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The archaeological culture concept: Hot or cold understandings

Marie Louise Stig Sørensen

Outline of an argument

The idea of culture is amongst archaeology's most distinct intellectual tools. It is central to most of our assumptions, interpretations, and arguments - whether this is acknowledged or not. As a distinct part of our disciplinary skeleton it underwrites our reasons and provides us with a basis for drawing interpretative distinctions amongst the objects and other remains that we study. Critique of the concept is common, occurring and waning with changing epistemologies and theoretical concerns. Recent critiques have in particular been reacting against the rigidity of definitions and the tendency of the concept of culture to bring complex assumptions about human behaviour into our analyses, or, alternatively, their lack of regard for humans. Reactions have also arisen from how the intellectual and political baggage of the concept, including the lingering guilt about how it has been used during certain periods, such as the mid-20th century, limits how we can

think with it. Recent critiques have also made it clear that we need to engage with ideas about cultures in a manner that simultaneously allows us to explore and use it and, nonetheless, avoids essentialising or universalising human cultured behaviour. Despite such concerns, in terms of archaeological practice the critiques have tended to be limited to redefinition of cultural borders or changes in the criteria used to identify cultures, and they have had little practical influence on how we approach material culture.

The traditional archaeological concept of culture has thus proven surprisingly resistant on an ontological level. It seems that we - in one way or another - need to assume cultures exist; such assumptions appear to be a prerequisite for our analyses to acquire focus. Without some notion of culture we are analytically impoverished; may be even working as if we were blindfolded. So, it may be necessary to accept that we need 'culture' as it helps us to delimitate

subject matters and materials. At the same time, however, exactly because of this centrality it is essential that we continuously engage critically with questions about what 'culture' is, whose culture we are referring to, and on what premises cultures are recognised to avoid the term becoming stale and entrapping our thinking. With that challenge in mind, how can we argue for 'culture'? This is the question that I'll try to ponder in celebration of Elisabeth and her contribution to archaeological thinking.

Within the English Language the application of the term culture to human development began, according to Barnard and Spencer (1996), in the seventeenth century and gained more general meaning in the eighteenth century. They also point to how in German the word was linked to work of speculative history in the eighteenth century when it also started to be "... used in the plural in the sense of humanity being divided into a number of separate, distinct cultures." (1996: 136). It is this latter understanding of 'Culture' that has dominated archaeological thinking.

The development of the archaeological culture concept can be traced during the growth of archaeology as a discipline in the 19th century, when it gained distinct form through interchanges with discussions within other disciplines concerned with 'culture', such as ethnography. Despite similar roots, the concept of culture nonetheless gained a number of overlapping as well as potentially different meanings, including variations arising from their use within different disciplines. A simple example is the difference between its use in the biological sciences and the humanities, as in the distinction between references to bacterium cultures

versus archaeological cultures. More subtle differences were to be found within the humanities themselves, where, for instance, the archaeological concept is strongly linked to objects and geographical spread whereas anthropology has tended to emphasise culture as an adjective and thus an aspect of behaviour.

During the 20th century the further development and refinement of archaeology included periods of renewed attention to the concept of culture; a common aim was to provide universal and clear definitions. Such changes were often, however, also informed by larger ideological concerns or by theoretical developments within the Humanities generally when basis assumptions and procedures were being challenged. The influential arguments of the *Kulturkreislehre*, which flourished in the beginning of the 20th century and which assumed "...that similar forms of material culture in different geographical areas must have had a common source" (Sørensen & Rebay-Salisbury 2008: 62) is, for example, strongly influenced by nationalism and evolutionary thinking. This became even stronger expressed in the work of the German archaeologist Kossinna, who at roughly the same time explicitly argued for a link between distribution, assemblages and people stating that "...sharply defined archaeological culture areas correspond at all times to the areas of particular peoples or tribes" (Kossinna 1911: 3, after Sørensen & Rebay-Salisbury 2008: 62). The positivist influence behind New Archaeology is an important example of the effect of epistemological changes; in this case resulting in a search for a definition of culture that was universally applicable and unambiguous, and therefore a 'correct definition'. Binford,

for instance, famously rejected the vagueness of the cultural-historical school (or the normative approach, as he called it) and argued:

One obvious shortcoming of this theoretical position [the normative approach] has been the development of archaeological systematics that have obviated any possibility of measuring multivariate phenomena and permit only the measurement of unspecified "cultural differences and similarities," as if these were univariate phenomena. As an alternative to this approach, it is proposed that culture be viewed as a system composed of subsystems, and it is suggested that differences and similarities between different classes of archaeological remains reflect different subsystems and hence may be expected to vary independently of each other in the normal operation of the system or during change in the system.

