THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MEANING

Susan D. Gillespie
University of Florida

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 20th 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

1

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 20th 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, a 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.

3.1 Matter and Form

The earliest study of symbolic meanings involved examining specific objects or design motifs at the formal level of meaning. Interpretations were typically limited to religious themes or personal identifications, such as badges of status or rank and indicators of gender, kinship, or ethnic group membership. These were often further characterized as corresponding to specific styles, which were considered to be meaningful to groups who adhered to their own styles, or who adopted the styles of others for various reasons. The action-centered approach to meaning, which treats symbolic meanings as constituted in human action, allows for an expansion of these limited interpretations.

The construction of artifacts involves first a consideration of the raw materials, drawn from a natural environment that is conceived according to cosmological beliefs and principles. Different parts of the landscape are invested with specific meanings, which are intrinsically associated with the materials or objects taken from those areas. Those materials may serve as a metonymic reference to the landscape, having once been attached to it. Materials gathered from distant places or via exchange with other groups may also be endowed with certain symbolic associations, especially an exotic quality or a reference to "otherness" or to a peripheral realm as opposed to the central, familiar locale of the community. Certain objects may be considered to have a sacral or numinous quality because of their point of origin and the nature of the raw material, as well as the techniques used to manufacture them or their purported association with supernatural beings or ancestors.

Raw materials were selected not just for pragmatic reasons but also for aesthetic or value-laden factors, such as color, texture, feel, and smell. The extraction of raw materials is not a straightforward task but is often prescribed to certain kinds of persons, at certain times, utilizing specific behaviors that are most often practical and rational, but are nevertheless invested with meaning within a larger system of meanings. Digging into the earth for metal or stone is an action that not only takes one into this "other" realm of existence (within the earth or underworld) but also thereby changes the earth itself, a human action that feeds back on ideas concerning the relationships between people and their environmental settings. The transformation of the raw "natural" world into "cultural" or "domesticated" products is a meaningful act that has symbolic implications for those who perform those actions.

Technological knowledge and procedures are integral components of systems of meaning. Artifact manufacture immediately engages human actions in constituting the simultaneous material and conceptual aspects of lived experience. Cosmological values and concepts are often metaphorically enacted in the manipulation and transformation of the material world. In this way not only are certain beliefs or ideas materially expressed, but the act of production may evoke more explicit discourse and reflection about them.

The specific techniques and decision-making involved in the construction of artifacts can be investigated through the *chaîne opératoire*, an archaeological reconstruction of the operational manufacturing sequence, which has implications for cross-cultural studies of human cognition. The knowledge and skills involved in the making of certain objects, features, or structures is associated with particular identities, for example, gender or class identities (where these are a basis for the division of labor) and specific craft-based identities. Artifact construction is a means of constituting or reiterating these identities and values in a recursive manner. Technology is thus an essential component of social and economic relations as the line drawn between people and the things they make becomes blurred.

Objects, features, and structures also are endowed with meaning(s) as they are used in social interaction, which need not imply that the same meanings are understood by the participants in that action or that people are conscious of those meanings. Because their meanings are imputed only in these acts of communication, they may be quite malleable and subject to change. Such action includes self-communication, when objects are used in specific ways and associated with certain body positions or movements within a limited range of settings or locales. While such social behaviors are typically routinely performed, generating little or no explicit self-reflection or discourse, they nevertheless contribute to the system of meanings that compose the constructed world. One way they do so is to contribute to the generation of collective or

social memory, which forms a connection linking the objects, the persons or groups involved, the event, and the place or setting.

Exchanges of objects or materials among persons or groups in the same society, or across societies, are an important means for constituting relationships among them. These may represent egalitarian relationships where the items are considered to be equivalent, hierarchical relationships where the items are of different value, complementary relationships where the items represent a complementary opposition, and so forth. "Gender" is a quality commonly imputed in some societies to objects that are exchanged among different groups as a way to metaphorically display their hierarchical or complementary relationships.

