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DISCUSSION ARTICLE

Humanness as performance

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Abstract

If archaeology is the examination of historical conditions with reference to a surviving material residue, then one way in which these conditions might be characterized is as the different ways they had enabled the development of different forms of humanness. The historical construction of this diversity is discussed here as the ways that the relationships between humans and things had been performed. This means that the practice of archaeology must question the recent desire to adopt a flat ontology that defines archaeology as the 'discipline of things'. It is argued that it was by means of the performances established between humans and their various objects of concern that different forms of human life were able to define themselves. The implications of this argument for the practice of archaeology are explored.

Keywords: Performance; Things; Humanness; Archaeology; Barad; Politics

Introduction

Current procedures tend to treat archaeological data as if they were a record of earlier processes of formation. As a consequence, the methodological and theoretical challenge of archaeology has been one of identifying the processes that had resulted in the form of the record, and archaeology has focussed upon the role of past human actions in the making of such a record. Archaeologists have adopted various theoretical positions in the hope of explaining changing patterns of human behaviour and thus the changes observed in the material residue. The purpose of this paper is to challenge this concept of an 'archaeological record', and with it, the need to theorize human behaviour as the maker of things. The alternative pursued here is to treat humanity as having been created historically by means of its performances which respected the significance of the people, plants, animals and things which it could identify and amongst which it lived.

I question the validity of recent attempts to define archaeology as the 'discipline of things', which is supposedly 'centered upon what it is that archaeologists do' (Olsen et al. 2012, 3, emphasis omitted). I will argue here that archaeology should be the study things with the express purpose of understanding how humans might once have brought themselves into existence as they lived amongst those things. The credibility of such an archaeology need not be assessed, as it is now, by the extent to which a pattern of recovered materials is claimed to represent the 'reality' of the processes of its formation, but instead we can evaluate such an archaeology by the extent to which it allows us to see, and thus to better understand, the historical detail of the material residue itself and of the lives of those others who were entangled within that material (Barrett 2021). This will then raise the issue of who is best situated to understand the material in the way suggested: those who engage with the material itself or those who treat the material recovered as a record requiring interpretation?

Things are never 'entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them', and material things are 'never entirely exhausted by their semiotics' (Bennet 2010, 5). The study of material culture cannot therefore be treated as if it were merely the product of either language or symbolism (Barad 2003, 801; cf. Tsoraki et al. 2021), simply because things are always more

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than the significance that is assigned to them by humans (Harman 2018). However, if archaeology is not to be limited to the study of things in themselves, then it is surely the study of how, by living within certain material conditions, people had once lived in relation to those things that they identified as being objects of concern. My intention is therefore neither to refute nor to sustain observations about the significance of things in themselves (whether these things are counted as living or non-living) but rather to clear the way towards understanding how an archaeological commitment to other forms of humanity might be practiced. I suggest that an 'archaeology of things' is in danger of diverting us from this objective.

Others have sought to reduce the diversity inherent amongst past forms of humanness by treating humanity as if it were a single form of life amongst an assemblage of things by developing a 'symmetrical archaeology' (Olsen and Witmore 2015) and by the adoption of a 'flat ontology' (Garcia-Rovira 2015). Whilst this ontological reasoning accepts that any assemblage contains different things (living and non-living), it also denies that any distinction between those things is dominant in structuring the history of that assemblage. This position therefore opposes 'the assumption that things are epiphenomenal and residual outcomes of some social or cognitive priors' and accepts that things are 'real beings with a genuine existence and impact in a shared … world' (Olsen and Witmore 2015, 187). This much I accept, but archaeology is surely *our* study of how various other historical forms of humanness had created themselves as forms of life relative to other living and non-living things (cf. Thomas 1993, 74). This will prompt a concern with human practices as being a product of the distinctive relationships that humans have entered into with other things (where those other things might have been counted as living or non-living). The challenge is therefore to maintain a concern with the making of forms of humanness while at the same time avoiding the assertion that the things studied archaeologically are to be understood as if they had merely resulted from human action (cf. Holbraad 2009). This should lead us towards an understanding of how lives, that were very different from our own, might have been lived amongst the assemblages of materials recovered archaeologically.

