THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MEANING

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Contents

Summary

The understanding of meaning in the past is an important component of archaeological research. Humans adapt to their physical and social environments in terms of their conceptions of their world, which can vary significantly cross-culturally. The meanings that are imputed to objects, behaviors, events, persons, and places are essential to cultural actions, many of which have material correlates. The archaeological record provides insights into the values, world views, and modes of conduct of ancient peoples, especially those that were shared and exhibited in patterned and redundant ways. Meanings can be topically investigated according to the key dimensions of archaeology they represent: time, space, content, and people. Many studies of meaning have focused on objects or artifacts as material symbols. Their meaningfulness is embedded throughout their process of manufacture as well as in their use and final deposition. People assume constructed identities or aspects of personhood that form the basis for meaningful social interactions, including such basic components of identity as gender, kinship categories, age difference, occupation, class or rank, and ethnicity or nationality. They navigate their daily lives through a conceived landscape composed of both meaningful natural features and human-made structures. Temporal segments and rhythms also orient social experience. Different methods for analyzing meaning in all these domains include the study of symbols as representations, the structural

organization of symbolic meanings, and the emergence of meanings in social practice. The meaningfulness of the past is also very important to people in the present, as there is a growing interest in preserving archaeological sites and artifacts because of the complex meanings they represent to modern populations.

1. Introduction

The desire to understand meaning in the past has a long history in archaeology, going back to such founding figures of the early twentieth century as Walter Taylor, Irving Rouse, and V. Gordon Childe. They recognized the need to look beyond the classification and chronological placement of artifacts, features, and sites, to understand what these remains meant to the peoples who created, used, and ultimately deposited them. Archaeological materials can be viewed as manifesting different kinds of relationships that were conceived between people and the artifacts or structures they made. They thereby provide insights into beliefs, values, world views, and modes of conduct, especially those that were shared and exhibited in patterned and redundant ways in the multiple domains of cultural life. Although subsequent archaeological approaches of the 1960s and 1970s downplayed the role of human intentions and the meanings people invested in artifacts, actions, and places, there is renewed interest in this topic. This change in perspective is due to a shift from the study of the past in terms of large-scale, cross-cultural, ecological processes for the explanation of human behaviors, towards a people-centered approach that examines how humans live their lives according to their cultural precepts, their individual socio-political contexts, and their intentions and knowledge.

The early attempts to study the meaning of artifacts, to get beyond mere classification, focused on their function, that is, why were they made and how were they meant to be used. Later the study of meaning focused on art or non-utilitarian artifacts and features. It was conducted under various labels—symbolism, cognition, art, style, iconography, religion, and ideology—each of which refers to a specific content and none of which encompasses the entire range of meaning. Developments in social theory have called attention to the fact that humans adapt to their physical and social environments in terms of their perceptions and understandings of those environments, many of which are shared within a group, are learned and reinforced across generations, and may vary significantly cross-culturally. The meanings imputed consciously, or often unconsciously, to objects, behaviors, events, persons, emotions, places, and temporal intervals are essential to all cultural actions, such that it is difficult to consider anything related to human activity to be lacking in meaning. The complexity inherent in the meaningfulness of human action has resulted in the development of different epistemological and analytical approaches to meaning. Each approach addresses only a portion of this broad topic, but taking all of them into account will ultimately broaden our understandings. Archaeologists have further realized that, as interpreters of past meanings, they are conditioned by their own cultural and situational contexts, which bias their understandings of meanings of the past.

The meaningfulness of archaeological sites and artifacts continues into the present. People today look to the past as a source of authority, identity, or a sense of their place in the present. Archaeological remains are considered to represent distinctly conceived

pasts for various groups, whose differing situations and agendas often result in disagreements concerning how the past, especially as represented in the material record, should be interpreted, displayed, and curated. The meaningfulness of the past in the present has broad implications for the expression of national and ethnic identities, and will continue to have significant impacts on preservation, heritage management, and educational outreach.

2. Meaning

The notion of meaning is complex and multidimensional, which is why archaeologists have had difficulty grappling with this topic and why different approaches are necessary to encompass its totality. Various opinions towards whether and how meaning in the archaeological record can be addressed are described in this section.

