



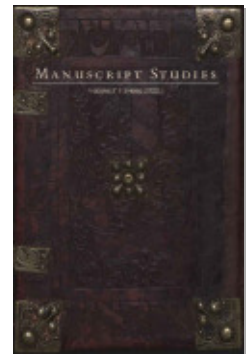
PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Artifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects* by  
Crystal B. Lake (review)

Megan L. Cook

Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for  
Manuscript Studies, Volume 7, Number 1, Spring 2022, pp. 212-216  
(Review)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mns.2022.0008>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/856955>

size of a Chancery sheet, you can understand why some books have mixed formats: one book, for example, can contain Royal paper in quarto, and Chancery paper in folio. The discussion of sizes and proportion of paper in chapter 2 is a long way from the discussion of the folding of paper in chapter 4, and the discussion in chapter 4 does not quite have the clarity it could (diagrams would have helped, and the poor design of the tables on pp. 174 and 175 does not).

Thanks to Da Rold we now know what is wrong with paper and scholars. It is that scholars have cut up paper study into nearly all of history's subdivisions: social, economic, codicological, political, literary, medicinal, art historical, et cetera; paper touches them all. It is also that scholars have generally considered paper as a support for their texts and those of their medieval forebears, and not as a technology that develops or an object that resonates in the medieval imagination. And so we have looked at fragments, but never the whole sheet. This is the great merit of Da Rold's book: it is a truly interdisciplinary study of paper in medieval England. Past studies can be placed in this landscape, future ones can sit in it, and the history of paper will be thicker.

Crystal B. Lake. *Artifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. 272 pp., 4 black and white photos. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-3650-0.

MEGAN L. COOK  
Colby College

THE CENTRAL THESIS OF Lake's work is twofold: first, that her titular category, the artifact, exists as a specific and specifically meaningful category of object, and second, that in the long eighteenth century, that meaning had a distinct political valence that animated writing about artifacts across a wide range of genres and contexts. Both of these arguments derive from the premise that, as historical objects, "artifacts could

communicate matters of fact that no living person could know for themselves" (12).

This ability to communicate the past comes with both affordances and limitations. Lake defines an artifact as "a fragment, but one that remains sufficiently intact to support reconstruction of the object's full shape and history" (6). Its relationship to its moment of origin or use is therefore a vexed one: while the artifact may, as a primary source, appear to offer neutral evidence about the past, "never enough of an artifact persists for either the reconstructions or the resulting interpretations of the object to be conclusive" (6). For Lake, this incompleteness may derive from an artifact's fragmented state or, more generally, from its detachment from its historical moment. It is in its incompleteness, Lake argues, that the artifact becomes a profoundly generative category of object. Without a doubt, the objects considered in *Artifacts* are engines of textual production, inviting study, analysis, and speculation in outsize relation to their relatively modest physical dimensions.

This book is divided into two parts, the first establishing a broad conceptual and historical framework for the idea of the artifact and the second consisting of case studies on four specific artifactual categories: coins and medals, manuscripts, weapons, and grave goods. While the book's subtitle characterizes artifacts as "found objects," the discovery of such objects is not a major consideration here (exceptions occur mostly in fiction, such as the ostensible found manuscript containing the story of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* or the statue in Shelley's "Ozymandias"). Instead, the writers in Lake's study tend to focus on the interpretation of these objects, bringing them to bear on the era's most intractable philosophical and political conflicts about history, governance, sovereignty, and the explanatory power of physical evidence.

Lake's first chapter, following the work of Arnaldo Momigliano and a host of more recent thinkers, including Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, Carlo Ginzburg, and Rita Felksi, establishes eighteenth-century antiquarianism and the study of artifacts as a discourse keyed into the central political concerns of the day. Depending on the way it was interpreted, an artifact might support a royalist or republican position, and might offer evidence in favor of either vitalist or materialist understandings of matter. In such a

context, artifacts function as vibrant, networked objects that invite interpretation and reinterpretation, Felski's "hermeneutics of suspicion" brought to bear on Ginzburg's "clues." In her second chapter, Lake delves more deeply into the intellectual and social contexts in which artifacts circulated during the eighteenth century, focusing on the objects displayed in the famous Don Saltero's coffeeshop in Chelsea and references to them in periodicals like Richard Steele's *Tatler* and Joseph Addison's *The Spectator*. The perspective cultivated in these publications, Lake argues, was deeply invested in qualities that anticipate Sianne Ngai's category of the "interesting," a category to which artifacts must certainly also belong. Thus, while the case studies of artifacts that follow explore writing across a range of eighteenth-century genres, periodical culture and its sensibilities remain a mainstay throughout.

