

Simon Bronner, in "The Idea of the Folk Artifact," offers a detailed definition of material culture in its social and historical context. Knowledge of objects is fundamental for understanding human experience, and can be synthesized into human experience in its entirety: "Material culture is therefore history; it is sociology, psychology, geography, and anthropology; it can be philosophy, literature, and drama." (p. 225) But neither are all artifacts equal in value nor reflective of the culture in its entirety. Bronner provides some useful perspectives on the ways to categorize artifactual evidence and the dangers inherent in such categorization.

Bronner's major focus is on folk artifacts—those materials that people used in their daily lives. Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick are more interested in those "icons" that reflect popular culture. They are defined as "symbols and mindmarks" (p. 232) and become part of the myths and legends that define a culture. Gerald Orr, in "The Icon in the Time Tunnel," provides some examples of icons that have survived throughout time, of icons that exist both across time and across civilization. As you read his article, look for examples of these icons and consider how knowledge of such symbols of popular culture affects our historical understanding.

These first three articles, then, define the possibilities for material culture analysis. They are theoretical in nature, outlining the broad interpretive value of study of artifacts. The final two articles are more pragmatic, demonstrating from the perspective of the public historian the problems that often inhere in using sources of this sort or in persuading others of their value. John Schlebecker introduces us to some of the impediments the researcher of material culture faces. His essay balances that of Bronner, as he illustrates the complexities involved in analysis of artifacts and the potential for fraudulent misuse of evidence. Kyvig and Marty's chapter on "Preserving Material Traces," takes us one step further down the path of the public historian who works with current material artifacts—particularly large-scale ones. They begin from the assumption that specific material traces have been identified as valuable reflections of culture. This chapter is not research oriented; it is, rather, focused on application. What are the practical arguments for preservation? they ask. What have been some of the issues that preservationists deal with as they seek to conserve our material culture? What is the existing legislation and what are the resources available for lay and professional preservationists?

These essays provide both theoretical and practical perspectives on the potential for using material culture. The best analyses of material culture come from those who have moved outside of the libraries and archives to contend with the three-dimensional research sources. We must appreciate the potential of material culture evidence for historical understanding and must train ourselves as historians to be more attuned to incorporating such evidence with other kinds of sources.

NOTES

1. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) p. 30; Simon Bronner, "The Idea of the Folk Artifact," *American Material Culture and Folklife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1985) 10-11.

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INVITATION TO ARCHAEOLOGY

James Deetz

Archaeology is the special concern of a certain type of anthropologist.¹ We cannot define archaeology except in reference to anthropology, the discipline of which it is a part. Anthropology is the study of man in the broadest sense, including his physical, cultural, and psychological aspects, and their interrelationships.² Archaeology concerns itself with man in the past; it has been called the anthropology of extinct peoples.

Archaeologists are anthropologists who usually excavate the material remains of past cultures, and through the study of such evidence, attempt to re-create the history of man from his earliest past and to determine the nature of cultural systems at different times and places around the world. Archaeology is similar to history in part of its purpose, that of delineating sequences of events in the past and their importance to mankind today. This kind of reconstruction is called prehistory, a term which stresses a basic difference between archaeology and history. Prehistory treats the time before man learned to write and therefore record his own career on earth. It begins with man's first appearance on this planet, almost two million years ago, and usually ends with the beginnings of written history in all parts of the world. This later date can be as early as *circa* 3500 B.C. in the Near East, or as late as A.D. 1850 in parts of the state of California. While such time limits can be imposed on archaeological studies, they are somewhat flexible and blurred at the later end of the scale. In recent years, archaeologists and historians have become aware of the value of working together in certain situations. The archaeological and historical records combined often yield a richer picture than either would separately. We know from history that Plymouth Colony was founded in 1620, that the ship bringing the first colonists was the *Mayflower*, that separate land grants were given the settlers in the cattle division of 1627, and that the first houses were probably made from sawn clapboards. Yet no known historical documentation tells us exactly what animals were used for food by the Plymouth colonists, what types of dishes were used in the homes, when the first bricks were produced locally, or what types of nails, window frames or door hardware were used in constructing the houses. Archaeological investigation of seventeenth-century house sites in Plymouth has given the answers to all these questions, fleshing out much of the bare bones of the historical accounts.

