

Assignment One. Diploma Programme in Archaeology. The Art of Interpretation
History and Theory of Archaeology.

In your opinion, why is it relevant to appreciate the social construction of ideas about the past?

Introduction.

The crisis in contemporary archaeological theory, arising from the loss of nerve, or innocence to put it another way (Clarke 1973), in a postmodern world, can be seen as symptomatic of society in general. In this essay I would like to explore how personality and style in theoretical texts in archaeology are a reflection of the rise and fall of paradigmatic schools of thought as the scientific model comes under scrutiny in the search for meaning, not just in the objects of archaeological enquiry- cultural change, material as symbol or societal structure, but also in the discipline itself.

The archaeological record has been assembled by dilettantes and academics, popularists and outsiders, over a period of fascinating development in the West. From an age of colonisation to an age of uncertainty, the subject has produced its own artifact: the theoretic text.

As an organism, the archaeological literature has grown, changed its character, developed arms and legs, has been torn apart by competitors, reassembled and given therapy, been reinvented, questioned and repositioned, made paranoid and highly self conscious and finally, perhaps, performed a disappearing trick in front of itself to its own surprise.

As society itself has changed, so inevitably has its agenda. If art can be considered a reflection of society, a system of self-analysis and focus, then surely science can be considered a cultural and technological product of neurosis. I would suggest that stress about the present and the future, a noticeable aspect of postmodern thought, is one of the reasons why a concern for the past, in the form of archaeological theory has come under such scrutiny. Knowledge is power, and whoever controls the tone and content of knowledge, 'Who sets the agenda?', (Yoffee and Sherratt, 1993) controls meaning and interpretation.

The question of cultural change, as evidenced in the archaeological record, must stem from a description of that record. Whilst this record can only ever be a small part of the whole past development of societies, it is the only absolute starting point, if we accept that the past is socially constructed by the present, at least in ideological terms. I want to suggest that the *scale* of attention has systematically shifted. If the focus of the earliest systematic studies was technological development, (Thomsen's Three Age System 1836), recent work has focussed on the individual's sensibility, whether the individual researcher or the individual in the past.

This essay can only really caricature an enormous literature, but it might be useful to see how one aspect of past societies has been socially constructed in the changing context of archaeological interpretation. Here we have the difficulties of two shifting elements, the conjectural past framed through comparative anthropological research and the unstable academic paradigm through which it is viewed, selected and theorised.

How are social ideas relevant to archaeology? Do they simply reflect the present?

If I take a range of historical and stylistic approaches to this question for one particular site, the Later Neolithic Monumental Complex at Avebury, dating around 2,700 B.C., one can ask the question “How did the layout of the site reflect the structure of society at the time of its construction and how was it interpreted?”

Avebury as a metaphor.

For such a large and unique site, the Avebury complex has been received in very different ways since its ‘rediscovery’ by John Aubrey in the *Britannia* (a description of antiquities) in 1695. Very little had been written up to that time, no mention in the Classical literature of Caesar or Tacitus, in comparison to Stonehenge, for example. Aubrey’s plan was made before massive changes were made to the site by stone-breakers during the 17th and 18th centuries. His comments include some observations of the builders of the site.

“..clear evidence that these monuments were Pagan-Temples, which was not made out before.”

Twining in 1723 decided that Avebury was a Roman Temple dedicated to the god Terminus, the Outer Circle added by Agricola to commemorate his voyage around Britain (Burl 1979).

By William Stukeley’s descriptions of the 1720s, the site lay in ruins. He based his date for the building of Avebury, 1859 B.C., on the year Abraham’s wife Sarah died. Many of his later critics assumed a Saxon or Roman date. His book of 1743 was called ‘Abury, a Temple of the British Druids’. ‘He was obsessed with Druidism and was convinced that the North and South inner circles were Temples of the Sun and Moon’ (Burl 1979) Stukeley decided that the whole was an image of the ‘sacred egg and snake. ‘Publick sacrifices, games, hymns, a sabbatical observance being there celebrated;’ (Stukeley 1743) Suggestions followed during the 19th C of a calendric function, an amphitheatre, planetarium, as being ‘built in the Dark Ages by people who had abandoned their forest shrines in which their wooden idols stood, in which their sacrifices were performed (Herbert 1849)

Smith (1885) described the builders of Avebury as people of a ‘low state of civilisation..men of small stature, of dark complexion....who must have carried on a perpetual struggle with the wild animals by which they were surrounded.’

One could endlessly record the various social contexts of the site over the years, but it has attracted a great deal of speculative interpretation. ‘Childe thought of it as a cathedral, Piggott as an open sanctuary associated with a sky god, Isobel Smith as dedicated to a fertility cult’ (Burl 1979) and Burl himself said ‘Death and regeneration are the themes’.