2.1 Meaning as Symbolic Representation

The popular impression in archaeology earlier in the twentieth century, based on a simple analogy with language, was that certain material objects or designs had a meaning that was to be deciphered. As symbols, these objects or motifs are often seen as esoteric representations of phenomena belonging to the domain of reality or nature, such as a design that represents the sun or the earth. Conversely, objects can also be seen to serve as material symbols for something that is non-material. They could be a design placed on an artifact to indicate one's lineage membership, a costume item that designates a rank or office, or an object with ritual implications, representing specific religious or cosmological beliefs. In this perspective, usually only non-utilitarian artifacts and artworks are considered to have symbolic functions, primarily pertaining to religion and cosmology (world view), as opposed to objects used for subsistence or other practical purposes. Considered within a materialist orientation, the material bases of life (economy and technology) are taken to be determinative of the symbolic and ideological components, which are therefore relegated to secondary or epiphenomenal status.

In this approach the relationship between the symbol or sign (the signifier) and its meaning (the signified or referent) is treated as direct and fixed, the meaning pre-existing the object, design, word, or gesture that represents it. In archaeology, which stresses the material remains of the past, a dichotomy is frequently created between symbols as the concrete phenomena excavated by archaeologists, and meanings as beliefs, concepts, and values that may have no material reality. Except in the case of icons (signs that have a formal resemblance or shared property with the signified) and indexes (signs that have a natural association with the signified), meanings are assumed to be arbitrary and potentially to vary enormously from one culture to the next. The conventional wisdom in this instrumental symbol-as-code perspective is that it is difficult or impossible to know what any specific object, design, or artwork meant except in rare instances where historical documents provide insights into past beliefs and symbolic systems. It is further recognized that any symbol can have multiple meanings (the quality of multivocality or polysemy), especially as they are utilized in different contexts. This quality makes the task of symbolic interpretation even more difficult for the archaeologist, who may encounter the objects or motifs in limited

archaeological contexts. For example, objects typically found in graves may have had a use-life that ranged across a variety of social settings, which are invisible to the archaeologist who may incorrectly interpret them as having only funereal implications.

2.2 Levels of Meaning in Iconography

Art historians specializing in iconography (the study of meaning in art as distinct from its formal aspects) have also recognized different levels or types of meaning in artworks and design motifs, based on analogies to linguistics and more generally to semiology or semiotics (the science of signs). The most obvious level, sometimes termed the formal level, is the one just described of the symbol as a code that stands for something else. A design motif on an artifact may represent the sun, which can also stand for light, life, power, masculinity, and kingship. Meaning at this level is the most arbitrary and contingent on cultural and historical factors. It is also most subject to change over time as well as across space, as other groups may borrow or adopt the symbol with or without its accompanying meaning. This disjunction or disconnection between a symbol and its meaning(s) is a typical problem for archaeologists and art historians. Meanings of multivocal symbols are also context-dependent, requiring an examination of their relationships with other symbols, their settings, and their uses in social interaction in order to pinpoint what specific meaning was intended.

A different level of meaning termed conventional, mythic, narrative, or denotative has to do with the linkage of symbols, sometimes in a linear or syntactical way, as a component of their meaning. Some symbols are metonyms or synecdoches for a broader category of phenomena of which they are a part; e.g. a crown, throne, or palace denotes the office and qualities of kingship. Individual symbols may refer to complete narratives or myths in which they appear, such as the apple or tree of life symbolizing the entire Biblical story of Adam and Eve. Standing monuments, architecture, and pathways may have been built to indicate a linear or other formal relationship linking them, for example, when people moved from one building or marked place to the next in a certain order, or when structures were arranged in specific patterns, each part contributing to the whole.

The intrinsic, connotative, or structural level of meaning focuses on the organizing principles that generate the patterned configuration of meanings of individual phenomena. Applications of this approach in archaeology have borrowed directly from structural linguistics in proposing that a generative grammar or set of rules and principles was reflected in aspects of expressive culture such as art and architecture. Emphasis at this level of meaning is given to the relations exhibited by various phenomena, particularly relationships of opposition or contrast (e.g. upper-lower, light-dark, inner-outer), rather than to the individual phenomena that serve to manifest the relationship. In other words, the substantive or formal meaning of individual units is neglected in favor of the meanings that derive from their relationships with other units in a larger system.

The structural level can refer simply to the grammar-like principles determining the arrangement of motifs on artifacts (formalist structuralism), a topic that is also pursued as part of cognitive archaeology. More generally it is presumed that the same organizing

principles and relationships, such as the oppositions of male-female and inside-outside, are expressed in other domains of social and religious life. Symbolic connections are made via metaphor, recognition of similarity in organization, appearance, or function across different contexts; thus a tomb may be a metaphor for a womb, a house, or the earth. The grammar or symbolic armatures are usually slow to change, even as the formal symbols that manifest the organizing principles may rapidly shift in time and across space, and when they do, their transformation usually indicates profound cultural change.

