wilk. His observations on people's behavior in markets are tangential to Fanselow's main argument, which concerns the different types of knowledge and relationships that underpin *perceptions* of quality in economies based on standardized and non-standardized goods. The key distinction here is between transactional systems in which trust, authority, and appreciation are grounded in material properties of the goods themselves and systems based upon interpersonal relationships (e.g., of kinship, locality, or tradition) between buyers and sellers. To suggest, moreover, that systems of quality control were alien to "ancient Mesopotamian societies" (as Rothman does) runs counter to a great deal of textual evidence from both the late fourth millennium BC and subsequent periods of Mesopotamian history. In the interest of brevity I call his attention again to the importance of commodities in early systems of administrative metrology and numeration, to the proliferation of written notation for different classes of the same commodity (e.g., beer, cheese, butter oil, textiles), and to the extensive evidence for close monitoring of different ingredients for processed consumables in accounting documents. The much later development of monetary systems based on finely graded alloys of silver is also worth a mention in this context (see Powell 1996, 232–34; and Winter, above).

Rova is sympathetic to my overall reading of the archaeological evidence but raises questions about the interpretation of cylinder-seal use in the late fourth millennium BC. She objects to the notion that Uruk seal impressions served as marks of quality and provenance on the ground that sealing practices were used mainly in the context of local resource management rather than long-distance trade. However, it is not clear to me why quality and provenance—including the (mis)representation of mundane, mass-produced goods as originating in the realm of sacred power and kingship—would be of less interest to local consumers than to distant ones. Here "provenance" should be understood not in a narrow

geographical sense but in terms of the active construction of fictional biographies for everyday goods, biographies which may (for example) invoke imaginary landscapes and supernatural beings as points of origin for the products of human labor. The gravitation of people towards urban centers is no less striking a feature of the fourth millennium BC than the spread of particular urban lifestyles over vast distances. What was attracting them?

Rova also suggests that an analogy between Uruk sealing practices and modern branding is weakened by the evidence that particular Uruk seals were used to mark mobile goods of different types, as well as administrative tablets and the entrances to storerooms. How exactly is this different from the contemporary use of logos to project a unified institutional image across architectural spaces, official documents, and a diverse range of merchandise (think of McDonald's, or the University of Oxford)? Her view that imagery on late-fourth-millennium seals does not convey information about the products to which seals were attached but rather encodes the identity of particular officials within the urban administration follows traditional scholarly opinion. This in itself, however, should not prevent her from addressing the counter-arguments presented in this paper and in an earlier article by Pittman (2004) to which I refer. I also find it hard to accept her suggestion of a significant time-lag between the unsealing of Uruk-period containers and the consumption of their contents, as the latter were usually organic and liable to be ruined by exposure.

A central argument of my paper, developed in the comments by Wilk and Miller, is that the intense fusion of mass-produced homogeneity and powerful cultural symbolism—an instantly recognizable feature of contemporary brands—is not in fact unique to modern material culture. The archaeological record furnishes many examples other than those I have discussed, and it would be rewarding to expand the comparative analysis still further. Susan Sherratt (1999, 189), for instance, finds similar qualities in the mass-produced assemblages of painted pottery that circulated throughout much of the eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age:

Again it is the multi-valency of the overall impression that succeeds in making these pots socially and culturally attractive: fine textiles, chariots, precious metal vessels associated with elite drinking rituals, bulls as symbols of divine or regal power in Near East and Aegean alike—all undeniably elite symbols, and all . . . subjects of international exchange at the highest level; but all wrapped up in a run-of-the-mill clay pot suitable for being lost forever in a tomb or for possession and use by someone who may belong to a less than super-elite stratum of society, but nevertheless has his social pretensions and aspirations.

In the local imitation and adaptation by Cypriot middlemen of established (Aegean) ceramic forms and decorative schema, Sherratt further identifies deliberate marketing strategies in

the second millennium BC that are no different in their essentials from the contemporary phenomenon of fake branding. Her work reinforces an important point raised here by Winter concerning the need to incorporate visual style and iconography into a consideration of early branding strategies even where specialized marking devices such as seals and labels are absent. I further agree with Winter's observation that a discussion of ancient sealing as branding must always be situated in a consideration of the "larger system of visual signaling through marking in general." In this context it is worth noting cases in which cylinder seals were rolled directly onto the bodies of standardized ceramic storage jars before firing rather than onto clay sealings. In the Early Bronze Age Levant this form of decorative packaging is thought to have been used by competing local producers to increase the desirability and distinctiveness of particular varieties of olive oil by linking them to specific centers of ritual activity (e.g., Joffe 2001).