In the missions of southern California, we know from the historical record that quarters were constructed for the Indian neophytes, and that they were occupied by family groups. Such a structure was built at La Purisima Mission in 1814, but the resident Padre was satisfied with simply noting in his diary that the building had been erected. Archaeological excavation showed it to be 540 feet long, of adobe brick with heavy tile roof. Study of the contents of the apartment units within this barracks structure provided valuable insights regarding Indian life in the missions not forthcoming from the historical record.

If historical documentation is of value at the later end of the archaeologist's time scale, the earliest end leans heavily on the natural sciences. The older the material, the less perfectly preserved it usually is, and the greater the need for supporting interpretations with data drawn from other disciplines. The excavation of a 40,000-year-old site in France requires the assistance of paleontologists, botanists, soil specialists, and geologists, to name but a few of the non-anthropological scholars who work with the archaeologist in the analysis of the materials recovered. Through the application of results from these supplementary fields, the archaeologist is given a good idea of the environment in which man lived at the time, and the types of problems which life presented.

The "where" of archaeological work is as important as the "when." Modern archaeologists are pursuing their investigations in all those places where man lives or has lived at any time in the past. Sites are excavated in the frigid Arctic, in the jungles of tropical America, Africa and Asia, on the open plains of the United States, beneath the streets of London, and even under the waters along the coastlines of many parts of the world.

With the entire world from which to draw his materials, and a two million year span of time represented by them, it is the task of the archaeologist today to integrate this immense yet imperfect corpus of data into a meaningful picture, and in so doing provide an understanding of cultural process in time and space.

CULTURE

Archaeology seeks to learn about culture from the fragmentary remains of the products of human activity. What, then, is culture? Culture can mean many things: a growth of bacteria in a petri dish, the correct way to behave in various situations, or what we get when we read "good" books, listen to "good" music, or learn to appreciate "good" works of art. To the anthropologist, culture means none of these things. On the other hand, to say just what it does mean to an anthropologist is by no means simple. In fact one entire book has been devoted to the definitions of culture used in anthropology.³ Assuming that you could find them, ten anthropologists selected at random on the street would probably give ten somewhat different definitions.

Since we are concerned with culture in our discussion of archaeology, we must attempt a definition in the face of so many others; there is some comfort in numbers, however, and our treatment of culture in this case

will not be too different from the consensus. Culture can be defined by making several statements about it.

CULTURE IS LEARNED BEHAVIOR. We inherit many things from our ancestors through genes; the color of our hair, our blood type, the shape of our face. Other things are given to us by our ancestors, but not biologically. There is no gene for speaking English, wearing a necktie, calling our mother's sister's children "cousin" or using Arabic numerals. Yet, generation after generation does these things, having learned them by a process separate from the genetic and biological, a process termed *extrasomatic*, apart from the body. We might even say that culture is everything a person would not do were he to grow up completely isolated on a desert island.

CULTURE IS UNIQUELY HUMAN. This statement might cause some disagreement. Many species of animals learn certain patterns of behavior in a way not too different from that by which man learns cultural patterns. But man is the only animal who uses culture as his primary means of coping with his environment. Culture is man's adaptive system. While bears and rabbits in the Arctic have developed heavy pelts through biological evolution that protect them against the cold, the Eskimo makes a snug fur suit and lives in an igloo. Over the ages, man has elaborated culture into an ever more complex buffer between him and his world. Remove this cultural screen from the picture, and we would find man so ill adapted to his environment that he would probably become extinct. Even a brief loss of electrical power places urban man in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable relationship to the environment, and an apartment dweller who cannot use his electric can opener is in much the same predicament as an Australian aborigine who has lost all his spears while hunting far from home.

CULTURE IS PATTERNED. The array of habits and customs which make up culture for any group of people is integrated: each part relates to every other part in a systematic manner. Anthropologists categorize culture in certain conventional ways. Language, religion, economics, technology, social organization, art and political structure are typical categories. In any culture, the form of the political structure is in some way contingent on the social structure; art reflects religion, social organization shapes a part of technology, and so on. In studying the nature of cultural patterning, anthropologists have come to understand how culture is structured in hundreds of cases.

SOCIETY IS THE VEHICLE FOR CULTURE. The distinction between culture and society is clear. Societies are groups of interacting organisms, and man is but one species of social animal along with other primates, many insects, and even certain lower forms of life. In the human case, society is the repository of culture; it carries it; its members participate in it; and culture is the dominant determinant of social behavior.

