

New study finds that branding is older than previously thought

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From at least Bass Ale's red triangle—advertised as “the first registered trademark”—commodity brands have exerted a powerful hold over modern Western society. Marketers and critics alike have assumed that branding began in the West with the Industrial Revolution. But a pioneering new study in the February 2008 issue of *Current Anthropology* finds that attachment to brands far predates modern capitalism, and indeed modern Western society.

In “Prehistories of Commodity Branding,” author David Wengrow challenges the widespread assumption that branding did not become an important force in social and economic life until the Industrial Revolution. Wengrow presents compelling evidence that labels on ancient containers, which have long been assumed to be simple identifiers, as well as practices surrounding the production and distribution of commodities, actually functioned as branding strategies. Furthermore, these strategies have deep cultural origins and cognitive foundations, beginning in the civilizations of Egypt and Iraq thousands of years ago.

Branding became necessary when large-scale economies started mass-producing commodities such as alcoholic drinks, cosmetics and textiles. Ancient societies not only imposed strict forms of quality control over these commodities, but as today they needed to convey value to the consumer. Wengrow finds that commodities in any complex, large society needs to pass through a “nexus of authenticity.”

Through history, these have taken the form of “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.” Although capitalism and branding find in each other a perfect complement, they have distinct origins. Wengrow shows that branding has for millennia filled a deep-seated need for us humans to find value in the goods that we consume.

Sure to be provocative, “Prehistories of Commodity Branding” is necessary reading for a wide range of people, from those interested in the workings of ancient societies to anyone who is interested in understanding how marketing has developed into a powerful force in our lives.

Source: University of Chicago

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