2.3 Meaning as Constituted in Social Action

The recognition of the different types and levels of symbolic meaning fails to encompass the subject in its entirety and does not consider how and why people impute meanings into things, gestures, actions, places, etc. Living peoples cannot typically say what something means, although they are quite capable of making pragmatic use of objects and actions that are endowed with meaning. The presumptive dichotomy described above between symbol and meaning or between the symbolic and material components of life has been generally abandoned in social theory. Meanings are not fixed into any symbol nor do they exist apart from it. Instead, they emerge from communication events, when people interact with others or in self-communication, often engaging the material world in the process. The functional, technological, sociopolitical, and economic aspects of life cannot be divorced from the symbolic realm, nor can economic factors be assigned some essential priority in determining meanings and their applications in social life. Virtually every phenomenon is considered meaningful in some way, and only thereby is it incorporated into the conceived reality within which people carry out their lives. Meaning is constructed by these processes, and is easily deconstructed or transformed.

The emphasis on the meaningfulness of everyday life results from the recognition of the interactive or recursive quality of culture, which is characteristic of a group of theories labeled agency, practice, praxis, or action theories. People act based on their conceptual knowledge of the world in which they operate, and thereby typically reproduce the conditions under which they act. They also reflect on their actions, often unconsciously when events conform to their expectations. Cultural life is thus constituted in the meanings that are continually implicated in events, actions, objects, persons, and places, and which are therefore contingent to each situation. Meaning is always in process, and always has the potential for change. Most meaning is non-discursive, as people go about their everyday lives in routine ways, reinforcing the meanings that have been engrained by habit. In so doing, the unintended consequences of their actions are to reproduce the configurations of meaning into which they have been enculturated. Tradition— following in the ways of the ancestors—is itself often very meaningful and such actions may be consciously intended. At certain times, however, especially when conflicts arise over the interpretations of things or events, or when people are faced with unexpected occurrences and consequences of their actions, meanings become more conscious and may be explicitly expressed, increasing the possibility for the formation of new meanings and the transformation, rather than reproduction, of existing ones.

The emphasis in the study of meanings has thus shifted from artifacts as static representational symbols to be decoded, to people and action as manifested in the material record. It has moved from the normative and essentialized view of culture as based on a set of ideals and beliefs to which all adhere, to the emergent view of culture as the product of human action. Societies are seen as composed of different identities and factions, among whom the contestation of ideas and values and the potential for negotiation and change are ever-present.

Because meaning is implicated in all aspects of the material world (including natural features and substances) and the entire spectrum of human action, it is eminently accessible to archaeological investigation. Archaeologists are usually limited to the study of social and public meanings, those that were patterned and repeated, especially in a variety of cultural contexts, over a sufficient period of time as to be recognizable in the archaeological record. While such ephemeral phenomena as speech, gestures, and perishable organic items are also usually lost to archaeology (except where they are depicted in artworks or described in texts), the materiality of many surviving objects, features, structures, and places gives them a special significance. Indeed, phenomena that are concrete and enduring are often endowed with certain meanings for that reason. Their permanence may denote the past or some temporal interval of long duration in reference to the perceived difference between the present and the time of their creation. As they come into play in subsequent social interactions, the original intentions of their creators may be transformed as these objects and structures take on new significance, which may involve their modification or rebuilding. Archaeologists can thus trace the change in meanings over time by investigating how long-lived phenomena were used and transformed.

2.4 Constructionism and Relativism

The constructionist (or constructivist) perspective in postmodern social theory as applied to archaeology has given rise to concerns about relativism and the validity and authority of archaeological interpretations. The relationship between symbols and their meanings is frequently construed as completely arbitrary. A minority view holds that all meanings are contingent on the specific social and historical circumstances in which they emerge, and cross-cultural comparisons of meaning systems are therefore invalid. However, the arbitrariness of symbolic meanings has often been misrepresented. Humans operate in a conceptual world that is mapped onto the real, physical world. Their ability to modify their understandings of the world is dependent on the flexibility and mutability of symbolic relationships. Meaning systems can be transformed to match the differences or changes in the physical world, and this is what has allowed for humanity's successful adaptation across the globe, even in the face of rapid and dramatic environmental and political transformations.