(Binford 1965: 203)

As an attribute to Elisabeth I shall in the following try to use the idea of hot and cold interpretations (Uzzell 1989) to explore the idea of culture from a different angle. My reflections are in various ways inspired by Elisabeth's work, her ability to gently but persistently challenge us in terms of how we think and what we assume, and her generous sharing of ideas and introspection. In particular, I was inspired by a recent conversation during which Elisabeth was pondering whether Hannah Rydh's work in India during the 1950s may be understood as an essentially post-colonial practice before a post-colonial-consciousness had come into existence and the term coined. I believe she used post-colonial practice to refer to

a particular way of being professional, including Hannah Rydh's attitudes and ways of interacting with the local people, and also as a particular way of approaching the thinking project – what was considered important questions and how this was approached.

This conversation made me think, again, about the discussion within gender archaeology about whether there are gendered ways of thinking, and how we might recognise and understand them. During the 1990s questions were frequently raised not only about gendered understanding but also about whether such gender differences should be explored and celebrated or isolated as an entirely negative result of male control and suppression. I then began to think about writing a small piece on whether the archaeological culture concept is essentially masculine. The first challenge, however, was in some ways about honesty: if we can trace an objective-orientated, and thus stereotypically a masculine, definition of culture in 19th and 20th century archaeological literature does that mean that there has to be a counterpart feminine way of thinking, and can we assume that how we think today is still masculine? If that masculine way of thinking was part of a science regime formulated at a time which did not embrace female practitioners as equal, and which therefore created separate voices and shapes of thoughts, what implications, if any, does that have for gendered thinking today? Was it a false, and wrong, starting point to think about the archaeological cultural concept in terms of aiming to replace an earlier masculine concept with a contemporary (and better!) feminine one? My arguments stalled at this point.

Apart from other issues, I realised that for me, there was a tension between emphasising and looking for, on one hand, gendered ways of thinking and, on the other hand, recognising disciplinary socialisation. Working in university education, I cannot but recognise the socialisation, and in particular the disciplining, that education enacts on us. How the aims of education is to teach us to think and perform in particular ways; and how this more or less explicitly aims to erase or override both the individual way of thinking and other particularistic thinking forms. May be, therefore, gendered thinking within academia is a complex idea, and not easily entangled. It also seems that the potential for locating specific gendered ways of thinking has become even more complex now that feminism and gender research have penetrated academic consciousness to some degree. In a post-modern and post-colonial world gendered ways of thinking may not simply be claimed as coming from gendered individuals, but may rather reflect, and be rooted in, more complex relationships between power, gender, and knowledge.

Among other factors, conformity is a strong force (both as a means of enforcing discipline and as a means of empowerment), and being part of and working within particular disciplinary formed knowledge systems and traditions is often more tempting, and might be experienced as more 'natural', than stepping outside.

The pull of the disciplinary consensus affects all genders. So even if there are clear signatures of a masculine 'way of thinking' underwriting our discipline, it does not follow that it by now is performed only by men - we are all complicit and implicated. At the same time, we should recognise that the possibility of alterity, of subversion, or simply of following other trends also exercises power and pull. Rather than looking explicit for a feminist understanding of culture, I therefore began to wonder about whether some of these tensions, and possibility, may exist or could be allowed to exist, within how we think about central concepts such as 'culture'. The challenging question therefore became not whether the archaeological concept of culture is masculine, but about how that concept (with its baggage of assumptions and political motifs) may be reinterpreted as a concept where the defining characteristic is not that it is gender based or its links to the civilisation process but is about how we use language as a means of exploring the world. Then it becomes a matter of how we may challenge our assumptions and agendas so that our archaeological understanding of 'culture' becomes more than a means of tidying and categorising the world, to be "...living components of broad languages of inscription and evaluation" (Barnard & Spencer 1996: 137) and, I would add, curiosity and engagement.

Briefly about the archaeological concept of culture and practice

Such a complex of associated traits we shall call a “cultural group” or just a “culture”. We assume that such a complex is the material expression of what today we would call “a people”.

(V. Gordon Childe 1929: v–vi)

Definition of a Culture

The distinctive metal, bone, stone and pottery types (artifacts), regularly found associated in graves and settlements over a given geographical area, together with the peculiarities of the domestic and funerary structures in which they occur, constitute what is called a culture.

