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ARCHAEOLOGY GOES POSTMODERN

Abstract

The author briefly comments on some of the points broached in recent discussion on archaeological theory and method. The possible usefulness of semiotic approaches based on the the concepts of Charles S. Peirce is suggested.

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The following is a response, admittedly unlearned and explicitly pedestrian, from a Finnish perspective to some of the themes and ideas broached in recent theoretical and methodological discussion in archaeology which appear to find their place under the general rubric of 'postmodern'.[1]

Recent surveys of developments in Western, mostly Anglo-American, archaeology tell us that the New Archaeology of the 1960s and '70s, which became established as processual archaeology, has in some quarters given way to a post-processual stage. From there, it has gone on to post-structuralism, and critical re-assessments of bases, positions and goals, loosely linked with the perspectives of postmodernism. As is well known, the first signs of this already emerged in the early 1980s.[2] Post-processualism implied, among other things, a return to 'history' (e.g. à la Collingwood) and the particular instance, and a reappraisal of the nature of material culture, particularly its role as a medium of signification and communication. Though not uniquely structuralist, these developments have fulfilled Edmund Leach's 1971 prediction[3] that, like anthropology, archaeology was to pass from functionalism to structuralism. Structuralism, it appears, was never seriously addressed in this discussion, or in any case it did not seem to find much use. The present situation finds us in what is now termed a 'post-structuralist' stage, owing much of its theoretical and methodological underpinnings to the critiques of Lévi-Straussian structuralism that have appeared since the 1970s.

Positivism

Of particular importance for post-processual and post-structuralist developments has been the critique of established archaeological thinking and the recognition of many and varied 'archaeologies'. The main brunt of criticism has been directed against archaeologies following a positivist programme.

Positivism, as understood in archaeology, simply underlined the importance of positive knowledge. Facts had to be 'neutral', based on direct observation, duly recorded, and untainted by values or judgements. These facts then had to be managed through a programme of procedures modelled on the concepts of the natural sciences, the aim being to account for the past in terms of generalizations, sometimes called processes, or at a higher level, laws. As described by Shanks, this meant 'subsuming the meaningless particular find under meaningful general statements which account for the particulars found'.[4]

The positivist tradition obviously offers much more than this, and it may be asked if archaeologists who subscribed to a positivist, or empiricist, programme, and those who responded critically to it, in fact missed much of what this positivism held in store, and still does.

Finnish archaeology – theory-free positivism

In Finland, whose archaeology has evolved from the foundations of a national-romantic antiquarian-

ism, processual studies have been few and far-between.[5] This was one of the places where the New Archaeology never really gained a foothold.[6] Finnish archaeology, however, has had a long tradition of collaboration with the natural sciences, beginning with Julius Ailio's systematizations of Stone Age materials around the turn of the century and continuing in the collaboration of archaeologists and Quaternary geologists in establishing Stone Age chronology with the aid of shore-displacement studies. There have also been numerous studies and projects focusing on paleobotanical materials and the questions of early agriculture and environmental impact. Although the theoretical basis was never discussed at any length, and other areas of Finnish archaeology, such as Iron Age studies, operated with traditional typologies and non-existent theory,[7] the archaeological literature gained something of a 'scientist' gloss, presenting a seemingly respectable discourse characterized by the value-free phrase-mongering and unambiguous wording of serious (natural-)scientific enquiry.[8] There is no denying the value of these achievements and the resulting increase of knowledge, particularly on man's interaction with the environment in the past, but, unlike processual archaeology in other countries, these studies made little reference to 'generalized statements' of any order.

Ideological context

The critique of positivism has also called for an awareness of the ideologies underlying archaeological practice, and specific critiques of them. Here, the questions seem to centre on what point is to be proved, by whom, and for what ends; and on the genesis of ideas, concepts and paradigms. But there is hardly anything new to this. Insofar as the material for such a critique consists of the writings of archaeologists, it calls for the standard methods of historical source criticism, something with which the history of learning in archaeology, and other fields, is thoroughly familiar.

What may be new is the need to recognize the influence of ideology in the present; that there are always axes to grind and choices to be made accordingly, and that the bases of this may well carry over from a past that is no longer relevant. No less important are the aspects of politics, official ideology, departmental prestige, the legitimation of power, and in-house struggles.