Objects are often endowed with the identities of their makers or givers, such that a part of one's personhood is exchanged with another, as represented by the item given. (Conversely, people's products or labor may be appropriated by more dominant groups, thereby alienating them from their work, as expressed in Marxist philosophy.) As selected objects of value are curated over long periods, they take on their own life-histories, intertwined with the biographies of the persons and groups who made, owned, exchanged, or fought over them. They also implicate meaningful spatial locales and temporal durations. Especially in non-egalitarian societies, heirloomed items may serve to naturalize the higher rank of their owners by objectifying the longevity of the group that has curated them, and also by linking the items to ancestral or supernatural figures who owned them in the past as a source of their inherent value.

The deposition of artifacts also reveals cultural attitudes towards the meaningfulness of materials, objects, spaces, and persons. People may go out of their way to dispose of certain materials, including what could be considered debris (dirt, stone tool debitage, remains of metal-working, potsherds, broken figurines) in culturally prescribed ways. The practice of "killing" artifacts (by damaging them in a specific fashion) for inclusion in graves is well

known, although no single meaning can be attributed to it cross-culturally. The deposition of finished items in various settings also typically exhibits meaningful patterning, such as grave goods, objects placed in sacred structures such as shrines or temples, or in such natural settings as caves or mountaintops, domestic structures, store rooms, and so forth. From these spatial patterns it may be possible to distinguish organizing principles, such as the contrast of pollution and purity, sacred and secular, inside and outside, male and female.

3.2 People and Identities

People act based on their self-identities and the perceived identities of others in order to realize specific kinds of relationships. The "person" is not a natural given, a biological entity, but is a social construct. The components of personal and social identities are many, and while they intersect in every human being, the specific identity displayed in any interaction is context-dependent.

Gender is a major component of identity that has been thoroughly examined and can serve as an example for investigating other dimensions of personhood. Feminist archaeology has demonstrated the errors that result when gender relations of contemporary industrialized societies are projected into the past. Gender is not an essentialized quality, a dichotomous form of being based on indisputable biological characteristics, but is always a cultural construct. It is seldom adequately characterized by the opposition of "male" and "female" because of the intersection in each person of other qualities, forming a composite identity in which gender is not necessarily primary. Thus gender alone need not be used to assign individuals to opposing social groups. "Third" genders, which may be a combination of male and female, and gender-neutral or agendered identities have also been recognized in some societies. Important distinctions must be maintained between biological sex (which can be equivocal), gender identity (which can be flexible and need not correspond with biological sex), gender roles, such as in the division of labor (which may or

may not be strictly enforced), and gender ideologies or gendered forms of agency, in which gender is used metaphorically, for example to refer to other oppositions or dyadic relations.

Gender identity and roles are often reiterated in a recursive manner by the adoption of gendered costume, accouterments, hairstyles, body postures, gestures or other mannerisms, speech, labor, and appropriate settings for action. These outward appearances serve to affirm and communicate meanings to oneself and others, and directly engage the material and symbolic domains in human action. Gender identities may be appropriated at different points in a person's life cycle and are not necessarily established at birth.

The complexity of gender as a component of identity is apparent in studies of individuals in the past, for which the best archaeological evidence consists of burials, with both actual human physical remains and often material signifiers of the deceased's identities; imagery of humans in the form of figurines, statues, and two-dimensional paintings, weavings, or sculpted reliefs; and, much rarer, written information on individual intentions, actions, and personhood. This evidence has revealed the problems of assuming a straightforward dichotomy in the symbolic associations of gender difference. For example, "male" objects (made or used by, or associated with men) may occur in female burials (and vice versa). Males depicted in representational art may be given female costume or accouterments, or even biological sex characteristics (and vice versa). Similarly, men may be treated as if they were women as recorded in certain texts (and vice versa); for example, male rulers may be written about as the "mothers" of their subjects.

Another important cross-cultural source for social and personal identities is kinship, by which group membership and specific types of interactions with others are ostensibly determined from ties based on consanguinity (biological relationship) and affinity (marriage relationship). Kinship, like gender, is a not a natural or biological given but is a social

construct. What are sometimes called "fictive" forms of kinship, such as adoption or sham marriage, may be considered just as legitimate as "real" kin relationships. Kinship is the basis for complex classification systems that are a major source of personhood (a complex of roles, rights, and obligations). Such persons are frequently ranked in hierarchies (e.g., based on generational difference, birth order, and gender) and engage in appropriate interactions with other persons considered to be related by kinship. These interactions typically involve the exchange or appropriation of goods, commodities, labor, and metaphysical qualities.

