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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SYMBOLS

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ABSTRACT

Why should archaeologists deal with symbols and how can they do so? This article outlines three major traditions archaeologists have followed in conceptualizing symbols, each with its own preferred topics of study, understanding of power and social relations, and epistemology. These include the processual view of symbols as tokens that represent reality, the structuralist view of symbols as mental girders framing a cultural reality, and the post-modern view of symbols as arbitrary fragments incorporated into phenomenological experience. The primary conclusions are that (a) any serious consideration of ancient society requires us to deal with its symbols; (b) human symbolism is so diverse (it includes cognitive structures; ritual icons; identities such as gender, prestige, and ethnicity; technological knowledge; and political ideologies) that multiple approaches are needed to deal adequately with it; and (c) a major problem in the archaeology of symbols is understanding how varied kinds of symbols relate to each other.

THEORIZING SYMBOLS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeologists probably disagree about symbols more than anything else they dig up. Many believe that however important symbols are, we are wasting our time trying to recover mental phenomena archaeologically. Others believe that symbols are irrelevant to the larger systems that have structured human life over the centuries. In recent years, many other views have emerged beyond these two traditional viewpoints. The relationship of symbols to power and prestige has become an important theme. Both gender archaeology and agency-centered interpretations have forced us to confront ancient identities

and motivations. Even under the agency theory umbrella, however, there is diversity. Some theorists deal with “Symbols with a capital S”—pyramids, chiefly insignia, and the obtrusive icons of rank and ritual. Others see every human intervention in material things as a symbolically constructive act.

The archaeology of symbols has been parochialized into gender studies, political studies, cosmological reconstructions, and so on. But symbolic systems work because of the coherent ties between different kinds of meanings, which make political participation compelling, identity meaningful, and ritual effective. Moreover, archaeologists have often studied obvious, iconic symbols but have little sense of the broad range of meanings with which humans invest the material world. In keeping with this, many believe that symbolic archaeology is exceptionally difficult and that few archaeologists study it—a puzzling belief, because a complete archaeological bibliography on symbols could include several thousand works.

The archaeology of symbols is fragmented and contentious but also rich, diverse, and creative. By bringing together archaeological sources on symbols, I hope to demonstrate how much we already know and to provide grounds for optimism for the future.

Is Symbolic Archaeology Possible? Dismantling Hawkes's Ladder

In 1954 Hawkes pronounced his famous “ladder of inference”: Without written texts, archaeologists can investigate economy readily, and political and social systems to a lesser extent, but for the most part, prehistoric symbols and ideas must remain a closed book (Hawkes 1954). Hawkes's dictum was essentially a formalization of common sense, and its intuitive appeal has helped to enshrine it in archaeological theory. Forty years later, the idea remains widespread that symbols are remote, subjective, and archaeologically inaccessible, in contrast to the “hard” realities of environment, economy, and politics.

Hawkes was wrong, and it is worth considering why he was. It is true, as he presumed, that archaeologists are necessarily methodological materialists: With only material remains to deal with, our inferences must be anchored with artifacts. However, this idea is easily conflated with others less sound. In contrast to a long scholarly tradition in which the symbol consists of the unity of referent and meaning (de Saussure 1972), our folk model regards symbols as material “containers” that convey tidy “packages” of information (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The material/meaning dichotomy is further conflated with folk distinctions between a visible, tangible material world and invisible ideas and feelings, between “hard” scientific approaches and “soft” humanistic approaches, and between “objective” knowledge and “subjective” opinion. The effect is a theoretical sleight of hand transmuting methodological materialism into a theoretical materialism in which signs speak for themselves to the de-

gree that we think they are purely material. The best demonstration of this effect is the double standard we use for judging an archaeological interpretation, based on our prior opinion about its materiality. If we understand how a prehistoric rock carving was made technologically without knowing why it was made culturally, the effort is considered a failure and symbolic archaeology is pronounced impossible. But if we understand how prehistoric people produced their food technologically without knowing the cultural reasons why they produced what and how much they did in the way they did, the effort is considered a successful demonstration of economic archaeology; never mind that we have reduced a complex, value-laden set of social relations to a simple faunal inference. The archaeological world is a cultural world, and by dividing it into a priori categories of material and symbolic, we deny the degree to which things like economy are fundamentally cultural and things like ideas are embodied in material practices.