Culture can thus be defined as a uniquely human system of habits and customs acquired by man through an extrasomatic process, carried by his society, and used as his primary means of adapting to his environment.⁴

To this definition we might add one qualification as archaeologists. Culture is highly perishable, and therefore cannot be excavated. No one has

ever dug up a political system, a language, a set of religious beliefs, or a people's attitude toward their ancestors. Yet such things as political and religious behavior, language, and social interaction affect what the archaeologist does recover. The patterning which the archaeologist perceives in his material is a reflection of the patterning of the culture which produced it. Pots, arrowheads, house floors and axes are the products of culture, not culture in themselves, but they are linked to culture in a systematic manner. It is the archaeologist's task to discover how cultural behavior is shown in its products.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHOD

An Indian village on the Missouri River in 1750 must have been a lively place. Barking dogs running between large earth-covered houses; children playing on the roofs; women making pots and chatting by the doorways; a party of men returning from a hunting expedition laden with bison meat—all contribute to a picture of confusion, sound, and motion. The same village in 1965 is a silent cluster of dim green rings of grass on the brown prairie, the only sound that of the wind, the only motion and life that of a tumbleweed rolling across the low mounds and depressions, and of a hawk circling high in the sky. The people are gone, and the only things which attest to their former presence are fragments of the objects which they made and used, buried in the collapsed remains of their dwellings.

If you had gone into this village after all the people had left, but before any deterioration had begun, understanding what had taken place there would be difficult enough. The material culture of a people is but a small part of their whole cultural pattern. The behavior which took the form of chatting, playing, and hunting could not be directly observed in their absence. Add to the problem the factor of disintegration over a period of two centuries, and the magnitude of the archaeologist's task becomes painfully clear. He must attempt to say as much as he can about the entire way of life of a people based on the very fragmentary remains of only a fraction of their material products. It is this incompleteness of the archaeological record which demands many of the techniques and methods of archaeology.

Like physicists, chemists, biologists, and other scientists, archaeologists observe, describe, and attempt to explain. Observation, description, and explanation comprise the three levels of archaeological study, and the archaeologist proceeds through these levels in a certain way so that he might finally be able to say many things about past cultures based on their scanty and imperfect remains.⁵ The particular operations of archaeology which correspond to these somewhat general levels are the *collection* of data through excavation (observation), the *integration* of the data recovered by placing it in time and space and ordering it according to some type of classification which will permit comparison with similar data (description), and the drawing of *inferences* from the patterns seen in the integrated data which serve as explanations of these patterns in cultural terms (explanation).

At the first level, that of excavation, archaeologists have developed a set of field techniques which enable them to gain a maximum amount of useful information from the material buried beneath the earth. Having recovered this material in a carefully controlled way, it is necessary to bring order to it before any logical inferences can be made. At this second level of analysis, the primary goal is to describe the materials according to three variable dimensions, those of space, time, and form.⁶ The spatial dimension of archaeological data is usually simply a function of the location of the excavations in terms of geographic space. To place the materials in time, a set of methods exists which enables the archaeologist to say how old his materials are. The formal dimension of archaeological materials consists of their physical appearance. Until the broken pots, remains of houses, flint arrowheads, and other fragments have been described in such a way that they can be compared with others, it is difficult to produce sophisticated inferences. The descriptive level of archaeology then consists of saying where the material was found, how old it is, and what it looks like—a seemingly simple set of operations which is in fact quite complex, and which has posed problems which have required almost philosophical solutions at times.

When he has recovered his evidence, and integrated it according to its spatial, temporal, and formal aspects, the archaeologist turns to the third level, that of asking what his materials mean in terms of the culture which produced them in the distant past. At this level, four important aspects of the data become important for the first time; we can classify these aspects as the contextual, the functional, the structural, and the behavioral.

Let us see how these aspects are used in archaeological inference by considering how they relate to a specific case, a clay bowl for example. The contextual aspect of this bowl refers to the context in which it was found, and all the circumstances of its occurrence, including the animal and plant remains found with it. Inferences concerning the cultural meaning of this bowl would certainly differ if it had been discovered in a burial rather than in a house or on the altar of a ruined temple. In one case, it may have served a very special mortuary function; in the others, it may have been either a domestic object or a ritual one.

The contextual aspect of an object frequently tells us something about its functional aspect. However, it may not if the context of discovery was not identical to its functional context in the culture which used it. Bowls used for ritual, domestic, or mortuary purposes could all find their way into a common trash heap; we would certainly not suggest that this context indicated the use of this type of bowl as trash. The functional aspect of an object is at times clarified by the contextual aspect but may involve other considerations, since inferences regarding the function of the object in the culture which produced it involve the consideration of its contextual aspect as well as its functional aspect.