Kinship identities are often tied to specific territories or places, and frequently incorporate conceptions of temporal cycles and durations, such as the ritually enacted links to common ancestors as a source of kin group identity and authority, and the life-cycles of families. Although kinship relationships may be difficult to discover archaeologically, it is generally the case that households--the practical unit of investigation--are composed of nuclear or extended families and may include others who are either actual kin or who act as if they were kin (and therefore may well have been considered as kin). The archaeological evidence for ancestor veneration (e.g., long-term ritual actions at graves or cemeteries, shrines, the curation of human bone, ancestral images) provides clues to the importance of kin ties in group identity and property management. Some archaeological studies of the distribution of designs on artifacts have attempted, albeit not always successfully, to infer patrilineal or matrilineal descent patterns (descent reckoned through only the father or only the mother) together with preferred residence choices of married couples (either with the husband's or the wife's family), on the presumption that those designs were symbolic identifiers of kin relationships.

Other components of identities which have archaeological implications include positioning within age-based groupings or rankings, offices and other achieved statuses, occupation or craft, and membership in or assignment to groups such as sodalities, religion, interest groups, political

factions, and hierarchical social estates, castes, and classes. Class identities characterize industrialized societies of the last several centuries, and archaeological approaches to meaning in both class and non-class societies frequently stress Marxist conceptions of ideology, which have been variously interpreted. In the Marxist perspective society is seen as composed of conflicting interest groups, primarily in terms of social classes. These groups are presumed to understand and represent their own interests in their conceptualizing of the cultural world, forming an ideology. According to this view, ideology functions to suppress or displace real contradictions and conflicts in society, represents beliefs and values that are not completely shared as if they were universal, and considers as natural or normal that which is actually constructed and contested. In some Marxist interpretations of ideology, only the dominant groups or classes have the power and resources to impose their world view on others, one that considers the hierarchy of power and rights as a given, governed by natural or divine precepts. The misrepresentation of the world by the dominant or ruling class, and the acceptance of this view by those who are subordinate, is stressed. However, other interpretations reject this normative characterization of ideology and emphasize the conflict of ideologies held by the different factions.

3.3 Space and Place

The meaningfulness of space ranges from the micro- to the macro-scale. It includes both the "natural" and the "built" or human-modified environments, an analytical distinction that need not have been relevant to the world views of past societies. The division or classification of space is basic to cosmology--the organization of the constructed world within which people operate. Typically it is grounded in the recognition of vertical cosmic levels (sky, underworld, etc.) and horizontal segments, such as the cardinal directions marked by the sun's movements or the distinction between center (one's community or home base) and periphery. Such macro-cosmic classifications are often

reproduced on a smaller scale. They may be localized to the immediate setting, endowing nearby natural features such as mountains, trees, streams, or lakes into a cosmic framework, and/or reproduced by human-made constructions. The spatial arrangement of structures thus reiterates cosmic organizing principles. Archaeological analyses of the configuration of buildings, free-standing monuments, and other markers in the landscape constitute one of the best methods for reconstructing these principles.

Out of space, different kinds of "places" are created as the intersection of meanings referring to qualities, objects, persons, and time. Typical examples include houses as "homes," cemeteries as places for the dead, temples and shrines for gods and spirits, forests for wild beings, and roads or paths as appropriate conduits for movement from one place to another. The landscape is conceived as the patterned configuration of various places. At the smallest end of the scale, certain activities may be prescribed for tightly defined spaces; each individual may have his/her sitting place, each tool its own position in a storage area. Places may be restricted to limited functions or utilized for a multiplicity of activities, either perspective providing important clues to the conceptualization of space and place. Boundaries to separate different places or spatial functions may be materially marked, for example by interior walls, fences, or palisades, although their absence cannot be construed to mean that such boundaries did not exist.

Segments of space are intimately associated with human identities. Gender, kinship, occupational, and class or status components of identity especially are affirmed by their association with specific places and the social actions appropriate to them. The spatial juxtaposition of the living with the dead (as when the dead are buried in or around domestic structures) may indicate the importance of ancestors as a cultural construct and the derivation of identities and status of the living from their association with the dead.