(V. Gordon Childe 1930: 41–42)

Within archaeology most definitions of culture are variations on the theme of the coexistence (association) of a range of objects. The spatial distribution of this coexistence is then used to define the spatial limits of, and thus the very existence of, a culture. These two fundamental criteria are used without any reference to human behaviour, to questions about identity and the ability of identifying with. This lack is commonly compensated for by how cultures in addition are recognised, clarified, and delimited on the basis of particular kinds of activities, such as burial practices or types of settlement forms, as in the second quote by V. Gordon Childe above. For the European Bronze Age, for example, changes in burial practices are used to define cultures, such as the *Tumulus Culture*, whereas bronze objects, and to a lesser

extent pottery, are used to identify spatially well-defined culture groups.

There has been little critical discussion of the epistemological problems of this definition, of the fact that the culture concept is essentially defined on the basis of two different kinds of practices. This is despite the obvious further repercussions arising from what it is we are separating and what we unite as belonging together. Therefore, even before we enter into any kind of existentialistic questioning of what cultures are, we are embroiled in a epistemological mix-up: the routine association between types and spatial distribution combines (and confuses) two different stages in the biography of the object as a basis for recognising cultures. An object's type is a result of its production, what it looks like is decided and designed at that initial stage (not, of course, without references to other contexts, but an object is nonetheless materially made in its production), whereas where it is found (and thus its spatial distribution) is due to the act of its final deposition or discard. The routine definition of culture thus relies on two separate aspects of objects and human behaviour, without any discussion of what practices link these two aspects. In practice, this problem is commonly recognised in discussions of ‘import’s, ‘imitations’, local copies’, acculturations and other terms that are used to explain away objects, which do not ‘fit’ what we in some ways recognise as a local ‘milieu’ of objects. So, despite maintaining a definition of culture that is bonded and explicit, in practice our cultures are permeable and porous in order to accommodate ‘common-sense’ understandings of what makes sense!

One of the main reasons why our definition of culture has resisted a change away from this reliance on types is, I suggest, found within its conception lineage. The concept developed during a time when industrial production played a significant social and political role: within the taken for granted primacy of production we hear the echoes of a 19th century worldview. In this view of the world, cultures were defined by the objects they produce – they were the signs of a culture's technical prowess and by implication its level of civilisations. It is thus not surprising that we struggling with applying the concept in a manner that makes sense of the past and helps us to understand it better.

Recognising such limitations does, however, help little, as meaningful analytical engagement with the past remains dependent on the ability to limit, classify, and differentiate within our evidence for/from the past. What our critique may help us towards, however, is to appreciate that we are allowed, indeed need, to explore and 'play' with different ways of understanding culture. In particular, we should try to open up arguments about the relationship between objects, people, and what informs the experiences of memberships, of being part of a group. In that process we shall, of course, be introducing new biases, due to the favours and fears of our times - such as the reluctance towards ethnic definitions of culture despite ethnic calls on culture being performed in the political arena around us - but nonetheless our work will benefit from the imposition of different views and values.

In response to these issues, let me try to pursue, ever so briefly, a particular thread, an argument about experiencing the world and the

ability to 'identify with' as a basis for understanding cultures. I ask: if cultures have to do with people, how they live and function within different kinds of networks, does it not follow that our definition of culture should also have to do with people? All cultural objects are entangled with people in a number of ways, but the relations and the quality and character of these entanglements differ depending on what the objects participate in doing, how they are used to mediate in different kinds of practices, and what they bring to these practices – what kind of experiences they enable. This is where Uzzell's idea of cold and hot interpretations may provide some guideline although it was developed to tackle a very different ontological issue, namely how we can engage meaningfully with past events (Uzzell 1989).

Uzzell introduced the term 'hot interpretation' to the field of heritage interpretation in 1988 (Uzzell 1989) in order to address failures in existing understandings of heritage interpretations and experience, and as an argument for the importance of the affective components in interpretations:

*The principle behind hot interpretation is that although a detached, cool and objective approach to the presentation and assessment of information and subsequent decision-making is seen as highly desirable in our society, there are many decisions ... where a purely rational Vulcan-like approach to the world is difficult, impossible or even undesirable. ... However, our feelings, emotional instincts and reactions play an important role in our decision-making. **Emotions colour our memories and experiences.***

(Uzzell & Ballantyne 2008: 502, my emphasis)

Uzzell and Ballantyne further stress that:

To deny the emotional side of our understanding and appreciation of the world and our relationships is to deny the very humanity that makes us part of the human race. This should also not be interpreted as if there are two types of thinking which exist independently of one another - cool and dispassionate and hot and emotional. Neither are we arguing that the latter has priority over the former. What is suggested, however, is that issues which involve personal values, beliefs, interests and memories will excite a degree of emotional arousal which needs to be recognised and addressed in interpretation.