In popular writing the ideas proliferate. Bord (1979) quotes Thom view that many stones erected at this time had astronomical significance in their alignments with the sun and moon and ‘it is possible this is also true of Avebury.’ They also mention the possible ‘gendering’ of the stone shapes from the circle and avenue, and that ceremonies within the central area could be well observed by crowds lining the top of the banks. Dames (1977) puts Avebury at the centre of a vast seasonal processional, ritual landscape that included Silbury Hill, West Kennet Long Barrow, the Sanctuary, Windmill Hill causewayed camp and many natural features in the area. He called the whole concept ‘The Avebury Cycle’, connecting the area with an association made between human and natural cycles, the marking of rites of passage and especially the relationship between the farming year, birth, marriage and death. Meaden’s (1999) reading associates the site with sacred springs in a mythical landscape, linked to creation and fertility. He also sees images in the stones and finds

the whole landscape to be a concrete form of much more ancient belief in the significance of the landscape. 'Only the viewer who knows where and how to look will see the image'. He also quotes Stukeley suggestively in a final paragraph;

'But those that approached this place with a purpose of religion, and that understood the mystical meaning thereof, must be extremely affected with it'.

In some ways we are in Phenomenological territory here, but there is also a sense of esoterical experience, of an exclusion of the unknowing or unfeeling observer.

Thomas (1991), to return to more conventional literature, takes the monument as having a social function. 'Monuments were performative. Their construction involved the bringing together of large numbers of people...and this may have involved the creation and manipulation of indebtedness, affiliation and alliance.' Monuments 'were often used as the settings for ritual activities, in which communities were gathered together, but also segregated and categorised.' (p 223)

The archaeological text as artifact.

Social constructivism, whether weak or strong, suggests that 'scientific knowledge is not purely objective, but is at least partly or entirely socially constructed' (Johnson 1999 p.45). The confidence of the New Archaeologists, gained from a background in the natural sciences, in the objective nature of science can be seen as a reaction against the cultural-historical model of the early 20th century. This in turn challenged the cultural evolutionism inspired by Darwinism and Marxism, which had developed as a critique of Antiquarianism. Each phase claimed scientific rigor as a justification to challenge the previous paradigm until the 'loss of nerve' visible in Postprocessional literature.

If antiquarianism was an attempt to record the remaining monuments of Roman and pre-Roman date, to establish the cultural roots of the country, it was inspired by classical texts. These texts, in themselves an artifact of the conquerer, allowed a freedom from biblical certainty. A foundation of cultural stability, the realisation that the dates given for the beginning of the world were not only wrong but based upon misinterpretation, gave rise to stress. The whole of the structure of religious belief began to disintegrate. In its place stepped science. Scientific and cultural revolutions, the displacement of established order by 'rationalism' and the ambitions of the enlightenment produced a systematic ordering and classificatory approach. Mystery was replaced by systems, wonder by conformity. Now the nature of creation was a subject for dissection rather than theology. I would argue that the roots of postmodernism can be found in the replacement of religion by science which questions the validity of any kind of conclusion couched in a post-colonial, gendered society.

As evolutionary theory was applied to cultural and social change, archaeologists could begin to adopt a more scientific and professional approach. Geographical and environmental concerns were less studied and a hierarchy of human development was used as a justification for colonialism and economic exploitation. The penetration of the dark heart by an enlightened occupation replaced an indigenous world view with another. The stress of occupation and 'responsibility' rebounded in a post-colonial neurosis that is still evident.

Supported by diffusionist hierarchy, in which the spread of technology and culture was seen as the correcting duty of the 'higher races', the occupation of one culture and the shrinkage of another has been a marked source of stress in the 20th century. So we can expand cultural dominance to an imperialist control of resources. Core and

peripheral cultures breed an atmosphere of dependence and resentment. Although development can be autonomous there is still a sense of a 'higher' or 'developed' culture visible in the post-colonial phase. Even the explanation of diffusion from the cultural core of the Middle East was coloured by a depreciation of that core that continues to this day.

Binford's (1962) emphasis on the interrelationship of three facets of culture-economic, social and ideological, adapted from Hawke's (1954) 'ladder of inference', allowed a new consideration of the processes involved in the formation of complex societies. His confidence in the abilities of archaeology to consider the wider reasons and implications of social change increased both the public and academic status of the discipline. This optimism was couched in a new 'scientific' approach at a time when the status of science was becoming so strong that political and ideological change was marked by a huge confidence in technology. That positivism should be the aim of all archaeological method in the light of Hawke's ladder seems extraordinarily confident today and must have been an element of stress in archaeological circles at the time. In practice the system of hypothesis, theory and counter theory as a prerequisite of research plans produced, instead of an explicit literature, a dense cloud of positional strategies.