Places are built, maintained, lived in, refurbished, razed, rebuilt, and abandoned. Their

meanings are always in process, and even the place where a building once stood may still reference the structure and the identities of the persons who built or occupied it. Archaeology has the advantage of being able to trace changes in meanings as implicated in material ways at specific places over long periods of time. In some parts of the world, and at certain time periods, families or even entire communities continually built their houses in the same places over generations, sometimes resulting in the large artificial mounds called tells. The meaningfulness given to continuity of place, definitively self-evident by the high visibility of tells in the landscape, should be different from those regions where house location constantly shifted or where temporal gaps typically separated occupations.

The "life-history" of structures is also materially represented by embellishments or additions which may be archaeologically verifiable. In the case of domestic architecture, such structural changes may be consonant with changes in the life-cycle of the household group that occupied it, and there is often a close identity between a family and its house or place of residence. The same sense of identity appears on a larger scale with territorial claims made by kin and ethnic groups, as well as cultures and nationalities to their lands and resources. Again, physical boundaries may be marked in various archaeologically visible ways, and the separate identities of the members of these territorial groups are often represented in material phenomena. (See Section 3.2.)

Cosmic and social order are conceived and maintained by the positioning of things in their places. People may feel "anchored" and at ease when they and those things to which they feel a connection are properly situated. Conversely, phenomena that move, especially in non-prescribed or erratic ways, may lead to anxiety and fear, or may generate awe. Movement within space is thus equally meaningful. As humans act within and move through various places, navigating in and around structures and objects, the meanings these places embody recursively feed back on their consciousness, thereby constituting and reiterating both the

meanings themselves and the structuring principles by which they were conceived, usually in a routine and taken-for-granted fashion. These actions exemplify what Pierre Bourdieu characterized as habitus: systems of durable, transposable dispositions (ways of being, habitual states, tendencies, or propensities) that generate and structure practices and representations. Such repetitive practices (rendering them more archaeologically evident) can therefore be considered as regulated without recourse to the notion that people must follow rules of conduct or consciously recognized precepts. In everyday living these organizing structures are literally embodied-- expressed via movements and other bodily dispositions--especially within the house as the preeminent social setting for enculturation and the constant recursiveness of culture. Notions of inside-outside, private-public, high-low, and so forth, are engrained as bodily dispositions and serve as a generative source of meaning for other domains of life.

Movement between places, especially long-distance movements, is also meaningful and can be recognized archaeologically. Travel to a distant or unfamiliar place is often fraught with awe or anxiety, and it impacts the identities of the travelers who dislocate themselves from their usual settings. In contemporary society, the tourist has been well studied as a separable, usually temporary identity requiring special clothes and accouterments (e.g., cameras), as well as non-ordinary behaviors that typically would not be exhibited at home. Another identity-transforming movement is the act of pilgrimage. Archaeological examples of pilgrimage sites and activities emphasize the special meanings associated with these places and the distinctive categories of material objects connected with them. Pilgrims and long-distance traders, as well as tourists today, often would bring back something from their journey, a souvenir or metonymic referent to the pilgrimage place and its qualities, now intimately linked with their own identities. Certain archaeological and historical sites themselves are also pilgrimage centers, today as well as in antiquity, and are particularly revered for their association with the past as a meaningful quality. (See Section 5.)

3.4 Time and Tempo

The meaningfulness of time is experienced in a variety of ways, often with material correlates. In archaeology, there is a need to distinguish this aspect of lived time from the analytical approach to time as a universal, natural, unvarying, and irreversible dimension that is measurable in standard segments such as radiocarbon years. Furthermore, the notion of evolution or cultural progress that dominates archaeological explanation is a powerful theoretical construct of the modern era that situates all of human history on a single universal scale. It is thus often irrelevant to the context-sensitive study of the meaningfulness of time in past societies. Time as it is experienced is not an isolable dimension, separate from human existence, but is implicated in social action and is signified by places, persons, and objects.

Archaeological investigations have long considered the importance of seasonality in the scheduling of economic activities. Seasonal changes in settlements, in wild or domesticated foods, in the activities engaged in, the clothing worn, the rites celebrated, and so forth establish a rhythm of life which has implications for cosmological and corresponding social concepts. Certain types of actions, qualities, and objects are associated with shifts in the natural world (sun, moon, climate, vegetation) that form specific durations. Aligned in a syntactic, but recurring, progression, these durations may be codified in the form of a calendar, although calendrical segments need not be considered to be of equal length or duration, and time can be felt to slow down, speed up, or stop entirely.

