

SOCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

M. S. Nassaney

Department of Anthropology, Western Michigan University, USA

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Summary

Social archaeology emerged in the twentieth century, as social diversity within nation states became a concern in the modern world. As archaeologists began to shift their attention from description to explanations of cultural change, they came to appreciate the ways in which social dynamics structured the material remains of the past, as well as their contemporary interpretations of the archaeological record. Despite some early skepticism, archaeologists now regularly use inference and analogy to interpret social organization and social relations in extinct cultural systems, and recognize the social context of their work.

Human social groups exhibit important diversity along age, gender, class, status, and ethnic lines. This social diversity is expressed and reproduced in differences in artifact production, use, and discard. The repetitive association of distinctive material culture objects reflects activities of specific social groups. Thus, artifacts and other aspects of material culture serve as markers of social identity. The material world—products and precedents of human action—constitutes a potentially powerful system of signification. Social archaeology exploits these conditions in an attempt to decode the social significance of material patterning.

Archaeologists have used various dimensions of the material world as entry points into social life including mortuary remains, settlement patterns, and stylistic analysis, to name just a few examples. Despite the close association between physical objects and

social groups, their linkage is subject to interpretation making archaeological evidence subject to political manipulation. Thus, social archaeologists are interested in the ways in which archaeological evidence is used and viewed by particular groups in the present and in the past.

Social archaeology will be extremely significant in a post-modern, global community in which the concepts of culture and nation-state are being redefined. In a world that is simultaneously socially fragmented and economically integrated, the lessons of a social archaeology will be increasingly important as humanity navigates the turbulent political waters of the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction

From its nineteenth century antiquarian roots and a preoccupation with artifact collection and description, archaeology has aspired to more lofty goals of cultural and social reconstruction since the mid-twentieth century. Social archaeology is a loosely defined subdivision of the broader discipline of anthropological archaeology that seeks to examine the ways in which the social dimensions of human life structured archaeological remains in the past and how contemporary social relations inform and influence present interpretations of the archaeological record. The approach aims to demonstrate that empirically recoverable patterns of archaeological materials and their interpretations are expressions of social relations of class, status, gender, race, and ethnicity. A political-economic perspective is often employed in which the analysis of social relations underscores unequal access to wealth and power. Because social archaeologists attempt to reconstruct the intangible (social relations) from the tangible (material remains), they must rely on inference and analogy to support their interpretations.

As with other inferential endeavors, social archaeology has its opponents who point to the ambiguity and equifinality of the artifacts, features, ecofacts, and their spatial relationships that comprise the archaeological record. Logical challenges have been posed on a number of grounds. For example, given the materialist bias of many practitioners, only inferences regarding technology and subsistence were thought to be achievable; sociopolitical organization and religious beliefs appeared on the upper rungs of the so-called ladder of inference, and efforts to identify them could only lead to highly speculative results. Others have questioned the extent to which the past is knowable beyond a mere reflection of the present, or noted the problem of applying ethnographic analogy to explicate specific historical and cultural contexts. Yet despite the potential pitfalls of the practice, social archaeologists are using dynamic and challenging analyses to elucidate the contextual relationship between social life and its material products and precedents.

Social archaeology employs both social models and ethnographic data. Social models are essentially abstractions derived from empirical observations of living societies. However, interpretations of past social systems cannot be confined to present social configurations, lest we be accused of reproducing the present in the past and, in turn, using the past to legitimate the present.

Most anthropologists think that social roles have been diversified throughout human history, at least along age and gender lines. This diversity, which is a legacy of our primate heritage, is often expressed in variation in artifact production, access, use, and discard. Artifacts do not merely reflect this diversity; they are used in myriad ways that extend beyond utility to serve as markers of social identity. The material world—permanent and in a process of decay, constructed and destroyed, exchanged and accumulated—is a potentially powerful system of social signification. Social archaeology exploits these conditions in an attempt to decode the social significance of material patterning.