I assume that humanity has always been varied in the ways that it has executed various tasks, and this variation has enabled it to evolve its practices in ways that have allowed it to colonize, adapt and grow by living amongst different kinds of environmental conditions. Two issues must be addressed by any archaeology that seeks to understand the history of these practices, and thus the creation of forms of humanness. First is the seemingly easy assumption that there is a single world, and that human practices describe the different ways that forms of humanness have found to occupy that world. I find this view to be problematic simply because it invites us to believe that it is we modern 'educated' westerners who have finally seen how things 'really are', while others have lived, and continue to practice their lives, within various forms of cultural delusion (cf. Venkatesan 2010). Martin Holbraad has sought, by means of various 'kinds of thought-experiment', to constrain the intellectual contradictions that will result from accepting that people have developed within radically different materialities (Holbraad 2009, 434). This 'ontographic' philosophy seeks to accept the different realities which human practices have occupied. The second issue concerns the stability of those practices. This is implied when we claim that a system of practices is adaptive to, and is fixed by, the environments of things (and where such a system of practices is represented archaeologically by a static record of its material residues). This immediately raises the question as to why practices might have changed and therefore why the 'archaeological record' of those practices has also changed through time. Two kinds of 'explanation' then appear to be on offer. Practices have either changed because of a human tendency to embrace change or because those environments changed, forcing a change upon human adaptive strategies. The first of these explanations might result in the claim that only certain peoples have the propensity for change, while others lack such a 'dynamism' (and have thus remained 'primitive'). The second explanation could be charged with perpetuating a form of environmental determinism (Outram and Bogaard 2019, 23–49), a charge that has often been levelled against processual archaeology (Shanks and Tilley 1987, 2). However, both kinds of explanation are avoided if

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we allow that the systems of bio-cultural reproduction, which are characteristic of human history, are themselves inherently unstable (Barrett 2021). This implies that it was the cumulative results of cultural behaviours that changed the environments within which people had lived, and that it is long periods of bio-cultural stability that are unusual and that require explanation. This is the kind of reasoning that is followed here, a position that has been characterized in the recent literature as indicating a concern with the processes of becoming rather than with the status of being.

Archaeological theory and the work of Karen Barad

One way that we might think about the issues that have been raised above is with reference to the work of Karen Barad (2007). Her argument centres upon the claim that we see and experience the significance of the world around us through our embodied relationships with that material world, which acts as a specific kind of apparatus. That apparatus plays an active part in determining what we can, and what we cannot, see, experience and express in cultural terms as the order of things. People's reaction to a world that they are able to see and to experience is therefore made with reference to a particular apparatus, and life is enacted as a form of self-understanding that is established in, and communicated to, the company of others.

The importance of Barad's work has been recognized in archaeology (e.g. Marshall and Alberti 2014), and while she makes her case with reference to Neils Bohr's work on quantum mechanics, her argument has a more general relevance (cf. Rovelli 2021, 165–166 fn.). This allows me to suggest that, while there are realities that we can never witness because we will always lack the apparatus to bring those realities into view, there are others who have experienced different realities by employing a different apparatus from that which is available to us. In Barad's account, our enquiries 'do not reveal what is already there; rather what is "disclosed" is the effect of the intra-active engagements of our participation with/in and as part of the world's differential becoming.' (Barad 2007, 361). The empirical experience of things therefore discloses the realities that different people once sought to understand from their particular perspectives upon a particular apparatus of things, and in the company of others.

Current archaeological theory is assumed to establish the more general principles about how we think that the reality of the world works and what gives that world the kind of order that we encounter amongst the things that make up that world. This enables us to see that our empirical observations make sense according to our beliefs about the forces that shape our reality. The relationships between those forces to which we are committed (because we believe them to be real), and which we express in terms of certain theoretical principles, and our empirical observations are probably matters of a far greater complexity than is sometimes allowed (Eagleton 1990, 24). One way we might perceive the modern relationship between how we think that the world works and our empirical experiences of archaeological materials is that our experiences of things are read as if they offered a particular example of the ways that reality has always operated. Archaeology expresses this 'uniformitarianism' in the historical terms of formation processes (e.g. Schiffer 1976; Hodder 1982). Most of the time, we do not bother to theorize our experiences because the principles that experiences make real are accepted and are taken for granted: things make sense to us. Consequently, we might only turn to theory when things do not seem to work as we believe that they should. One reason why theoretical work in archaeology is likely to have been held in so little regard (e.g. Bintliff 2011) is because it appears to restate the empirically obvious, but it does so in terms that are abstract and technically demanding. We might wonder in this light if the non-modern peoples that we study had ever themselves 'theorized' the conditions that they experienced. I would suggest that they did, although in these cases, their beliefs are likely to have depended upon forces and processes whose existence we are likely to doubt. We might go further and refer to these beliefs as being 'ideological' simply because they expressed a commitment to a taken-for-granted, unchallengeable and existing order which had sustained various patterns of human exploitation (cf. Miller and Tilley 1984).