In many ways, the question is not whether we can find symbols archaeologically, but whether we can find anything cultural that is not symbolic. Many powerful symbols in any culture are the commonest things: bread, water, houses, the river, and the hills beyond. Powerful symbols are not irrational and ethereal but are often highly rationalized and concrete: Money is a symbol rather than mere gold, paper, or numbers in an account. Nor can the symbolic aspect of these things be magically separated from a logically prior economic or material use; indeed, much of our modern, supposedly rational economy is structured by massive efforts to protect symbolically important things—the environment, the small farm, the family home. But, having inextricably entangled the material and the mental, once we get beyond the superficial level, all fields of archaeological inquiry converge in similar epistemological constraints: We must replace the ladder of inference with a level playing field.

Is Symbolic Archaeology Necessary? Coming to Grips with Culture

Current archaeological studies of symbols descend from many sources: the earliest New Archaeology (Binford 1962), stylistic studies (cf Carr & Neitzel 1995), evolutionary studies (Lindly & Clark 1990), structuralist archaeologies (Conkey 1982, Deetz 1977, Friedrich 1970), structural Marxist and Marxist research (Leone 1984, McGuire 1992, Shanks & Tilley 1988), and diverse post-processual works (Barrett 1994, Hodder et al 1995, Thomas 1991, Tilley 1993). Recently, several of these lines of research have begun to converge within a general framework involving cultural actors and symbols. Archaeologists interested in social evolution have begun to explain transitions to agriculture (Gebauer & Price 1991, Hayden 1990) and to inequality (Hayden & Gargett 1990, Price & Feinman 1995) in terms of ambitious, strategizing human agents. Marxist and structuralist archaeologies have turned from monolithic

constructions of high-level structures to more nuanced accounts of how institutions, individuals, and symbols interact (e.g. McGuire & Saitta 1996, Pauketat & Emerson 1991). Gender archaeology is based on the concept of culturally defined genders, directing attention to the symbolic construction of identities (Conkey & Spector 1984). The broad shift to people-centered approaches coincides with a postmodern view of culture as fragmented and contested rather than integrated and normative. These agency-centered approaches derived from Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1979), Ortner (1984), and ultimately Marx provide a missing theoretical foundation for the study of symbols. The logical necessities of a practice theory view imply an archaeology dealing with people as people, that is, as actors behaving in culturally specific ways. This approach in turn commits us to taking symbols seriously as a pervasive aspect of the archaeological record.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SYMBOLS OF SYMBOLS

While it is no longer the case (if it ever was) that postprocessualists study symbols and processualists do not, there remain deep gulfs among archaeologists dealing with symbols. At the risk of oversimplification, perhaps the best capsule description is that archaeologists in processual traditions tend to view symbols as representing social realities, while postprocessualists and other structuralism-influenced archaeologists generally view symbols as constituting social realities. Root metaphors are central to academic theorizing (Turner 1974), and we might characterize these points of view as “symbols as tokens” versus “symbols as girders.” To these may be added a third, recent view, the poststructuralist view of “symbols as tesserae.” Each of these traditions has its own conceptualization of social relations and power, epistemology, and canonical case studies. Because the traditions correspond to deep divisions in the field, it is worth reviewing them at some length.

“Symbols as Tokens”: The Information Transmission View

According to many archaeologists, symbols serve primarily as instruments of communication (Wobst 1977). As one recent discussion puts it, “Symbols, including icons, rituals, monuments, and written texts, all convey and transmit information and meaning to their viewers” (DeMarrais et al 1996:16). Thus a sumptuous headdress signals a special status, an exotic artifact boasts about long-range connections, a monument represents a capacity to command labor. As tokens representing meanings, symbols have a material life: They can be produced, exchanged, monopolized, subverted, and destroyed. Much of this material life is governed by human intentions and strategies, and, as Binford (1962) and Wobst (1977) argued, when symbols are put into material form, there may be predictable economies of representation.