However, humans are not completely free to construct or transform the meanings that are constituted in their actions. If they are to adapt successfully, their conceptual world must be aligned fairly well with the ecological and social constraints that are part of the real world. Similar types of constraints may therefore give rise to similar symbols, meanings, and structural frameworks in different cultural settings. This is not to say that environment or socio-economic structure determines the specific meanings assigned to

any symbol. Nevertheless, all humans experience life processes through the same kinds of bodies, with the same general physical and social requirements for survival. This factor constrains or influences how they understand the world, resulting in similar concepts in different societies that cannot be explained as the result of diffusion; for example, the division of the populace into two genders, the meaningful difference expressed as inside-outside especially experienced by sedentary peoples who live in dwellings, and the symbolic linkage of paramount leaders in presecular hierarchical societies with the sun.

Another factor that shapes the development of symbols, so that they are not completely arbitrary, is the meaning system within which a people understand their world. People are enculturated within a conceptual world, which they typically reproduce—giving rise to recognizable traditions—or modify through their own actions. Certain ideas or concepts are positively viewed, others are proscribed or sanctioned, and many are simply unthinkable within such systems. The organizing principles or conceptual structures may constrain innovation, channeling variability in certain directions over others. Such structures may also be found to exhibit cross-cultural regularities, including the common organization of phenomena according to the principle of binary opposition (male–female, inside–outside). The widespread application of oppositional classification has been attributed to a posited universal feature of the human mind; however, this cognitive explanation has been rejected as unverifiable or overly-simplistic. A better explanation for these organizational similarities again is the common life experiences of all humans.

Constructionist approaches also impact archaeological interpretation in other ways. Critical theory in social philosophy, as applied to archaeology, has demonstrated how archaeologists and others who seek to explain and interpret the past do so within the parameters of their own world views in the present, which are likely to be quite different from those held by societies of the distant past. Individual archaeologists are further biased by their socio-political situations, life-histories, and theoretical leanings. Given that all humans interpret the real world according to the conceptual world that they learn and reproduce, it has been argued that archaeological interpretations of the past are themselves constructions, and that different archaeologists as well as other persons or groups will likely produce conflicting constructions of the past. In the strict constructionist school of thought, all interpretations of the past are constructed in the present. Furthermore, all perspectives on the past are therefore relative, and there are no criteria for choosing which among them is more valid (the position known as relativism).

This relativist (or strong relativist) view challenges the fundamental proposition that archaeology can contribute to knowledge of the past, arguing instead that it is only meaning in the present that is being constructed. However, most professional archaeologists take the position of moderate relativism, agreeing that all scholars bring cultural and personal biases to their scientific undertakings, but that many of these can be exposed and compensated for with sufficient critical reflection and sensitivity to cross-cultural differences. Furthermore, the archaeological record itself has a material existence apart from any interpretations, and it is possible to evaluate competing knowledge claims by judging their coherence with that record (a position called

contextual constructionism, in opposition to strict constructionism). Archaeology as a discipline has developed standards for weighing the plausibility of alternative interpretations and for recognizing the limitations of our knowledge against the ambiguities that are inherent in attempting to understand the past on the basis of surviving material remains.

3. Topical Concerns

One way to approach the study of meaning in archaeology is to consider specific topics corresponding to the conventional dimensions in the archaeological record: time, space, content, and people. This section provides a brief survey to demonstrate the various ways meanings are implicated in human actions involving the making and using of objects, the appropriation of social identities, the engagement with the natural and built environments, and the marking of various temporal rhythms and durations. Examining each topic separately allows for a deeper exploration of the consideration of meaning in the past. In actuality, the meaningfulness of all of these dimensions is interrelated and should not be treated in isolation. For example, the construction of personal identities is intimately associated with certain objects, places, temporal durations, and relationships with others.

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Biographical Sketch

Susan D. Gillespie, born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1952, received her B.A. in anthropology from the University of Maryland, her M.A. from the University of Alabama, and her Ph.D. in 1983 from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She was Assistant and Associate Professor of Anthropology at Illinois State University in Normal, Assistant and Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, and is now Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Florida, whose faculty she joined in 2001. Her primary research interests focus on the archaeology and ethnohistory of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, specializing in social organization, iconography, and cosmology. She has directed archaeological fieldwork in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, Mexico, and has analyzed ethnohistorical documents pertaining to the Aztec and Maya cultures. Her major publications include *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* and *Beyond Kinship: Social and Material Reproduction in House Societies* (co-edited with Rosemary Joyce).