Holt's response seeks to question the terms of the debate on branding and modernity set out in my paper. That most researchers assume branding to have become a significant factor in the transformation of human societies through its recent articulation with Western capitalism is, in his view, a misconception. In suggesting otherwise he is able to produce only a single supporting reference, to his own (2006) paper setting out terms for a sociological approach to branding. Placing that citation in its full context, however, gives a very different impression of its meaning from the one implied by his response (2006, 299):

Brands have been elemental to markets since traders first marked their goods as a guarantee for customers who lived beyond face-to-face contact. Yet it wasn't until the late 19th century—when American hawkers of patent medicines began using their brands to promote not only physical remedies but also therapeutic salves for social ailments—that brands became important agents in what we now understand as consumer society. In the decades that followed, Madison Avenue creatives emulated this strategy, embedding intangible ideals in an assortment of everyday branded goods. Branding became an increasingly sophisticated enterprise, tagging along as western societies moved from uniform statuses of mid-century mass society to the fragmented individuated statuses of the postmodern.

In the first sentence of this passage, Holt subsumes brands under the much broader category of traders' marks. As Frank Schechter (1925) pointed out long ago, this is a false equation. Particularly important in this regard is Schechter's distinction between the use of product labeling as an aid in marketing commodities and its use as a means of regulating the activities of producers and merchants—a contrast which forms the basis of Hamilton and Lai's (1989) comparison between late imperial China and medieval Europe (see, more recently, Hamilton 2006, 93–126). In China the use of commodity labels in advertising can be traced back at least to the beginning of the Sung dynasty in the tenth century AD. According

to Hamilton and Lai, the contrasting use of product marking as a protectionist strategy—designed to maintain professional or state monopolies over certain goods and trading networks—was characteristic of medieval guilds in Europe. Given that Holt does not distinguish clearly between brands and other kinds of product marking, it is worth citing Schechter's (1925, 78) formulation of this contrast at some length:

The characteristics of the typical craftsman's mark of the Middle Ages [in Europe] were: (1) that it was compulsory, not optional; (2) that its purpose was the preservation of guild standards of production and the enforcement of guild or other local monopolies rather than the impressing on the mind of the purchaser of the excellence of the product in question and thereby the creation of a psychological need for that product; (3) that, consequently, while the modern trade-mark is distinctly an asset to its owner, the medieval craftsman's mark was essentially a liability.

In the remainder of the passage from his article, Holt asserts that brands first became an important force for social change in the context of American consumer culture and specifically through the development of the modern advertising industry. How does he reconcile this view with Hamilton and Lai's discussion, now almost two decades old, of the importance of branding in late imperial China, let alone my own arguments concerning early societies in the Middle East?

In fact, Holt's comments largely avoid the substance of my article, introducing points of detail about contemporary brands that are diversions from the main argument (which is in fact based upon much more than an isolated comparison of ancient and modern labels). Nowhere have I suggested that De Bortoli has only one brand of wine or that "artisan" brands represent the full range of modern branding strategies. It is Holt who is setting up straw men here. Only on one point is he correct: I have no interest in reporting that the most successful Australian wine brand currently features a colorful wallaby, which is not germane to the points I make in my comparison of an ancient Egyptian (not, *contra* Holt, Mesopotamian) commodity label (not, *contra* Holt, seal) and a modern Australian one. Rather my concern in these early sections of the paper is to show how a consideration of archaeological data reveals the deep social origins and cognitive foundations of branding as material practice, in turn opening up new perspectives on historical and contemporary forms of commoditization (see comments by Algaze, Wilk, and Miller).

Holt appears to be concerned that anthropologists and archaeologists are not taking modern consumer culture seriously enough. Yet the nature of his response hints that a genuinely cross-disciplinary study of branding may in fact be of little interest to "those working in the sociocultural wing of marketing." Perhaps this is only natural (though no less disappointing for that), for such an approach leads the study of branding far beyond the conventional territory of market research and consumer culture theory (Coca-Cola, Microsoft,

Nike, etc.) into a consideration of much less familiar types of data. This lack of familiarity is evident from the factual errors and misunderstandings in Holt's representation of my work. The brief arguments he presents for the distinctiveness of contemporary branding strongly exemplify both the historical exceptionalism discussed here by Wilk and the monolithic conception of modern capitalist experience that Miller and others have criticized. As in many early- and mid-twentieth-century accounts, modern branding is defined by Holt in opposition to a hypothesized primordial state in which commodity fetishism does not exist, in which the meanings and qualities of material goods are transparent, in which specialized communication technologies are either absent or not worth describing, and in which social identities are constructed outside the realm of consumption. To see this position most strongly advocated not, as Wilk predicts, by an archaeologist but by a theorist of consumer culture serves only to reinforce Miller's call for greater dialogue between past and present. The ghost of Karl Polanyi may continue to haunt understandings of ancient and modern economies for some time to come, but I nevertheless look forward to further studies by researchers willing to cross "the great divide."

—David Wengrow

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