This approach has long since proved its value in archaeological interpretation, particularly in the study of strategies of political leadership (Blitz 1993, Clark & Blake 1994, DeMarrais et al 1996, Hayden 1995), prestige goods exchange (Brumfiel & Earle 1987, Ericsson & Earle 1977), and the interpretation of grave goods and burial procedures in terms of the social standing of the deceased (Beck 1995, Binford 1972, Brown 1981, Chapman et al 1981, O'Shea 1984, Saxe 1970). A recent exchange in *Current Anthropology* illustrates both the uses of this approach for analyzing political symbols and some criticisms of it. In three original analyses, Blanton et al (1996) discussed the use of cosmological legitimation in "corporate" and "network" strategies of organization; DeMarrais et al (1996) developed hypotheses about when and how ideology will be deployed in material items; Joyce & Winter (1996) argued that ideology is one tool of many by which elites maintain their position. All three treated power as the self-evident ability to control others (cf Wolf 1990) and ideology as the pragmatic use of symbols to accomplish this power; this point of view contrasts with arguments that the mental reality of symbolic meanings can make them a potent causal factor in politics (e.g. Conrad & Demarest 1984). The strongest reaction to these papers came from Marxists and interpretive archaeologists, who argued that symbols do not merely represent and disguise power relations but actually constitute them; however, many reactions crosscut theoretical approaches. Criado (1996) argued that the autonomous, freely acting individual is an idea peculiar to modernity and that culture cannot be reduced to instrumental ideology. Hodder (1996) argued that the authors did not consider preexisting systems of meaning, the varied experiences of ideology within a society, and ambiguities and disagreements over what symbols mean. Like Hodder, Clark (1996) and Cowgill (1996) demanded greater examination of how ideologies relate to semiotic and phenomenological systems. Clark (1996; cf Miller & Tilley 1984) posed the problem of relating the ambitions of elites and the actions of groups, and Brumfiel (1996a), D'Altroy (1996), and Schortman et al (1996; cf Brumfiel 1992) argued against unitary, "top-down" interpretations of symbols and for consideration of resistance. A key point here may be the dramatic aspect of political ritual (Geertz 1980, Kertzer 1988, Turner 1974), because it is often the public performance of symbols rather than real consensus on their meaning that unites groups. A final problem is how to relate meaning systems and other aspects of social life in a long-term history (Sahlins 1985; e.g. Marcus & Flannery 1996).

The "symbols as tokens" view merits critical discussion because it has been almost unquestioned. Its most problematic assumption is simply that artifacts, actions, and social relations have a meaning or existence logically prior to their translation into symbols, which serve primarily to represent this precultural reality. The concept of prestige is a good example. With few exceptions (Helms 1993, Shennan 1982), there has been little examination of cultural reasons why

a particular material, action, or item might have been regarded as prestigious rather than of the strategic mechanics of the pursuit of prestige. Thus, paradoxically, this argument views people as acting politically and economically but not culturally, because it implies that the identities and values signaled and sought after are not themselves symbolic constructions (a view made explicit in models assuming a universal pursuit of power or prestige). There is little investigation of multiple forms of prestige integrated into cosmological schemes, gender, and alternative modes of classifying people and prescribing behavior (Bourdieu 1977, Hatch 1989) or of variations in the symbolic organization of prestige and authority (Godelier 1982). Nor has the interaction of prestige with other supporting or cross-cutting components of identity such as gender, language, and ethnicity (Farr 1993, Hendon 1999) been examined. Artifacts are regarded as self-evident and defined by their function; unless their explicit function was to signal, they were nonsymbolic. The use of symbols, rather than being an inescapable characteristic of human existence, thus becomes a specific realm of cultural life, like ceramic production or mollusk collecting. Not coincidentally, this view of symbols is usually implicit in theorizations of power in which ideological power is understood as an elite tactic comparable to the use of armies, political resources, or economic funds (Mann 1986).