The remainder of this essay traces the historical development of social archaeology. The field has had a number of influences throughout its brief history, and it has come to have different meanings to different practitioners. Social archaeology can be logically classified into three related and partly overlapping subdivisions, each of which employs both social models and ethnographic data to varying degrees. These topics reflect influences from other social scientific and humanistic concerns as the field matured over the latter half of the twentieth century. A growing interest in social organization, socio-politics, and social agency constitute the developmental pillars of social archaeology that form the framework for the discussion in this essay. The essay closes by pointing to some future avenues that social archaeology may take, along with the significance of the approach and how it can help humanity in the next century.

2. Early Historical Development: Practitioners and Their Concerns

The roots of social archaeology lie in the first half of the twentieth century in the work of the German philologist and prehistorian Gustaf Kossinna and other nationalists who organized similar material objects and their patterns into archaeological “cultures” that were thought to exhibit ethnic coherence. The basic premise was that archaeological materials could be used to identify the distributions of past cultures or ethnic groups. Similar methods were being employed by American anthropologists and material culture specialists such as Otis Mason and Clark Wissler to organize museum collections in what became known as the culture area approach. Explanatory mechanisms to account for change in these early efforts were diffusion and migration. The Americans, in particular, championed close relationships between people and their natural environment, such that the culture areas corresponded quite nicely with biotic zones at varying scales. This perspective attained its fullest expression in the work of Alfred Kroeber, Julian Steward, and those New Archaeologists who practiced cultural ecology.

The British prehistorian Grahame Clark advocated a functionalist view of society that included social and political organization. In an early graphic display of the relationships of various cultural subsystems that presaged the flow charts of the New Archaeology, Clark accorded “social organization” a central place in cultural systems underscoring its importance in society. V. Gordon Childe also shared functionalist views of the past toward the end of his illustrious career as a European prehistorian. He adopted Marxist viewpoints after his 1935 visit to the Soviet Union and began promoting social, political, and economic institutions as prime movers in culture change. He identified social relations of production as central in human behavior and

argued that technology could only be understood in the social context in which it had operated. Despite the emphasis that both he and Clark placed on the social, these archaeologists subscribed to the ladder of inference; social organization and religious beliefs were not subject to the same kind of analysis as technology and economy.

By the mid-twentieth century, Anglo-American views dominated archaeological thinking in the West. A number of anthropologists challenged archaeologists to become more anthropological and move beyond mere questions of form and chronology. Clyde Kluckhohn, Julian Steward, Walter Taylor, and Gordon Willey, ethnologists who transcended social anthropology and archaeology, contributed to social archaeology in its early guise by advocating or applying new theoretical or methodological approaches to archaeological practice.

Perhaps Willey's settlement work conducted in the Viru Valley of Peru in 1946 has had the most enduring legacy. At Steward's encouragement, Willey conducted a settlement survey and analysis that led to the first monograph-length treatment of regional settlement patterns published in 1953. Willey argued that settlements reflect, among other factors, institutions of social interaction and control within a particular culture. Later in the decade, William Sanders used a similar methodology in the Basin of Mexico. Considerable effort was also being devoted at this time to establishing a correlation between social organization and settlement types. K. C. Chang prodded archaeologists to delimit local social groups such as households, communities, and aggregates, since cultural traits are meaningless unless described in their social context—a bold call for the study of the social dimension in archaeology.

An interest in functionalism, systems theory, and cultural ecology combined with a hypothetico-deductive methodology set the stage for the New Archaeology. With Lewis Binford at the helm, the movement evinced a new optimism about recovering traces of social life. New Archaeologists repudiated the ladder of inference behind Binford's juggernaut and claimed that the difficulties in reconstructing social organization and religious beliefs were methodological ones. Although not all skeptics were silenced, by the early 1970s the climate was more receptive for research that accorded social relations a more prominent, if not dominant, role.

A very different set of contributions to social archaeology appeared with the re-emergence of neo-Marxist perspectives after the Cold War following the English translations of texts that had received only limited distribution in the West. The most influential concepts were those related to the internal contradictions harbored by all societies, including classless ones. This dynamic brought to the foreground the importance of people-people relations, while casting people-land relations as the backdrop for the enactment of historical developments. Barbara Bender was among the first widely read archaeologists in the Anglo-American world to apply an explicitly social perspective to the problem of agricultural origins. She pointed out that even hunter-gatherers are linked to larger systems of social relations and social processes that extend beyond the household. Moreover, alliances incur social obligations, and individuals in positions of authority can channel demand for increased production. This was an early attempt to “break and enter the ecosystem,” to use the title of Elizabeth

Brumfiel's essay written in the same tradition more than a decade later. Ultimately it is the social relations that articulate the society and contribute to historical development.