The material marking of these durations according to solar, lunar, or other celestial movements and alignments was common in antiquity. It was associated with some of the world's major monumental constructions, such as the megaliths and henges of Europe and similar constructions in the New World, as well as pyramids and other elaborate structures oriented to the sun or to important constellations and planets.

On a more mundane level, cycles and other temporal rhythms were experienced in everyday life, as a component of the habitus or ways of being. Individual humans undergo changes during their lifetime which are often marked as the transformation of identity, for instance in rites of passage. Domestic units also experience life-cycles as parents grow old and die, and are replaced by children who may thereby assume part of the identity and status of their parents, even their literal places in the same house. The notion of the replacement of family members over time is often evident archaeologically.

A fundamental temporally-derived source of meaning is the idea of the "past," both the qualities it encompasses and its relationship to the present and/or future. The past may be seen as an "other" dimension, inexorably separated from the present such that these two time frames are construed as distinct or even opposed. Conversely, it may be viewed as coexisting in the present, materially manifested in certain objects or places and continually re-enacted by the actions of the living who thereby become their ancestors. Narratives that recount the origins of the world and people may be materially represented by features in the landscape, constructed places, and objects (whether or not they were heirloomed relics of the past). The past is frequently viewed as a source of precedence or tradition, which is often linked with authority, legitimacy, morality, and a strong sense of appropriate qualities, identities, actions, and rights. The desire to maintain ties to the past, through the enactment of rites and the curation of places and objects associated with the past, remains a powerful force in the present, and the practice of archaeology today is embroiled in issues of preservation in association with patrimony and nationalism. (See Section 5.)

3.5 Ethnicity, Culture, and Nationality

Large-scale concepts that integrate meanings of identity, place, time, and material phenomena are often termed ethnic or ancestral groups, cultures, and nationalities. These differentially labeled constructs actually have much in common in terms of how they are used by archaeologists and other social scientists, government and administrative officials, and the general public. Ethnic or ancestral groups are a means of forming--or having forced on one--a sense of cohesiveness and shared identity. These groups see themselves as distinctive from others with whom they interact, or are set apart by those others as different; the sense of difference is grounded in the relationships with others. In terms of ethnic or ancestral groups, this difference is believed to be based on some notion of common group descent or separate group affiliation over time. Such identities are often materially marked and can be archaeologically identifiable, e.g., based on the spatial distribution of artifact and architectural styles. Where such internally coherent and shared identities correspond with distinct territory and/or long span of time, these groups may be referred to as cultures or nationalities.

Interpreting the meaningfulness of such identities and the values and social and material actions that correspond with them poses difficulties for archaeologists, in the first place because they are often confused with the notion of an "archaeological culture." In the early 20th century the recognition of a distinct and spatially bounded archaeological assemblage, composed of selected components of the archaeological record, was termed an archaeological culture. It became entwined with the developing concept of culture in early anthropology as the possession of a distinguishable people organized into a spatially and often linguistically separable society. However, it is now known that there may be little overlap between an ethnographically described living culture and the materially recognizable archaeological culture.

Furthermore, there is a crucial lack of agreement regarding the use of the term "culture" between social scientists and the general public. The popular view is that ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities are essential (exhibiting a configuration of shared features), geographically bounded (at least in their original putative "homeland"), and unchanging over long periods of time. Language, rituals, mundane actions, and material objects that manifest these group

identities are taken to be customary traditions of long-standing that are either unique to that group or that serve to historically relate it to equivalent groups. Certain places and objects are revered for their denotative references to the persistence of the group, as are historical or legendary personalities who played key roles in the group's formation or claims to its specific status, rights, and privileges.