By severing the use of symbols from their context of meanings, the informational view makes belief irrational and hence merely disadvantageous in followers and cynically optional in elites. It replaces meaning with a disenchanting interconvertible value like that of money in a capitalist economy. Without symbolic context, many questions become unanswerable. Why are some exotic goods prestigious and others not? Which specific kinds of status does control of prestige goods confer in a particular society? Why is supplying someone with food understood as largesse in one setting and as tribute or duty in another? Why is prestige competition more important in some societies than in others? What relation do grave goods have to the circumstances of death, social relations among survivors, ideologies of death and burial, and other factors (Bloch & Parry 1982, Brown 1995, Gnoli & Vernant 1982, Huntington & Metcalf 1991, Parker Pearson 1982, Ucko 1969). Long-term changes in the meaning of artifacts become problematic, as does disagreement or misinterpretation over meanings, and it is not obvious that controlling a symbolic artifact always gives one control of the idea it represented and the reactions of others. As recent feminist critiques (Gero 1997) have pointed out, the cross-culturally rational, genderless individual portrayed as manipulating political symbols draws strongly on modern gender and class values.

"Symbols as Girders": The Mental Reality Approach

In contrast to the information transmission view, many archaeologists have explored how symbols constituted and structured the mental and social world of

ancient people. Leroi-Gourhan's (1982) analysis of French Paleolithic cave art is the best-known example of structuralist analysis in archaeology. Other forays into structuralism have treated design rules in ceramics, bone artifacts, art, and vernacular architecture (Conkey 1982, Friedrich 1970, Glassie 1975, Washburn 1983) as well as generative grammars of artifacts (Chippindale 1992). A less purely cognitive approach was developed in the early 1980s (Hodder 1982b), culminating in Hodder's (1990) sweeping analysis of European Neolithic cultural structures, *The Domestication of Europe*. But interest in symbols as components of mental reality resists easy alignment with theoretical schools. Technological studies have investigated the structure of knowledge (see below). Recent "cognitive archaeology" (Flannery & Marcus 1993, Renfrew & Zubrow 1994) has focused on knowledge, religion, mental maps, and the material tools of thinking, using structural analysis, the direct historical approach, technological studies, studies of iconography, and computer modeling.

What this Noah's Ark of theorists have in common is a focus on symbols as mental structures, as girders framing an essentially cultural world and structuring thought processes. Treating symbols as mental building blocks captures a number of important insights. The most important is simply that humans orient themselves in the world, think, and act through learned, culturally specific structures that recur wherever they organize themselves and their material productions. Hence structural symbols such as gender oppositions, principles of spatial and temporal orientation, and cosmological qualities (Rappaport 1979) are embedded deeply in the individual's being. The individual cannot choose not to think and act through them, and their purpose is less to represent specific referential meanings than to organize other symbols. One implication of this is that even rational strategies are governed by generic rules of behavior, prescriptive rituals, symbolic limits, cultural tone, and inappropriate forms of maneuvering.

Proponents of the "symbols as girders" approach have been active in analyzing art and ritual, space and cosmology, and technological knowledge. Upper Paleolithic art has become iconic of human symbolic capacities in evolutionary narratives. Interpretations show a complex historical layering. Pre-1960s interpretations of cave art as representing hunting magic, fertility magic, and clan totems have generally been discredited (Ucko & Rosenfeld 1967). Leroi-Gourhan's (1982) structuralist approach decoded spatial binary oppositions between "male" animals such as bison and "female" animals such as horses. Other analysts focused on small portable items. Marshack (1972) argued that lines and dots on carved bones indicated calendrical uses. Conkey (1982), studying compositional rules in carved bone artifacts, related mobiliary art to information exchange at seasonal aggregation places and suggested (Conkey 1985) that art may have been produced for rituals legitimating social