Post-processionalists distrusted the New Archaeology's positivism and its emphasis on the macro-theory. Big questions and big social structures ignored the details and the individuals. At the same time the new approach attempted to re-address Hawke's ladder at the sharp end- ideological and cognitive elements of culture. I would argue that this emphasis has re-bounded on archaeological theory and the production of text. The loss of nerve has led to an infolding of focus and an introversion of ambition. Now the Emperor's new clothes are made of paper, more specifically printed texts. As 'other' (a vital concept in the new paranoia) academic societies emerged from the post-colonial institutions (including post-emancipation institutions as men could be read as having colonised women) a new range of issues emphasised ownership and vested interests. All views were held to be, at least for the sake of balance, equally valid. It could be argued that the emphasis on interpretative approaches destabilises the position, authority and function of archaeology and its various discourses fuel the dispersal of voices outwards, away from a new paradigm.

As landscape is an artifact, an object of the gendered, classed, aged gaze, so the production of text about an essentially constructed past is conditioned by social and cultural upbringing. The control and manipulation of nature can be extended to the control and manipulation of meaning, not just in the past, but in the present and in the future. The influence of social constructivism on theories about the past is symptomatic of the growing paranoia about control of the individual and personal consciousness of experience. We are conditioned as social individuals, fed stories by the media and taught to structure the world according to convention.

'All academic thought is political in nature' (Marx 1906)

The sense of being caught in someone else's explanation of society, of being 'a pawn in their game' must be a significant aspect of much contemporary discourse. The paranoia of the loss of belief, in a post-Darwinian society and once the New Labour honeymooners had gone their separate ways has caused a new need for certainty in a world order under siege.

This stylistic shift in some recent texts seemed to produce a flailing around for purpose, despite some more positive attempts at optimism.

‘It doesn’t matter what you say as long as you say it in the right way; as long as you conform to the rules of positivist/empiricist discourse, rational method’ (Johnson 1999 quoting Shanks and Tilley 1992)

The application of Middle Range Theory is based on Uniformitarian assumptions, but can we assume anything? There is a conflict with positivism which can never be solved. Thoughts and symbols are untestable, interpretations are hermeneutic and rationality is an ideological construct. The scientific and even the academic process is a chauvinistic control mechanism, so where now?

A new positivism (not in the scientific sense) equates this confusion with other disciplines, notably in the social sciences. The successful establishment of academic departments in the 1960s produced a generation of academics who moved into senior positions from an earlier confrontational stance. This progression bred a swath of conferences that were inclusive of a range of disciplines, contributors and styles, marked by a jockeying for position and influence. This left the discussion wide open. The production of papers this system produced was a self-perpetuating cycle of discourse, which a relativist would see as self-defeating. However, this bulging organism, to return to my original image, is a living, breathing entity. It has evolved away from the rigidity of paradigmatic control which I would argue is a typically contemporary position.

In the Art World, where the production of artefacts is controlled by the market place, meaning is controlled not by the producer or the consumer but by the packaging. The context of the exposure controls the interpretation. There is a wearisome avoidance of meaning which changes according to circumstances. Public understanding is discouraged. Instead a mystique of authority, ‘genius’ and value is promoted, neatly avoiding the difficult questions of public money, relevance and priority. Where convenient, creative behaviour and production is hijacked by academia, government, marketing and commerce. Most people understand this and are no longer willing to have ‘the wool pulled over their eyes’. Artists accept that to be a commercial success you produce what is required of you, take your 50% and are grateful for the attention. The ‘boys club’ exists as a self-congratulatory, non-judgement but selective system. Many artists seek to side-step this process, preferring instead to engage directly with their audience, clients, public or supporters. They accept, like archaeologists, that there is a large community of critics, theorists, writers and polemicists who produce their own self-perpetuating product. It is often esoteric, intended for a closed audience and not necessarily very usefully connected to the production of art. On one hand it improves the academic and intellectual status of artistic production and of the artists themselves. On the other hand it obscures, misinterprets or overcomplicates the relationship of art and society, which is complex enough already.

I wonder if the field archaeologist has the same relationship with the academic archaeologist. The dichotomy seems characteristic of the human condition. It may be seen as one aspect of culture: production and analysis.

‘As rhetoric, archaeology cannot be separated from its audience.’
Shanks and Tilley 1987

‘...another universal theory developed by the academic community in order to maintain privileged control of the ‘correct’ interpretation of the past’
Hodder 1991