As archaeologists increasingly invoked the importance of social relations for understanding past human societies, they simultaneously became self-critical and began to question scientific objectivity. Richard Ford, Mark Leone, and others began to see archaeology as an ideological tool that served to reproduce social relations and the status quo. Leone took his cue from the German school of critical theory that sought to expose the ideological basis of knowledge claims. Critical archaeologists represented an early critique of the New Archaeology and its insistence on an objectively knowable past. When the dust cleared from these early archaeological bombshells, the intellectual terrain began to accommodate new thinking brought about by civil rights, indigenous movements, and feminist theory that had entered the mainstream a decade earlier. Margaret Conkey, Joan Gero, and Janet Spector, for instance, followed the lead of feminist anthropologists in pointing out the ways in which archaeologists had assumed that significant cultural activities were only those performed by men. Moreover, they also showed that contemporary gender roles were frequently imposed on the past and that the past was subsequently used to legitimize the present in a vicious tautology. Gero went so far as to claim that the gender-based division of labor in contemporary society had changed little from our Paleolithic forbears. She used information on National Science Foundation funded research to argue that the male archaeologist typically hunted the raw data in the field and brought it back to the laboratory for the female archaeologist to process and cook into palatable form.

As archaeologists became sensitive to the role that social and political relations played in contemporary archaeological practice, they began to see societies as aggregates of individuals that stood in different relationships to positions of power, privilege, and prestige. Influences of French and British social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Anthony Giddens through the work of Ian Hodder and other post-processual archaeologists contributed two important reconceptualizations for social archaeology. First is the idea that individuals are social agents capable of exercising power and making decisions that contribute to historical development and social change. The second concept is the recursivity of material culture. Social agents actively produce material culture and use it to create, reinforce, and transform social relations of power and inequality. Material culture is not merely a passive reflector of social life. This latter perspective was most cogently put forth in Hodder's contextual approach. His admonitions had the effect of turning some New Archaeologists or processualists away from generalization toward the particular, historical nuances (contexts) that structured the meaning of material culture. Artifacts are symbolic markers whose meanings change through time and in the eyes of the beholder. One only needs to think of the different meanings the American flag embodies to a veteran of the Second World War, a Vietnam War protester, or a member of the Michigan militia to make the point of the social embeddedness of material culture. It follows that the production, use, and consumption of material culture embody social practices and social structures.

The following sections of this essay elaborate on the ways in which social archaeologists have explored social organization, socio-politics, and social agency by presenting some examples and influential case studies.

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Biographical Sketch

Michael S. Nassaney received his B. A., M. A., and Ph.D. degrees in anthropology from Providence College (1977), the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville (1982), and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1992). He is currently an associate professor of anthropology at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. His research interests include archaeological theory and method, political economy, ethnohistory, material analysis, the archaeology of culture contact, and the ways in which social relations are created and reproduced through the material world, especially in North America. He has conducted archaeological investigations in New England (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont), the Midwest (Illinois, Michigan), the Southeast (Arkansas), the Caribbean, and Europe. He directed the Plum Bayou Survey project (1988–1995) in central Arkansas and the Southwest Michigan Historic Landscape Project (1995–2000). He is currently involved with the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project, an interdisciplinary initiative aimed at exploring the history and outcome of European and Native American interactions in the fur trade of the western Great Lakes. Nassaney's work has appeared in journals including *American Antiquity*, *Dialectical Anthropology*, *Historical Archaeology*, *Southeastern Archaeology*, and the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*. He has also co-edited volumes including *Stability, Transformation, and Variation: The Late Woodland Southeast* (with C. Cobb), *Native American Interactions: Multiscalar Analyses and Interpretations in the Eastern Woodlands* (with K. Sassaman), *The Archaeological Northeast* (with M. Levine and K. Sassaman), and *Interpretations of Native North American Life: Material Contributions to Ethnohistory* (with E. Johnson).