These concepts are at odds with the situational and constructivist approach to culture and ethnicity in Western scholarship especially. Social boundaries are known to be more permeable than rigid, and even as they may be maintained in material ways, they are not fixed, nor do they prevent movement across them. Moreover, like other identities, culture and ethnicity are social constructs that are constantly in process and emerge out of social action. They are highly dependent on situational context and, especially as ethnicity and nationality are most apparent in interactions with others who represent a contrasting identity, may be the subject of explicit negotiation and transformation. "Culture" and "nationality" may be firmly held meaningful concepts with objective legal as well as affective or emotional implications, but archaeological and historical studies have shown that they are often ephemeral and ambiguous, and tend to develop and change as the result of external historical and ecological factors rather than reflect some durable essential features. Peoples' sense of who they are as a group and how they are different from other groups is subject to continuous modification. Archaeologists are in the best position to trace these changes, but this often puts them at odds with the political realities of the present, in which archaeology is too often seen as a tool for documenting a continuity of group ethnicity or nationality that may never have existed. (See Section 5.)

4. Theory and Method

The brief survey in Section 3 of the different ways meanings are embodied in cultural life and may be visible in the archaeological record highlights the complexity of this topic and the multiplicity of research questions that it arouses. These questions require a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to answer them satisfactorily. Representational and structuralist theories center on meaning in the abstract sense, divorced from how meaning is constituted in individual actions on a continual basis. These approaches have been incorporated within, and overshadowed by, perspectives that emphasize a human- or micro-scale approach to immediate lived experience. Some of these latter methods are explicitly context-specific and eschew comparative or generalizing forms of analysis. However, as archaeology's greatest advantages are its encompassment of all of humanity's past, its capability to trace changes over time, and its global reach, macro-scale analyses will supplement them and will further provide for the delineation of cross-cultural ecological and historical constraints on human action.

The instrumental meaning of symbols (as communicative codes; see Section 2.1) is generally considered to be decipherable only with the aid of written texts. Most archaeologists discount the existence of universal symbols, and even where certain forms or motifs are discovered cross-culturally, it is difficult to verify that they all had the same meaning(s). Documents that provide verbal information written at the same time as the symbols were in use--by those who created the symbols or by others who observed them--are the most reliable. For this reason, the study of symbolism in the past has been most successful in historical archaeology. Even in this most ideal situation, the documentary information cannot be taken as a straightforward description of what symbols meant, since writing itself is an exercise in symbolic construction. Thus, text-aided guides to meaning must be checked against the totality of the archaeological evidence. Alternatively, there may be documentary information concerning later peoples who were related to earlier cultures that used the symbolic devices under investigation. Here the "direct historical approach" can be attempted, projecting the later meanings back into the prehistoric era. However, this method assumes continuity in the linkage of meaning and symbol, and the possibility of symbolic disjunction (noted in

Section 2.2) can be difficult to control for.

This "symbol as representation" approach assumes a one-to-one correspondence between symbol and meaning that is arbitrary and independent for every symbol in use and must be learned individually by members of a society. In contrast, the structuralist perspective examines how meanings of individual symbols are derived from their coherence within a broader system or configuration. Meanings are assumed to derive from conceptual relationships that exist between phenomena, such as opposition or hierarchy, e.g., male-female or ruler-subject (see Section 2.2). Some variation of structuralism is commonly used in many approaches to the study of meaning, including cognitive, contextual, and practice-oriented approaches. The objective in structuralism is to delineate the framework or structuring principles that organize meanings within this system. The structure is composed of a potentially finite set of relationships that generates meanings in both mundane as well as novel or unfamiliar settings, just as grammar allows a speaker to generate new intelligible sentences and to understand the sentences spoken by others.

In order to investigate the fundamental conceptual principles that organized past lifeways, archaeologists require a great deal of information on the various cultural domains, so that their coherence or internal consistency can be verified. Hypotheses concerning structural regularities as seen in one domain of the material record--such as domestic living arrangements, architectural layouts, or grave configurations--are compared against the others to see whether the same rules or principles also apply. This approach to meaning has been labeled "contextual" and "conjunctive," and it is most successfully accomplished when the fullest amount of information is available, particularly in historical and proto-historical societies. The method for establishing meaningful relationships, by constantly comparing a part against the whole, has been likened to the hermeneutical approach to the study of meaning in written texts.