Archaeological research in Finland has a strong founding in nationalist ideology. In its early stages in the late 19th century, archaeology was explicitly regarded as a patriotic activity, the purpose of which was to discover and illustrate the monuments and material remains of the nation's past. This past was already conceived in terms of the history of the Finno-Ugrian family of languages spoken in Finland, Karelia, parts of the Baltics and areas of North-West Russia. Consequently, the initial task of archaeology was to provide the tangible evidence of these peoples in the past. Although the foundations of this paradigm were rejected before long, it continued to exert an influence on the way archaeologists and their work were defined both by the general public and by themselves. They were the guardians of the national patrimony – the keepers of the nation's antiquities.

Recently other ideological considerations have emerged as possible rationales for trying to study the past. An interest in cultural ecology, and particularly prehistoric societies as ecologically functioning entities, owes much to a general concern for the environment, and to the naive conviction that prehistoric societies were better equipped to live in harmony with their surroundings.

Producing archaeological knowledge – working for the government

In the 1880s the practical business of archaeology in Finland became the task of the state, and for all intents and purposes a state monopoly. Academic education in archaeology – for long the sole prerogative of Helsinki University – was organized in connection with the State Archaeological Commission, and the country's few archaeologists were trained as government officials.[9] Although rivalries existed as they do anywhere, there was no real competition between different institutions in the field. In fact, there was only one institution, with the Department of Archaeology of Helsinki University as its appendage.

Although the field has expanded into other universities and museums in Finland over the past few decades, archaeology as the recording, administration, protection and salvaging of antiquities – is still to a large degree the concern of the government, and the majority of the country's archaeologists are in government employ, at a single department of the National Board of Antiquities. In very real terms, the sub-culture of this field is largely that of a single government department, and it mostly exists along some 50 metres of corridor in an office building in downtown Helsinki. This obviously does not generate ideological diversity, with competing views on the purposes and aims of archaeological research. Most of Finland's perma-

nently employed archaeologists complain that their work is simply administrative, and research and its funding are something they must arrange on their own.

The archaeological establishment may, therefore, present a different picture than corresponding institutions in other countries. The majority of its cadres are civil servants, and whatever dimensions archaeology has as a social practice in Finland are defined by this primary relation of employment. It could be described as enlightened government involved in managing the nation's cultural resources to serve a secular ideology of nationhood. It is perhaps antiquated and obscure to most citizens, but hardly a point to be questioned.

In broader perspective, fields of research such as archaeology are allied with the state. For a number of historical reasons, Finland has never had any appreciable tradition of free intellectual enquiry outside the pale of state-funded academia or government institutions for research. The current economic recession and the drastic cut-backs of funding for research will no doubt erode the time-honoured tradition of Finnish intellectuals identifying themselves with the state and may well point to new perspectives. But such developments always follow a time-lag, and the ingrained modes of thought and the unvoiced attitudes and commitments will remain for a long time.

This would put Finnish archaeology as a social practice into a neat pigeonhole, with clearly defined parameters and not much room for esoteric theorizing. But fortunately, the organizational and economic basis, important as it may be, can never dictate what goes on in people's minds. There is always room for individual enquiry and inquisitiveness, and the broader context of our brand of archaeology as part of an international community of archaeologies – some different and some perhaps similar – will always prompt responses.

Semiotic perspectives

The contexts of archaeological practice – the production of archaeological knowledge – can be thus defined or outlined. A further possibility is to approach the whole discipline, in its historical and societal aspects, as an instance of semiosis. This does not exclude specific semiotic analyses of archaeological source materials, nor does it attempt to define archaeology simply as a sub-species of semiotics. It is only suggested here that such approaches should be considered and explored.

As mentioned above, post-processual discussion in archaeology has made reference to structuralism, post-structuralism and, at least in passing, to semiotics. The latter has been regarded in the context of its European, Saussurean tradition, and surprisingly does not appear to have been explored in any greater extent.[10] There appears to have been even less, or no, interest in the largely American direction of semiotics based on the theories of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914).[11]

Why should this be so? An obvious answer is that semiotics, as established in its various orientations, has not had much to say about material culture as studied by archaeologists. The frames of reference of semiotic studies that have taken up aspects of material culture, particularly the semiotics of industrial products and design, are naturally bound to the present texts, utterances and other communicative activities that are concomitant to these materials. Apart from remaining unknown to semioticians, the mute and forever silent world of the archaeological record may simply be too large a problem to tackle.