(Uzzell & Ballantyne 2008: 502)

Here I am using this argument to suggest that focussing on such personal values, experiences, and memories may provide a different way of understanding culture, one that places sensory aspects of living at the centre, providing us with a hot but vague insight into prehistoric experiences of cultural links and the recognition of companions. I propose that we at the least should try to think such qualities into our analyses so it may exist as a parallel insight to that provided by the recognition of a culture based on its production and discard pattern.

Using the idea of ‘hot interpretation’ as a basis for appreciating the importance of self-recognition as an element of the identification of culture, leads us to focus on practices and objects that were central to people’s experiences and performances of culture in the form of shared idioms, ideas, visual impressions and sensations. Using the European Bronze Age as my

empirical soundboard, I would therefore like to share a view of what happens when we replace a 19th century masculine concept of culture, that focused on hard data, with a 21st century sensual concern with soft data emerging from evidence of life-ways and therefore related to the experience of living. This is not often done within archaeology, although there are a few very distinct and innovative examples within gender archaeology of attempts at peopling particular aspects of the past (e.g. Spector 1993; Tringham 1991). These examples are, however, primarily concerned with, literally, peopling the past, by bringing an awareness of people – their individual distinct experiences (Spector 1993) as well as the quality and impact of communal co-habiting (Tringham 1991) into sight. The implications of such insights for our definition of cultures were not, however, drawn out. If our concern is what culture is, how a sense of sameness, sharing and identifying with can come into existence and be maintained, we will have to think beyond these examples. One possible approach is to explore experiential aspects of cultural identities: how did/do people experience culture and cultural identity? The answer would lead us towards visual clues, towards sensual and tactile as well as cognitive understandable and recognisable traits of the self through cultural encounters with an other that is different. This suggests that a culture group always needs the other, or at least an imaginary other; but it also needs to state itself, to be able to recognise itself as having characteristics and particular features. At its core this is largely an emotional interpretative engagement.

There were probably many such aspects to life of Bronze Age communities, and it would be easy to suggest a range of intangible features – the memories and stories, or the obligations and dependencies that tied people together in more or less loose groups. I am, however, particularly interested in potential tangible means of community experiences, as objects provide strong anchors for emotions and memory allowing these to cross-over generations and to extend over large areas. This enables an experience-based understanding of culture that spreads beyond the individual and small groups to engage with similarities through time and space. This makes food and dress interesting aspects of Bronze Age societies as both saw substantial changes during the period and had distinct regional differences, both characteristics that may have profoundly influenced relationships between groups and challenged ways of seeing the world.

Wool, and therefore woollen textiles did not exist prior to the Bronze Age (Bender Jørgensen, Sofaer & Sørensen, forthcoming), and until around 2000 BC the clothing used within Europe were made of different kinds of plant fibres as well as animal fur and hides. Genetic modification of sheep eventually led to its hair becoming wool, and textiles made of wool appear. We find them in different parts of Europe from the Early Bronze Age, and by the Middle Bronze Age they were presumably the dominant form of dress in some areas. So some people would be dressed in woollen fabrics, which are soft and pliable, folding around the body. Until the end of the Bronze Age these textiles were in most areas brown or grey, being dependent on the natural colours of the sheep. Other people, however, wore linen, which

is stiff and had a different range of hues. These differences were geographical, rather than based on personal choices. When comparing Northern and Central Europe, for example, we find that the textiles in the north were made of wool, whereas textiles in central Europe were far more varied. It is also in Central Europe that we find the earliest European evidence of textile dyes and other means of making the textile surfaces more decorative and diverse (Bender Jørgensen, Sofaer and Sørensen forthcoming). Textile research has undergone a tremendous development during the last decade and evidence about regional differentiations is still being put together. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the impression of different regional costumes – ways of seeing and being seen, of visually recognising and experiencing the in-groups and its 'kin' versus the other – will only be further augmented with more studies. It is becoming clear that Bronze Age people in Europe would have looked different to each other. With regard to appearance during the Early and Middle Bronze Age it is possible to propose that these differences were tactile and explicit parts of how people experienced and encountered the world around them:

Overall, [in the Early Bronze Age] there were probably many visual similarities between the appearance of men and woman in particular in terms of the basic material used and the kind of clothing worn, but also in terms of the schemes used to decorate the costumes and the body. Women's clothing, and in particular their heads, may often have been more richly decorated than men, but the differences between men and women's appearance probably declined with old age.