Cognitive archaeology emphasizes the development of such grammars within the individual domains of culture. It also stresses binary oppositions, which can be seen more fundamentally as a discrimination between similarity and difference as a basis of perception and classification. Cognitive science in general investigates the mental operations by which people perceive the world, process that information, and store it for retrieval when it is needed. In archaeology the study of the mental operations utilized to manufacture artifacts such as pottery vessels and chipped stone tools has become an important application of cognitive archaeology. Other studies have focused on the structural principles in the arrangement of design motifs on artifacts, such as the mental operations that produce various formal patterns (e.g., bilateral or quadrilateral symmetry, mirror imagery) as constituting an ethnoaesthetic approach to form and meaning.

The structuralist approach is based on the premise that the same organizing principles should be manifested in material remains of a variety of cultural contexts. On the one hand, this makes them more enigmatic, for unlike in a language-based grammar, the same "rules" can be manifested by different forms in various settings. On the other hand, the redundancy in the organization of the material world is an important clue to the operation of the conceptual structure. In classic structuralism, binary oppositions or dualisms, linked in analogous fashion, have been used to reconstruct the building blocks of structure. Common examples in archaeology include male-female, inside-outside, life-death, human-spirit, high-ranked-low-ranked. Such concepts have correlates in the archaeological record and may form conceptual clusters (e.g., male/high-ranked/outside versus female/low-ranked/inside). This method has limitations however, and in the absence of historical information, archaeologists need to be wary of assuming universal oppositions without further verification of their existence in any particular society. Orienting structures that classify meanings are not always reducible to binary oppositions, and oppositions that do come into play do not form fixed combinations but are manipulated and dynamically transformed depending on the context and the

14

point of view of the different persons involved.

Classical structuralism as a theory (and not just a method) has been further criticized for its over-emphasis on the system as the source of meaning, and its neglect of both the individual symbols that compose the system and the people whose actions constitute the system. The structure of meanings too frequently is treated as pre-existing or having a separate existence from the symbols that manifest it. The symbols themselves are reduced to epiphenomena and considered to be easily interchangeable or substitutable. In fact, some symbols may have been important for historical or ecological reasons and so are not completely dependent on their positioning within the structure for all aspects of their meaning. Certain key symbols may bear a heavy burden of meaning, used in a variety of contexts or especially salient contexts. Furthermore, structure is too often treated as fully coherent and shared by all members of a society, when in fact structures can include ambiguity and contradiction and are not equally understood by all persons or groups in the same culture. Finally, because structuralist theory has emphasized the meaning system, it has typically been applied in ahistorical fashion, unable to explain the origin of or changes to that system. This is because the system of meanings has been separated from the actions and intentions of people.

In contrast with structuralist theory, practice or agency theories emphasize instead the constitution of cultural meanings in social action and the recursiveness of culture, as both behavior and structure act back on one another through the medium of people's concepts and understandings (see Section 2.3). These and other poststructuralist theories have therefore located meaning not in material symbols, nor in some underlying system that has a separate existence, but in the interaction between peoples and other phenomena that are therefore invested with meaning. These approaches deny the analytical separation between symbols and meanings, and between the material and conceptual worlds. They further stress the conflictual aspects of these interactions, as various persons and groups will not come to the same understandings, and symbols may be used to misrepresent or subvert, especially for the benefit of more powerful groups.

Phenomenological approaches take this emphasis a step further to insist that meanings arise solely in the individual experiences of humans at the moment of encounters with other phenomena, what is sometimes referred to as "being-in-the-world." The overarching system of meanings and the longevity of symbols are eschewed in favor of a micro-scale analysis focusing on the continual creation of meanings as experienced by the human subject. Such micro-scale investigations are difficult to undertake in archaeology and have been criticized for their shift too far away from enculturated systems of thought that are often unconsciously reproduced in action and may manifest long traditions. They nevertheless add a useful dimension to archaeological analysis that too often has taken the long view and emphasized diachronic over synchronic approaches. Altogether the representational, structuralist, cognitive, practice, and phenomenological methods can help to illuminate the complexity of meaning in the past.