hierarchies. Mithen (1990) argued that Paleolithic images depict animal behavior and would have served to educate young hunters. These approaches have focused on the meaningful aspects of Upper Paleolithic symbolism. In contrast, analyses of art as information exchange include White's (1989) account of Aurignacian ornaments as a medium for creating social identities, and Gamble's (1982) interpretation of figurines from France to Russia as part of a common ritual system that helped to circulate information and mates among low-density foragers (cf Jochim 1983). In other approaches, Clottes (1996) used Lewis-Williams & Dowson's (1993) neurophysiological model to construe cave art images as products of shamanistic trances. Surprisingly, there has been little gender interpretation (though see Leroi-Gourhan 1982 and Rice 1981). Nor has Paleolithic art been dealt with in the postmodern approach (e.g. Tilley 1991), as an ecological system (Rappaport 1979), or as a medium of political history (Dowson 1994).

Probably the most effective archaeological work on cosmology has come through analysis of space. Categories of space relate to gender, personal identity, and cosmological systems (Bourdieu 1977); architectural studies have used this insight to relate space to social action (Wallace-Hadrill 1988, Yates 1989). Other analyses have discussed the experience of being within spaces defined in particular ways (Parker Pearson & Richards 1994). Sophisticated Marxist analyses include Leone's (1984) analysis of the early colonial garden and Kus's (1982) analysis of sacred space in Madagascar. The meaning of space has also been explored formally through network analysis (Broodbank 1993) and Geographical Information Systems (Zubrow 1994).

Technological knowledge is an integral part of the symbolic world (Dobres & Hoffman 1994, Lemonnier 1992, and articles in *World Archaeology*, Volume 27, 1995). That making things always incorporates cosmological beliefs about tools, materials, qualities, and processes has been well documented by studies of metal production in Africa (Herbert 1994), Mesoamerica (Hosler 1994), and South America (Lechtman 1984). The skills, knowledge, and social decisions involved in making things can be investigated through reconstruction of the operational sequence (*chaîne opératoire*) followed (Lemonnier 1992, Schlanger 1994). Because technological processes involve the practice of skills and knowledge associated with particular identities and values, they are a central way in which social agency is created and exercised (Dobres 1995, Dobres & Hoffman 1994, Sinclair 1995). As this argument implies, the archaeology of knowledge is more complex than simply reconstructing a prehistoric road map or recipe. Knowledge may be conscious or unconscious, general principles or specific data, agreed-upon or disputed, and it is often nondiscursive, as with ingrained bodily skills or practices.

Treating symbols as cultural structures, especially in structural analysis, has been criticized on a number of grounds. Reactions to *The Domestication of*

Europe are typical: Processualists have questioned the epistemological status of the cultural structures Hodder reconstructs (O'Shea 1992), while later post-processualists criticize Hodder for the coherent nature of his cultural structures, an unchanging script inaccessible to actors (e.g. Thomas 1996:97). Within this framework, it can be difficult to model both geographic variation and temporal change and to account for discrepancies, disbelief, and cynical manipulation. Structuralism also assumes a coherent underlying belief system rather than the fertile chaos cosmologies may appear "on the ground" (Barth 1987). Moreover, symbolic structures must be viewed as products of a specific social order. The archaeology of technology provides a good example: Impersonal knowledge may be a product of the information age, and in the past, the act of possessing and using knowledge may have been as socially important as the actual thing known. Without strong Durkheimian assumptions about elementary social structures, Lévi-Straussian assumptions about elementary mental structures, or Marxist assumptions about hegemony, identifying cultural structures alone usually does not satisfy social-minded archaeologists. For these reasons, already by 1982 a number of studies (in Hodder 1982b) combined structural analysis with other analyses. Hodder (1982a), for instance, explored structural parallels between Neolithic houses and tombs in the context of gender relations, and Shanks & Tilley (1982) discussed the opposition between individual and collective burials with reference to relations of production. Structuralism has lost its identity as a distinctive approach while continuing to contribute to the definition of symbolic structures, particularly cosmological oppositions, within structural Marxist, postmodern, processual, or other approaches (e.g. Roe 1995).