(Sørensen 2013)

In the Middle Bronze Age people in different parts of Europe are likely to have begun to look distinctly different in their appearance, some used wool and others linen, but some were also adorned with large shiny bronze objects including pins that were up to 0.5 m long, arm rings in the form of spirals that encircled the entire length of the arm, and large bronze plates attached to the belt, whereas others would wear ornaments made out of strings of black jet beads.

(Sørensen 2013)

Other objects, such as pins and pendants, traditionally used as identifiers of cultural groups, may then be more appropriately understood as

additions and elaborations of an already existing sense of differences and similarities.

The other cultural practice I had in mind is food – the kind of food prepared and eaten. The Bronze Age environment was intensely explored and utilised. Beans and peas emerged as new domestic crops, and many local environments were intensely used. The Archaeo-botanical evidence from Hungary shows that in no other period before or after was the environment exploited as knowledgeably and fully as was the case in the Bronze Age. But in addition, specialisation also began to affect the life of communities, and the fauna record from settlements show that different communities had very different subsistence

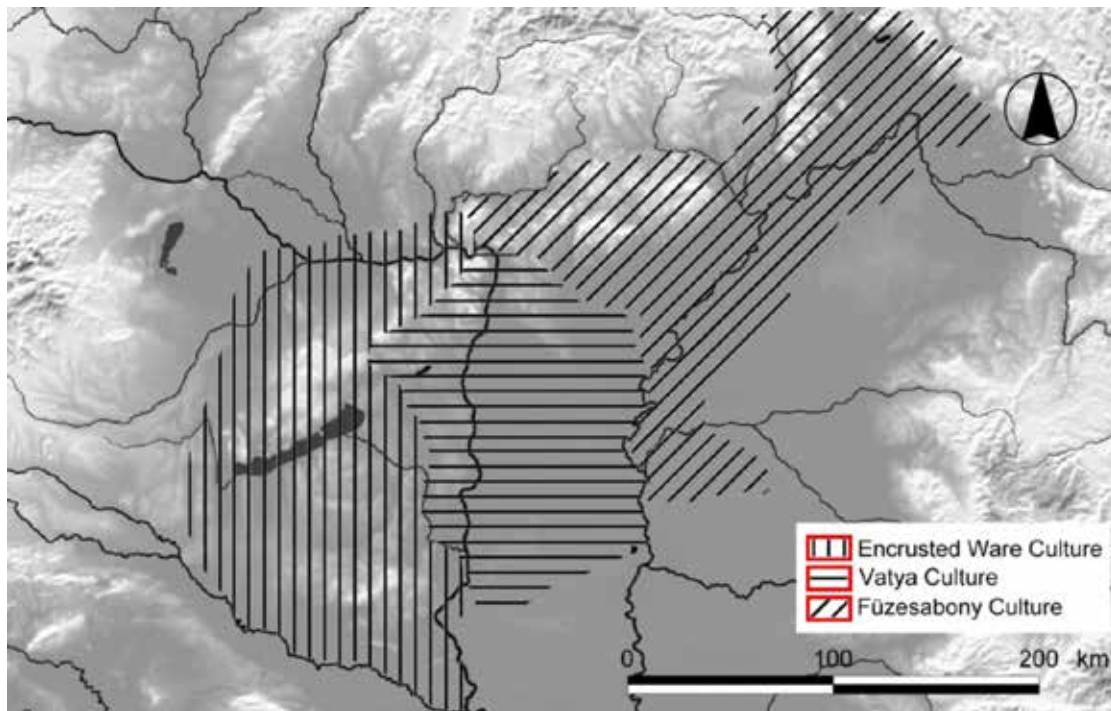


Fig. 1. Map showing the distribution of major cultural groups in Central Europe during the Middle Bronze Age. After Sørensen & Rebay-Salisbury 2009.