In each of four case studies, Lake combines consideration of texts that seek to understand or document artifacts in their material particularity with those that treat them in a more fictive or literary way. The first explores numismatics, including both coins and medals, in the work of John Evelyn, John Dryden, Joseph Addison, and Charles Johnstone's popular satire *Chrysal*. While Evelyn endorses the use of coins as a subject for the study of history, the others uncover the limitations of the form's ability to attest reliably to the past. The second case study takes up manuscripts, beginning with a brief history of Sir Robert Cotton's library and the ways in which it served as a possible source of legal challenges through precedents found in its contents. The potential of Cotton's library and similar repositories to yield both true and potentially forged or misinterpreted archival material created both interest in and suspicion about manuscripts. They are, in Lake's excellent turn of phrase, "foxed with suspicion" (118). The affordances and suspicion occasioned by old manuscripts are also at work in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, the focus of the second half of this chapter. Walpole was himself a collector of manuscripts, and Lake argues that reading with an awareness of the ability of manuscripts to be manipulated creatively—"not as reliable historical documents but as entertaining fictions"—informs his treatment of both real books and fictional ones.

Lake then turns to weaponry, reading firsthand accounts of displays of historical weaponry in the Tower of London alongside salvos in the pitched battle between the ancients and moderns, including Jonathan Swift's *Tale of*

*a Tub* and Tobias Smollett's *Sir Launcelot Greaves*. Like wary visitors to the Tower, both Smollett and Swift articulate a tension between Enlightenment ideas and Britain's attachment to its bellicose past. The last, and most intriguing, of Lake's case studies takes up what she calls "grave goods": matter taken from, or very closely associated with, the bodies of a quartet of English sovereigns whose graves were opened for study during the long eighteenth century, including Charles I, executed in 1649 and raised during renovations in Windsor Castle in 1813. The bodies of these dead kings prove surprisingly, even unsettlingly, vibrant in ways that resist objective, disinterested treatment by their antiquarian excavators and inspire poetic meditations on tyranny from Byron and Shelley.

Although Lake's primary sources often deal with material of fascinating particularity (such as a liquid of uncertain nature taken from the tomb of Edward I), the book's focus is on textual representations of such matter across a wide range of literary and extra-literary genres. At times artifact and representation are closely related, but readers specifically interested in archaeology and antiquarianism should know that the book's main contribution lies not in our understanding of the history of these fields, but instead in the way that discourses around historical artifacts intersect with the broader currents of epistemology, literature, and politics in the long eighteenth century. While this approach allows Lake to approach her materials in ways that highlight their relevance to contemporary thought on the political life of objects, readers get a less clear picture of how these different categories of artifacts taken up in her case studies might have appeared meaningfully linked to their eighteenth-century handlers and custodians.

Lake has set herself an impressively broad brief in this book, and it does sometimes seem as though the material for individual chapters has been defined in ways that serve the book's overall thesis. The chapter on coins, for example, devotes significant attention to both coins and medals, but surely the fungibility of coins versus the more purely commemorative status of medals matters to their work as artifacts. The chapter on manuscripts focuses on legal and ostensibly documentary materials, and readers of *Manuscript Studies* in particular may wonder how other kinds of books, especially those that do not make such evidentiary claims, fit into the schema that Lake describes. Notably, the book focuses on British artifacts and, for the

most part, British authors, but does not explicitly consider the ways that discourse on artifacts may have fueled or been fueled by nationalism, empire, and colonialism in an era in which each of these played a major role in political and social thought. Given the wide range of material that Lake manages here, it is perhaps inevitable that *Artifacts* raises some questions that it does not answer, and it is much to be hoped that these questions will be explored—by Lake or by other scholars—in future work.

Nevertheless, understood on its own terms, *Artifacts* makes a clear intervention, demonstrating a pervasive (if not universal) connection between material objects and political discourse. In doing so, it offers a valuable new perspective on the long life of artifacts, and important critical perspective on the ways in which objects can signify far beyond their immediate context. It does this with remarkable clarity both synchronically, as it argues for the ways in which writing about artifacts and antiquities participated in English politics and literature, and diachronically, as it offers readings that explicitly connect contemporary thought to eighteenth-century texts. At a moment when we are keenly aware of the non-neutrality of museums, libraries, and curricula for study of the past, *Artifacts* offers fresh insight into the post-medieval discourses that shaped those institutions and the objects that they hold today.

Cécile Michel and Michael Friedrich, eds. *Fakes and Forgeries of Written Artefacts from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern China*. Studies in Manuscript Cultures 20. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2020. 344 pp., 82 color and black and white ill. €99,95. ISBN: 9783110714227.

KELLY TUTTLE

THE OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION, edited by Cécile Michel and Michael Friedrich, is a broad, entertaining, and thought-provoking set of thirteen chapters exploring different aspects of the production and reception of faked written artifacts. These artifacts include cuneiform tablets, inscribed