But this again is precisely the fascination of archaeology: the ever-present riddle of the message of incompletely known and recovered objects. I would claim that this riddle is at the core of what makes most archaeologists take up archaeology in the first place – not necessarily to understand but primarily to decipher the language of things made of stone, bronze, iron, pottery, wood, and bone by people long since dead. But the language we seek is a chimera – a language of our own that we construct to speak of our own purposes. As such it is no less valuable – in fact it is all we can ever have – but to forget this is to invite delusion.

Having experienced an upsurge of popularity in the 1980s, the field of semiotics expanded, but also suffered from a certain trivialization. Most anything could be described in semiotic terms, though not necessarily explored intelligently. For many, semiotics became yet another fashionable buzzword, and there was little concern for the often tricky methodological and epistemological positions involved, beginning with a choice between Saussure and Pierce. This was regrettable especially since semiotics can be used to explore practically anything, for example, to deepen our understanding of pursuits such as archaeology.

Even at the risk of trivialization, it could be said that the whole business of archaeology is a series of intermixed, overlapping and sometimes contradictory semiotic operations. Ultimately, there is always a story to be told, such as the progress of man or his societies from one place or stage to another, the genesis of a people, or a parable of lost wisdom, for example, in dealing with the environment. These, and many similar examples, are all of

our own invention. Their content may vary, but their themes and the questions they pose and try to answer have been around far longer than we dare to think.

All good things come in threes

Space does not permit a serious or detailed evaluation of the relative merits of Saussurean and Peircean semiotics from an archaeological perspective, much less Umberto Eco's contributions or the cultural semiotics of Yuri Lotman and the Tartu School. At a purely formal level, the binary notions of semiotic enquiry of the Saussurean tradition easily lend themselves to systematizations of archaeological materials. Types and classes of artifacts can be viewed in terms of the *langue-parole* dichotomy, which may offer added insight into the technical and craft traditions evidenced by the archaeological record and the ways they operate in generating systems of signification and communication in the world of man-made objects. In addition, some of the pitfalls of traditional formalism in artifact studies can be avoided if the various entities of the archaeological record are approached, for example, by considering their possible syntagmatic and paradigmatic aspects. This is not to say that such approaches will automatically begin to reveal hitherto overlooked meanings and messages in our materials. But inasmuch as they point to the ways the world of objects and things could have been constituted in some places at some times, with signification and communication in the background, they may prove to be useful as fresh insights into our source material.

As mentioned above, Peircean semiotics and archaeology have yet to meet. Rather than proposing any methodological programme for archaeology based on a Peircean position, or tackling the considerable ontological problems involved, I would only suggest that some of his notions could be used to explore the discipline of archaeology itself as a semiotic phenomenon. By viewing from this angle the ways in which archaeologists construct their knowledge, and offer it to each other and the world, we might find new perspectives on the time-honoured methods of archaeology.

Peirce's theory of signs involves three categories of aspects necessary to defining a sign and involving a triadic relationship, with specific relations of a first, second and third order. The core of this idea can be found in the following definition by Peirce:

> 'I define a *sign* as anything which is so determined by something else called its *object*, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its *interpretant*.'[12] (Italics added)

Deely illustrates the basic form of the semiotic triangle with an example of a dinosaur bone, found by a gardener, and shown to a paleontologist.[13] The bone (A) is the sign, the object (B) of that sign being the long-deceased dinosaur. The interpretant (C) comes into play only when the 'perceptual effect of the bone on the paleontologist, but not on the gardener, triggered the virtual element whereby the bone actually represents the dinosaur'.[14] Following from such a basic triad are further qualifications involving signs in relation to their objects, signs in themselves, and signs in relation to interpretants.

What is of interest for archaeologists is that the semiotic triangle can used in exploring the ways in which the data and knowledge of archaeology are generated and placed in series of signs and interpretants. If in the above example a prehistoric stone artifact is substituted for the bone and a trained archaeologist replaces the paleontologist, we have at hand a highly everyday instance of an archaeologist going about his business. In telling the gardener, or writing in his report, that the artifact was, for instance, a Late Neolithic stone axe of a certain culture, our archaeologist has already brought into play a number of triadic relationships.