Symbols as Tesserae: The Poststructuralist Critique

It would be deceptively facile to resolve views of symbolism as strategic manipulation and as cultural structure within the structure-and-action dualism of a practice theory model [for instance, via the "duality of structure" (Giddens 1979; e.g. Marcus & Flannery 1996:31)]. But a trenchant critique of both approaches has recently come from Hodder et al (1995), Tilley (1993), Barrett (1994), Gosden (1994), and Thomas (1996). These analysts begin by rejecting the dichotomy between material signifiers and ideal meanings: "Material culture may be physically embedded but it is at the same time culturally emergent. . . . precisely because material culture has this property of being culturally emergent, there can be no simple or formal demarcation between what is internal to, or is in, and that which is external to, or outside, the object" (Tilley 1993:5). Meaning does not reside in artifacts or in people but in the moment of interaction between the two (Thomas 1996:97); symbols' meanings do not exist outside of the moment in which people apprehend them and assemble them

into meaningful formations. Symbols thus resemble mosaic tesserae, or perhaps Legos: fragments with qualities such as color, shape, and size, inherently arbitrary, that are temporarily assembled and experienced as meaningful by people playing with them.

Treating symbols as tesserae has broad implications. Because symbols' meaning is not fixed but contestable, social life involves continual struggle over alternative interpretations of important symbols. Power in this view is the ability to formulate a genuine experience of the world and to resist others' attempts to impose their views: a Foucauldian view that relates power to cultural structures more than to personalized political hierarchies and which sees power as enabling as much as restrictive. Proponents of such analyses often dismiss structuralist-inspired interpretations of symbolic structures as essentializing or totalizing simply because they do not believe that cultures have an uncontested essence or totality. Hegemony, counterhegemony, and discord pervade this view of the past. Methodologically, the approach diverts attention from the formal or economic qualities of artifacts toward understanding how they were incorporated into experiences—how they appeared, sounded, channeled bodily movement and attitudes, recalled other artifacts, and were fit into collages of images. Because how symbols were used was as important to their meaning as any pre-fixed referent, archaeologists have to carry out close contextual analysis. Because the emphasis is on the immediate moment of experience, analysis tends to be strictly on the microscale. Epistemologically, archaeology is couched in language appropriate to a socially situated discourse: formulation rather than discovery, interpretation of a text rather than analysis of a corpus, plausibility rather than proof.

Collective burials and megaliths have furnished the paradigmatic case study for postmodern theorists of kinship, time, and landscape. Culture-historical interpretations treated these monuments essentially as religious sites analogous to churches, and New Archaeological interpretation turned toward social structure (e.g. Fleming 1973) and ecology. The Maltese temples were seen as the centers of chiefdoms (Renfrew 1979), and communal tombs were interpreted as territorial markers erected as Neolithic farmers came under population pressure (Chapman 1981, Renfrew 1976). Since the 1980s, Sherratt (1990) has argued that monumental tombs were built as organizational surrogates for villages as native Mesolithic populations adopted farming. Carvings on chambered tombs have been interpreted as "entoptic" designs representing visions during shamanistic trances (Bradley 1989, Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1993).

One common theme in postprocessual approaches, drawing largely on Bloch & Parry (1982) and Meillassoux (1981), has been kinship and cosmological knowledge in the service of social processes. Monuments such as Stonehenge (Bradley 1991) were remodeled and reused over very long peri-

ods, showing that ancestral places furnished potent symbols throughout prehistory. Many tombs have inner chambers that may have allowed only restricted elites access to burials, and access to the past may have legitimated an elite of ritual leaders (Bradley 1989) or elders (Patton 1993); collective burials may also have mediated gender relations (Hodder 1982a) and effaced individual identities to mask relations of production (Shanks & Tilley 1982).