5. The Meaningfulness of the Past in the Present

One obvious indicator of the meaningfulness of material phenomena is the high value given today to the archaeological and historical remains of the past. Sites and artifacts form a major component of cultural and national heritages. Paradoxically, as development continues to destroy archaeological remains on a global scale, there is growing interest in preserving selected sites because of the meaningfulness they represent. As described in Section 3, these sites are believed to represent "the past" as an important component of identities. They provide a sense of origin and of qualities that are participated in differently by various groups, forming a means of expressing historical relatedness or difference in the present. People may visit archaeological sites to demonstrate their personal or group heritage and

sense of continuity with the past, or conversely their distance from it, as they reflect on how changed the present is from the past. This phenomenon pertains to sites on the national or supra-national level (such as those representing the centers of the early civilizations considered ancestral to those of today), but it is also becoming more common at the local level, to ground identities within a more immediate sense of belonging. The feeling of identity extends to issues of curation and management of the relics of the past, including the variable attitudes towards the collection and display of looted artifacts and human remains. At archaeological and historical sites, there is increasing demand for educational and interpretive centers, rather than museums full of meaningless artifacts, that can explain what happened in the past on a human scale, so that visitors can better relate to the peoples of the past.

In the 20th century it became common to trace the origin places and historical events and movements of specific ethnic groups and nationalities. Many archaeologists believed they could track the development of "cultures" as distinguishable assemblages, comparable to the Soviet concept of *ethnos* as a group definable by fixed criteria unchanging over centuries, including language, architecture, dress, cuisine, religious rites, and other customs. These constructs remain part of popular culture and are at odds with contemporary social theory, which sees ethnicity, culture, and nationality as constructs that, while meaningful to those who adhere to them, are malleable and responsive to changing circumstances. Archaeologists of the 21st century are having to deal with the fact that they cannot adequately satisfy the desires of governments or ethnic groups--as they exist today--to trace their essential and fixed identities back to some point in time and space.

The fact that the past is constructed or interpreted, by the public as well as by archaeologists and historians, has also meant that different persons or groups will attribute contradictory meanings to the same archaeological sites or regions and artifacts, often to serve political agendas. The past as a concept, and as embodied by material remains or ancient landscapes to which people feel a connection, is a powerful source of meaning in the present expressed in public sentiment, education, developmental policies, political programs, and the global explosion in tourism. Archaeologists conduct their work within this contemporary situation, taking into account the meaningfulness of the archaeological record to people of the present, while also seeking to delineate the quite different meanings as understood by the various peoples of the past, meanings which have left clues in those same archaeological remains.

Selected Readings

Barrett, J. C. (1994) *Fragments from antiquity: an archaeology of social life in Britain, 2900-1200 BC*, 190 pp. Oxford: Blackwell. [A case study applying a phenomenological approach to the meaningfulness of the megalithic landscape of southern Britain and how its changes over time were experienced by the various populations who lived there.]

Dobres, M., and C. R. Hoffman (1994) Social agency and the dynamics of prehistoric technology. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 1:211-258. [Emphasizes the symbolic and meaningful aspects of technology using agency theory approach.]

Hodder, I., M. Shanks, A. Alexandri, V. Buchli, J. Carman, J. Last, and G. Lucas, eds. (1995) *Interpreting archaeology: finding meaning in the past*, 275 pp. London: Routledge. [Presents the case for interpretive and phenomenological approaches to meaning; few practical case studies].

Jones, S. (1997) *The archaeology of ethnicity: constructing identities in the past and present*, 180 pp. London: Routledge. [Applies ethnographic analysis of the emergent quality of ethnicity to archaeology; a case study from Roman civilization.]

Kohl, P. L., and C. Fawcett, eds. (1995) *Nationalism, politics and the practice of archaeology*, 329 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Examines the role of archaeology in the development of nationalism, especially in Europe, and the politicization of contemporary archaeology in the interests of nationalism and group identities.]

Lechtman, H. (1984) Andean value systems and the development of prehistoric metallurgy. *Technology and Culture* 25:1-36. [A seminal case study of how "world view" is materialized in technology.]

Robb, J. E. (1998) The archaeology of symbols. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27:329-346. [Provides a useful and succinct summary of the different methodological approaches to symbols in contemporary archaeology].

Shennan, S, ed. (1994) *Archaeological approaches to cultural identity*, 317 pp. London: Unwin Hyman. [Concerned with relationships between artifacts and their meaning and what can be legitimately deduced from archaeological remains about the lives, social situation, and cultural identity of the people who created them; technical and detailed, advocates no single approach.]