Initially, the identification of the artifact as a prehistoric stone axe requires the recognition of similarity (or here iconicity) with previously known prehistoric axes, which in turn are defined as axes through a similar iconic parallel with existing stone axes, for example, from ethnographic contexts. In both cases, the relationship of sign and object remains incomplete, or serves no purpose, without the interpretant, which consciously or unconsciously establishes the existence of representation. Placing the axe in the further context of a prehistoric culture, or chronological phase, again sets up new relationships of signs, objects and interpretants. A further example could be using the axe as evidence of a specific prehistoric people. It soon becomes obvious that the triangles of signs, objects and interpretants can be constructed *ad infinitum*.

At first sight, this appears to be only an interesting intellectual diversion, a neat way to package existing knowledge. But there is the possibility of developing specific methods of analysis and interpretation from this basis, for example, to investigate the semiosis of items of material culture. The immediate benefits of this brand of semiotics for archaeology may emerge in areas such as the history of research and source criticism. It might

also serve the purposes of a critical deconstruction and re-evaluation of archaeological knowledge. By specifically diverging from the assumedly linear way of thinking by which we think we gain our knowledge, and by pointing to the relationships of signs and objects and interpretants that are not immediately recognizable, the semiotic triangle can provide a new look at the writings and utterances of archaeologists, and the tales they tell.

NOTES

[1] See Shanks, M. & Tilley, C. 1987, *Re-Constructing Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. Shanks, M. & Tilley C., *Social Theory and Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Shanks, M. & Tilley, C. 1989. Archaeology into the 1990s. *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, Vol. 22, No.1, 1989, 1-54. Shanks, M. 1992 *Experiencing the Past. On the character of archaeology*. Routledge, London and New York.

[2] See contributions to Hodder, I. (ed.) 1982. *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Trigger, B. G. 1989. *A History of Archaeological Thought*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. Hodder, I (ed.), 1991. *Archaeological Theory in Europe. The last three decades*. Routledge, London and New York. Bintliff, J. 1988. Post-modernism, rhetoric and scholasticism at TAG: the current state of British archaeological theory. *Antiquity* 65 (1991), 274-278.

[3] Leach, E.R. 1973. Concluding Address. Renfrew, C (ed.). *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*. Duckworth, London, 761-771.

[4] Shanks 1992, 26.

[5] Exceptions are Siiriäinen, A. 1981. On the Cultural Ecology of the Finnish Stone Age. *Suomen Museo* 1980; Siiriäinen, A. 1982. Recent Studies on the Stone Age Economy of Finland. *Fennoscandia antiqua* I; Seger, T. 1982. On the Structure and Emergence of Bronze Age Society in Finland: A Systems Approach. *Suomen Museo* 1981.

[6] Hodder, I. 1991. Archaeological Theory in Contemporary European Societies: The Emergence of Competing Traditions. In Hodder, I (ed.) 1991, 11.

[7] A positive exception in this area is Taavitsainen, J-P. 1990. Ancient Hillforts of Finland. Problems of Analysis, Chronology and Interpretation with Special Reference to the Hillfort of Kuhmoinen. *Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja* 94.

[8] Having translated most of these studies into English, the present author is deeply aware of this.

[9] Most of them followed careers in government service, an exception being A. M. Tallgren. See Kokkonen, J. 1985. Aarne Michaël Tallgren and Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua. *Fennoscandia archaeologica* II (1985), 3-10.

[10] Wylie, M.A. 1982. Epistemological issues raised by a structuralist archaeology. In Hodder 1982 (ed.); Hodder 1982. Symbols in Action. Ethnoarchaeological Studies of Material Culture. Cambridge; cf. Gardin, J-C. 1983. L'Archéologie entre en sémiotique. *Semiotica* 45, 3/4 (1983), 339-344.

[11] Among a wealth of introductory literature on semiotics, a good introduction to Peirce's idea is provided in Greenlee, D. 1973. Peirce's Concept of Sign. *Approaches to Semiotics* 5. The Hague. See also Deely, J. 1990. *Basics of Semiotics*. Bloomington & Indianapolis.

[12] Hardwick, C. (ed.) 1977. *Semiotics and Significs. The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 63-73. Quoted in Deely 1990, 88.

[13] Deely 1990, 89.

[14] Ibid.