But how did people experience the creation and use of monuments? Recent interpretations have focused on local experiences of space, movement, landscape, and the body (Tilley 1993). Whittle (1996) has argued that Neolithic architecture involved the symbolic creation of defined places, and Thomas (1991) interprets Neolithic monuments as part of a new mode of engagement with the land. Tilley's (1994) study focuses on the monuments' landscape settings. As Barrett (1994) points out, space both within the monument and in the surrounding landscape must be understood in terms of patterns of movement imposed by the monument. Megalithic structures thus form part of a "monumental choreography" (Richards 1993). Thomas & Tilley (1993) interpret the iconography of cosmological processes of transformation from life to death.

The limits of the "tesserae" approach mirror those of the other two approaches. In denying the fixity of symbols' meanings, we risk seeing ancient peoples' ongoing reinterpretation of symbols as a quasi-voluntaristic act of will or self-empowerment, and we shortchange the effect of inherited and unquestioned terms of thought. All of symbolic life thus becomes superficial, without historical or psychological roots—a transitory juxtaposition of images on a screen. The insistence that interpretation of symbols is always conflictual owes as much to a particular understanding of modern politics as does the converse view, and it may underestimate the conservatism of ancient societies whose local culture formed a more total environment than ours does. Power tends to become equated too broadly with identity or the ability to experience, making it difficult to analyze its varied uses in hierarchical societies. Rather paradoxically for such a locally oriented approach, interpretations frequently produce generic portraits applicable to virtually any past society.

DISCUSSION

It would be ingenuous to invoke the fable of the blind men and the elephant and argue that these three ways of looking at symbols are entirely complementary or can be made so by a "definitive" approach. While the case studies reviewed above have been investigated primarily within one tradition, issues such as gender and identity show both how far the three approaches to symbols presuppose one another and how they are sometimes incompatible.

Conkey & Spector (1984) originally argued that gender systems are cultural constructs related in complex ways to economy, society, and politics. The following decade witnessed a profusion of archaeological gender studies in all theoretical traditions (see Bacus et al 1992, Claassen 1992, Claassen & Joyce 1997, Cohen & Bennett 1993, Conkey & Gero 1997, Ehrenberg 1989, Gero & Conkey 1991, Moore & Scott 1997, Nelson 1997, Walde & Willows 1991). In general, archaeologists working in processual and structuralist traditions have focused on the meaning of gender within a system of cognitive categories and on how gender as a preexisting role or identity structures activity regimes and division of labor. Critique of both approaches has concentrated on two points, social context and the nature of gender categories. Studies that treat gender in terms of static economic roles and identities and supplement existing interpretations of the past have been criticized (Spencer-Wood 1991). Gender is central to power relations, including inequality (Kelly 1993), hegemony (Ortner 1990), and resistance (Brumfiel 1992, 1996b). Poststructural feminists have argued that gender does not form a system of static, agreed-upon dualities but must be understood as a process of relational difference (Baker 1997), and the biological basis of male and female sexual categories has been questioned (Nordbladh & Yates 1990). The point is that while much gender archaeology can be accommodated within a range of theoretical points of view, there are real divisions in theoretical approach that cannot be reconciled (for instance, as to the reality of enduring, conventional gender categories and identities). Nor is it clear how desirable a highly abstract and anodyne theoretical umbrella for all gender archaeology would be. The same is true for analysis of other aspects of identity such as prestige, ethnicity (Emberling 1997, Jones 1997, Shennan 1989), kinship, and language as well as for topics generally associated with a single theoretical approach.

Nevertheless, some general points emerge to guide an archaeology of symbols. The "symbols as tokens" view really deals primarily with how symbols are used in specific political contexts, and it works best with iconic badge-like symbols and personal identities. It necessarily presupposes a far broader and, ideally, explicit analysis dealing with how the symbols were constituted meaningfully in the first place and how their meanings affected their usage. But treating symbols as self-imposing cultural deep structures (as in the "symbols as girders" approach) requires a stratified model of the actor as constituted by both broad, abstract, and unconscious "generative structures" (Bourdieu 1977) and concrete, often conscious, and situation-specific symbols and meanings. This model requires us to think about contested alternative meanings and struggles over interpretation rather than assuming that important symbols had unanimous, unproblematic meanings. Finally, we should distinguish the study of cultural structures from that of meaning as an active experience and tackle them separately.