All man-made objects are reflections of the thoughts of the people who made them. The structural aspect of the bowl tells us something of the cultural norms which led to its production. In comparison with other bowls, this one might be seen as "typical" in that it and similar ones resulted

from the expression in clay of a set of ideas which were joined by certain "rules" of combination. For example, since all bowls of this type have round bottoms and straight sides, there may have been a "rule" which dictated the repeated combination of round bottoms and straight sides, and bowls with square bottoms and flaring sides would violate such a "rule" and either would not have been made or would have been thought "wrong" by their makers.

The "rules" which govern the structural aspect of the bowl were a part of the cultural system of its makers, and as such were passed along from generation to generation. The repeated application of these "rules" shows a patterning of behavior which is reflected by the behavioral aspect of the bowl. That is, we are now concerned with the relation between the behavioral significance of patterning shown by the material and the behavior which was typical of the producing culture. For example, it has been shown that highly patterned and similar behavior led to the manufacture of similar pottery in an Indian village where women resided in the same dwelling with their daughters. The sharing of behavior patterns by these women, brought about by their common residence, was reflected in the sharing of "rules" as shown by the pottery.

These four aspects of archaeological data which form the basis of inference thus involve the circumstances of discovery of material objects as these might aid in understanding their function, the function served by the objects in the culture which produced them, the rules which dictated their creation, and the behavioral aspects of the sharing and passing on of these rules. At the inferential level, the archaeologist is at last providing the flesh for the bare bones of his data, and, if done with care and imagination, such a procedure makes possible the delineation and ultimate understanding of past cultures. . . .

In the course of digging, the archaeologist encounters a variety of materials, which can be classified into three broad, general classes: artifacts, features, and non-artifactual materials. When associated, these constitute what is usually termed an archaeological assemblage. Artifacts are man-made objects such as pots, axes, pipes, arrowheads, or beads. Features are culturally produced objects which, unlike artifacts, cannot be taken from the field. They include fire pits, houses, storage pits, and burials, to name but a very few. The artifacts from features can be collected, but the features themselves must be recorded in the field. This is done by making accurate plans, cross-sectional drawings, and photographs of the feature. This information is filed with the other data from the site. Non-artifactual materials include a great variety of things, such as animal bone, seeds, charcoal, shells, pigments, asphaltum, and ash. While not man-made, such material tells the archaeologist much about the former occupants of the site.

When the excavations have been completed, and all records, artifacts, and related materials have been taken into the laboratory, the archaeologist is ready to begin the difficult but often fascinating task of resurrecting a life way of a people from the scraps and pieces which he has spent long

hours removing from the earth. Before this can begin, the material must be cleaned and catalogued. Cataloguing is a simple process and involves placing a number on each object taken from the site. These numbers are entered in a catalogue, and the entry tells the location and circumstances of discovery of each object. Once a collection has been catalogued, it can be mixed, sorted, or segregated in any way, and it is still possible to place the objects back in their original relationships with an accuracy which is as great as the accuracy and precision of field location by pit, level, or feature.

NOTES

1. This book is concerned with archaeology as a part of anthropology. There is a somewhat different type of archaeology, sometimes called classical archaeology, which is primarily concerned with the archaeology of the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean world. This type of archaeology is usually taught as art history in university art departments. Its beginnings lie in the Renaissance, when man became interested anew in ancient art and dug it from the ground to serve as an example and inspiration. Anthropological archaeology, on the other hand, is only as old as anthropology itself, and is concerned with all the remains of past man, wherever we find them in the world.
2. Excellent general introductions to anthropology include D. L. Oliver, *Invitation to Anthropology* (New York: Natural History Press, 1964) and F. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1958).
3. A. L. Kroeber, and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, Vol. 47, No. 1); Cambridge, 1952.
4. Anthropologists also distinguish between culture on the one hand, and individual cultures on the other. This latter, somewhat different use of the term signifies individual groups of people the members of which share in a particular culture system. Thus we can speak of American culture, Chinese culture, Navaho culture, etc. Another definition of culture in these terms would be the shared habits and customs of a single society.
5. For a discussion of analytical levels in archaeology and anthropology, see G. R. Willey, and P. Phillips, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1962), p. 4.
6. A. C. Spaulding, "The Dimensions of Archaeology," *Essays in the Science of Culture in Honor of Leslie A. White*, ed. G. E. Dole and R. L. Carneiro (New York: Thomas Crowell and Co., 1960).