Cultural Group Encrusted Ware	Cultural Group Vatya	Cultural Group Füzesabony
Decorative elements Lines, triangles, dots	Decorative elements Simpler decorations, motifs from Encrusted Ware and Füzesabony	Decorative elements Circles, spirals, running spirals, channels and knobs
		

Fig. 2. Fine ware bowl characteristics of the three main Middle Bronze Age groups in central Europe. The photographs show the highly decorated bases of these bowls, a feature Sofaer (2011, 2013) emphasises in her discussion of their socio-ideological roles.

basis, and must have eaten very different food. With increased fauna evidence we should be able to begin identifying people who lived of dairy products with occasional meat and others who eat beef but hardly ever pork, and so on. As was the case for access to textile fibres, the variation in Bronze Age cuisine was largely due to regional differences in terms of access to resources rather than primarily resulting from personal choices, and as such it must have been an aspect of people’s life-ways and part of their way of experiencing the world.

This focus on food also means we may rethink the importance we have been given to pottery in defining cultural groups. This is not about questioning that pottery is important, but rather about looking into in which ways it was important, and in particular to think about the relationships between pottery and people: how did people use pottery and how may this have

formed their notions of sameness and affinities? Leo Webley explored such ideas some years ago in his study of Early Iron Age households in Northern Jutland, pulling ceramics typology apart insofar as the types were used to discuss the activities of the households rather than treated as signatures of time and space (Webley 2008). Such an approach makes variables such as volumes and proportions meaningful in terms of use: what was the pots used for and what range of differentiations of functions happened within the household - and what does this tells about social relations and social norms and practices? Typological variation thus becomes connected to an understanding of the ways in which pots were used and in turns to the practices they were part of. During the Bronze Age, pottery variations are clearly regional and distinct. Many areas of northern and western Europe only had a narrow pottery assemblage both in terms of quality of

manufacture and the range of vessels types. In such communities food would not be processed in different kinds of bowls and dished up on individual plates and drinks were probably not poured from jugs into individual cups and the latter were probably not linked to an individual. This in contrast was probably the case in Central and Southeastern Europe. The household assemblages on sites such as the Bronze Age tell at Szazhalombatta, Hungary, is complex being composed not only of beautiful, well-crafted vessels but also showing a variety of types including small cups and shallow decorated bowls. Many of these types are, with typological variations, found widely within the Carpathian Basin. The shallow bowl with wide flat rim is, for example, found within the different Middle Bronze Age 'culture groups' of the Carpathian Basin, see Fig 1. The broad flat rim means that the volumetric capacity of the bowl is modest compared to its dimensions, suggesting it was the visual qualities of the bowl that mattered: the vessel seems to be about the display or presentation of food. This, however, cannot be seen simply as a material form of identity, but rather that these widely shared bowls and the cultural practices they were part of provided for opportunities to experience identity. Such pots become linked to, and enable, an experience of doing certain things in a distinct way – and this may be experienced as a confirmation of belonging with a particular group of people who shared those ways of doing things. It is therefore also interesting to notice that whereas these bowls, and the principle they express about display, are used within a large area of central Europe there are distinct regional differences in how they are decorated and how

they are used within cemetery contexts (for the latter see discussion in Sørensen and Rebay 2010). We may then begin to recognise this type of bowls (and other similar core cultural forms) as an icon of a particular cultural behaviour and linked experiences. This means that having and using such bowls would have been a means both of inclusion in the larger cultural group and creating specific divisions within it.

In a modest way this has been an intellectual travel, a chartering of an engagement with a question, a concern about what we mean when we talk about culture and whether we could do it differently. Whatever my initial aspirations this has not become a text arguing that the archaeological culture concept is defunct! That was neither possible nor particularly meaningful, it seems. But it did become an attempt at variegating the concept, of thinking about different ways of engaging with the past and of being sensitive to what the materials may reveal about people's own hot and engaged understanding of what and which features constitute their cultures. In the introduction I stated that critiques of the culture concept have tended to be limited to redefinition of cultural borders or changes in the criteria used to identify cultures. This same could be said about the thinking I outlined here about dress and food as part of lifeways; but my argument differs in so far as the assumed relationship between objects and 'culture' is being interrupted as people were inserted into the reflections. Meanwhile, in the spirit of Elisabeth and her contribution to archaeology, the purpose, rather than proposing or stating, was to ponder and wonder and to allow the archaeological project to be open.

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Endnotes

Hanna Rydh is an important Swedish archaeologist and feminist whose life and contribution Elisabeth has explored from a number of angles. With regard to Hanna Rydh's work in India, Elisabeth argues that due to her conduct " ... she supported the young nation in writing its own history. It is symptomatic, that Hanna Rydh employed both men and women in the local excavation crew, and furthermore that she founded a village school for both boys and girls." www.area-archives.org/files/hanna-rydh-med-farg.pdf [2013-09-04].