Beyond "Codebreaking": Getting at Archaeological Meanings

What methods can we use to investigate symbols archaeologically? We must throw out the most popular image, that of codebreaking, of "making mute stones speak" to suddenly render the archaeological record completely transparent. In this Rosetta Stone view, interpreting a symbol involves merely identifying its literal referent; if this were true, there would be no differences of opinion over ethnographic interpretation, because all ethnographers have access to the same dictionaries. Pursuing the linguistic analogy, there are many equally important aspects of symbolism beyond simple reference and grammar: context, medium, intention, genre, register, style, attitude.

There is, then, no specific methodology unique to the archaeology of symbols. Instead, the key starting point for investigation is realizing what are the right questions to ask. Some basic points of study are as follows: (a) iconic or representational meaning of symbols; (b) structural or relational meaning of symbols; (c) phenomenological or experiential meaning of symbols; (d) grammars and variations of form, technique, and decoration; (e) perceptual aspects of symbolic artifacts (visual, auditory, tactile features); (f) cross-artifact styles and semantic associations; (g) social connotations and associations of artifacts, representations, and styles; (h) technical analysis of techniques of manufacture and use wear; (i) economic aspects of artifact manufacture and circulation; (j) knowledge and execution of artifact manufacture as cultural process; (k) artifact life histories from manufacture through deposition; (l) context of usage and interpretation; (m) knowledge differentials and layers of interpretation among users of artifacts; and (n) ambiguity, multiplicity of interpretations, misunderstanding, and irony. The significance of an artifact may involve a complex combination or juxtaposition of many of these codes, contexts, and circumstances. With such an array of questions to ask, our interpretations can never be final or lawlike. Instead, we will find ourselves crafting (Shanks & McGuire 1996) good ethnographies, which are always controversial.

Some Future Directions

Formulating the archaeology of symbols as an object of study raises interesting lines of research. If archaeologists can investigate greatly varied kinds of symbols, then the internal organization of symbols of different kinds, at different levels of embeddedness, habituation, exegesis, or maneuver, becomes itself a key focus of theorizing. Can we identify key symbols (Ortner 1972) that structure other symbols and identities? How do knowledge, technological practice, rite, cosmology, and gender relate to one other?

One direction such questions lead us in concerns cross-artifact analyses. Archaeologists typically deal with specific artifacts, but symbolism that crosses boundaries may be a key to understanding how objects are understood

and used. Why did a 1930s toaster become streamlined like an automobile? Why did dark green suddenly become popular in 1990s consumer goods? Symbolism of colors, textures, forms, and compositional styles may be the link between social relations, semantics, and artifact variation. Related problems include the question of economy of meanings among media—for instance, why did pottery design simplify rapidly in much of Europe when metals were introduced?—and the importance of artifact life histories. A third problem is that of regionality—the gap between representation and experience, between widespread material culture similarities and local beliefs, habits, and interpretations. To what extent can culture horizons be seen as regional habitus (Bourdieu 1977), zones of similar cultural response containing within them the seeds of rapid differentiation?

Socially, we need to incorporate symbols more fully into our understanding of social relations. One route to this is via the differentiation of prestige into bounded and related spheres of semantic values. Given the importance of the body as a nexus of identity, interpretation, and classification, gender is an obvious axis of differentiation but far from the only one. Methodologically, this problem might involve contextual analysis of artifact use, structural analysis of cultural principles, and iconographies of bodily gestures depicted in figurines and art. We must also confront the paradox that social orders emerge from situations in which participants often have very different interpretations of one another. Material things are central to our understanding of one another's roles, purposes, and values and thus furnish the focal points of ambiguity and of multiple interpretation. But ambiguity is not anarchy, and material culture may productively be viewed as systematic miscommunication.

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