# COMMENTARY

## THE CULTURAL USAGE OF SPACE; TOWARDS
## SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION IN ARCHAEOLOGY

There are few archaeologists who do not, at some level or another,
aspire to the reconstruction of past social conditions on the
basis of data recovered through archaeological fieldwork.  This
data includes material from field surveys and excavations, from
aerial photographs and in some periods, from literary sources as ·
well.  The archaeological record offers a very broad range of
evidence, but all of it is partial, often minimal.  It is fre-
quently very difficult to fix particular material remains in time.
The problems of the partiality of material recovered and of the
temporal resolution possible are the greatest obstacles to social
reconstruction inherent in the material base upon which archaeo-
logy focuses.  That which is potentially recoverable from any
particular period in the past will diminish with time, as more
disintegrates beyond recognition or is destroyed by modern acti-
vity.  Temporal resolution, on the other hand, ought to improve
with the development of more refined and accurate dating tech-
niques.

The development of social theory within archaeology has al-
ways had to take cognizance of these two factors.  Over recent
years archaeological theory aimed at the problems of social re-
construction has fallen into two occasionally overlapping, but
essentially separate, approaches.  The first has been the conside-
ration, adaptation and development of various theories of society
so as to bring them to bear more specifically on archaeological
questions.  The second has been the emergence within archaeology
of what is termed 'middle range theory'.

The 'theories of society' approach can be subdivided into
three theoretical frameworks which are usually seen as offering
competing models of social formations, though to some extent it

is obvious that each, in fact, sees different aspects of social formations as primary and therefore aims its analysis specifically at the reconstruction of these aspects. Two of these frameworks have been developed from bodies of anthropological theory; the neo-marxism of people such as Terray, Bloch, or Godelier, or the structuralism deriving in the first instance from Lévi-Strauss, but taking further inspiration from the structural linguistics of Chomsky, Saussure and others.

Marxism is, of course, an obvious source of inspiration for archaeologists because of its essential materialism. The step from material items and their patterning through space (i.e. the primary data of the archaeologist) to modes of production and economic networks is one which seems theoretically justifiable and also practically achievable. Structuralism offers what initially seems a much lesser potential for the archaeologist. Aspects of this theoretical framework such as the concentration on the symbolic and on the structure of meaning patterns not only confront the archaeologist with new concepts, but also seem to be so far removed from the material as to be inapplicable. However, in both instances, the archaeologist is attempting to interpret material observations within a theoretical framework derived essentially from social observations, and the far greater numbers of Marxist archaeologists reflects the practical problems of this inferential process rather more than the relative merits of the two social theories.

The third framework within the theories of society approach is qualitatively very different in being derived from the physical rather than the social sciences (although it might be claimed that it represents an attempt to find a level at which it is possible to encompass the social within the physical). The systemic approach to human societies and its application in archaeology (most notably by David L. Clark and A.C. Renfrew) takes *interactional* relationships as regular and knowable on a theoretical level. It then becomes a matter of achieving a sufficient level of detail to reconstruct specific parts and of minimising the number of parts about which little or nothing is known. From this one can produce not only a social reconstruction, but it should be possible, if the social conditions at two points in time are known, to simulate the processes which have intervened between the two system states. Thus systems theory also offers us an improvement on the use of comparative 'slices of time' for dealing with long-term social change, by being essentially dynamic. Here lies what is perhaps the greatest attraction of systems theory, and the greatest criticism from systems theorists of those operating within the anthropologically derived social frameworks is that they lack the analytical power to cope with long-term social change. Against the seductive prospect of being able to explain social change are the problems that the appropriateness of a systemic model to human societies remains questionable (and there has been no exhaustive attempt to test its validity in non-archaeological situations) and that in many archaeological situations the level of data recovery is far from

adequate for a systems analysis.

For those archaeologists trying to develop appropriate theories of society it is the level of data recovery in archaeological contexts which constitutes the most severely limiting factor. And it is at this point that the exponents of 'middle range theory' have been focusing their attentions. There are three important transforms effecting the differences between the material culture of a society in the past and the material assemblage available to the archaeologist. These are patterns of deposition, of survival and of recovery. Middle range theory is concerned with what factors effect these patterns and whether these can be viewed systematically and therefore be built into any analysis of archaeological material. Ethno-archaeology has developed specifically to facilitate these investigations and to test hypotheses generated by this approach in ethnographic situations.

The disjunction between the two approaches can rather crudely be expressed as the separation of theories of the social from theories of the material. This disjunction is of crucial significance within archaeology, because if social reconstruction from the essentially material remains of the archaeological record is to be possible the relationship between the material and the social must be the pivot of the interpretational process. Because the archaeologist must rely almost exclusively on the material for his reconstruction he has tended to view this as an image (though a distorted one) of the social, rather than as an aspect of and integral to the social. Similarly, he has always tried to infer social patterns directly from material patterns; a material pattern is not an image of a social pattern, but is, in the first instance, a part of a social pattern.

The medium for archaeologically recognised patterns is space; space is also the medium though less explicitly so for ethnographically recognised patterns. The difference between the archaeological and the anthropological concepts of space is that archaeologists tend to regard space as an abstract framework within which social formations and material objects alike exist; it is essentially a physical and constant phenomenon. For the anthropologist space is more something which is created and used, and it is social and cognitive or symbolic as well as physical. If the archaeologist adopts and adapts this concept of space and attempts to analyse and interpret the spatial patterning available to him in the archaeological record as the products of human actions and of intra- and inter-group interactions, the disjunction of the material as image of the social should be obviated. In order to do this the development of a theoretical framework in which the material and the spatial are integral to the social is necessary.

A first step in the development of such a framework is the testing of the hypothesis that the use of space has culturally specific patternings. To do this the usage of space as apparent in the archaeological record must be considered on a multiplicity of levels: from formal and decorative aspects of individual artefacts and artefact assemblages, to the differentiation of

activity-specific areas within sites or sites within regions.
The hypothesis is comparable to the assumption implicit in much
ethnographic work that relation structures of the social and the
cognitive (including such things as kinship categories and the
symbolic meaning structures behind ritual action) can be consi-
dered to be culture-specific.  While the anthropologist takes as
given the cultural entity within which his analysis is to be
applied so as to isolate the features and structures which are
exclusive to it, the archaeologist must work through identifica-
tion of comparable patterns back to the cultural entity itself.

If this hypothesis can be shown to be correct the archaeolo-
gist will be in a position more closely comparable to that of the
anthropologist; he would then be able to interpret social forma-
tion and intra- and inter-group relations within the context of
known cultural groupings.  It is necessary to achieve this sort
of comparability if social reconstruction within the theories of
society frameworks are to be possible.  This is true for systems
theory as well as for the more explicitly anthropological approa-
ches, for the starting point of systemic analysis must be a
social entity, though this is not necessarily a cultural one.
Within these proposals it is not intended that the considerations
of 'middle range theory' should be neglected; these are essential
to the practicalities of testing the hypothesis outlined above.
The sort of theoretical developments that it is hoped such an
approach may achieve should avoid the disjunction between the
theories of the material and the theories of the social at pre-
sent apparent in archaeology.

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