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The emphasis that these ideas place upon the claim that 'belief happens in and through things' (Morgan 2005, 8) means that the meanings that things had for people were expressed in the ways they had performed in relation to those things. This is a very different perspective from recent attempts to understand human history as a matter of its purely cognitive development (Malafouris 2013). This is because people's understanding of reality could only have emerged as they lived within, and engaged with, the materials that had revealed that reality to them as being a reality of a certain kind (Ingold 2000, 185–187). If we accept that all life is related (Darwin 2009 [1859]), that it is conscious in its various ways (Thompson 2007), that life is necessarily embodied (Hoffmeyer 2008, 18–38),) and that all embodied lives are lived socially amongst others (e.g. Székely, Moore and Komdeur 2010), then it follows that all forms of life must exist by means of the embodied processes that both locate and consume sources of energy (e.g. foodstuffs), grow by employing the internal processes of metabolism and develop by means of an intentionality that is performed and is thus communicable and can therefore be understood by others. By intentionality I mean that life recognizes its place in the world and that it directs itself towards particular things in that world (cf. Dupré 2012). 'We humans, then, are not the only ones who interpret the world. "Aboutness" – representation, intention, and purpose in their most basic forms – is an intrinsic structuring feature of living dynamics in the biological world. Life is inherently semiotic' (Kohn 2013, 73–74). We need to accept that all forms of life necessarily change the environments around them when extracting energy from that environment, and it is these environments that human actions have further embellished with their various cultural constructions.

Barad has written that 'agency is a matter of intra-acting: it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has' (Barad 2007, 178, emphasis omitted). Humanness is a variable kind of agency; it is the result of the particular enactments of life as it is lived, and it thus gains an understanding from its engagement with its environment (Barrett 2014). However, those understandings change as the environments change, and it was through the body's entanglements within these changing environments that different realities were disclosed (Alberti 2016). Humans have therefore lived according to the ways that they have interpreted the worlds within which they have become entangled, and the material conditions which those bodies once inhabited are glimpsed by us today by means of the archaeology of their residues.

The task of archaeology

If the purpose of archaeological work is indeed to allow us to understand something of 'what it is to be human, how we have related to the world' (Webmoor and Witmore 2008, 65), then archaeology should presumably recognize that forms of humanness have emerged by their occupancy, and their understanding, of the material conditions that include those to which archaeology can attest (cf. Moro 2016). It is important to distinguish the archaeology that I am attempting to describe here from the more traditionally defined discipline that has sought to equate currently existing patterns of material residue with extinct systems of social ranking, economic practice and symbolic production. These more traditional procedures have been developed to consider how the static residues of things might be interpreted to reveal the existence of earlier dynamic systems of organized behaviour, with the further, and contentious, objective of establishing what had driven and transformed those earlier systems (Renfrew, Rowlands and Seagrave 1982). If the various behavioural and 'natural' processes that have resulted in a material residue can be identified (Binford 1962; Patrik 1985; Schiffer 1976), and if the residue had somehow revealed that an explanation for its form lay with a human instigator, then the material residue would appear to have been 'derivative of some monopolizing agency', namely the 'hands that shaped it' (Witmore 2014, 203–204). It is against this traditional archaeological reasoning that rejection of its inherent anthropocentrism has arisen, noting that in traditional archaeology 'the materiality of social life has been marginalized' (Olsen 2003, 87) by being treated as if it were the mere representation of

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what really mattered, namely the human purpose. This would be like arguing that the origin of things can be explained as lying with the prior existence of humanity (Witmore 2007, 558), which is clearly nonsense. By way of an alternative, I regard the relics that have survived as being the eroded fragments of the material apparatus through which forms of humanity (and various other forms of life) had been able to act, and thus to perceive their own realities and existences (cf. von Uexküll 1957).

The recent move away from a dominant anthropocentrism that has been employed in archaeological reasoning has been achieved by decentring the human subject and by focussing instead upon the relationships that exist between all material things. Consequently, archaeology has been defined as 'the discipline of things' (Olsen et al. 2012), and the 'new materialism' in archaeology (Witmore 2014; cf. Ribeiro 2019) has been concerned with present-day assemblages comprising 'relations between the archaeologist, instruments, data, artefacts and sites and other participants' (Jervis 2019, 145–146). Jervis has employed the work of John Law (2004) to enable him to argue that archaeologists do not work in a single reality but rather in a 'generative flux' that is continually being reformed by such developments as changing research priorities. An understanding of the human pasts certainly results in part from the assemblages that Jervis describes, but these assemblages must surely also include the absences that mark out the once-existing lives of other kinds of humanness, for without these absences, I fail to see how we might ever understand the histories of 'what it is to be human'.

My concern is further compounded by my doubts that these historical forms of humanness will ever be sought, let alone understood, by those working in an archaeology whose work is limited by the demand that it needs simply to record, and then to report upon, the residues of ancient material conditions (cf. Gibson 2021). The central problem facing traditional archaeology, identified by Catapoti and Relaki (2021), lies in archaeology's desire to define and to analyse static categories of material, meaning that it is poorly placed to reveal the transitory and dynamic conditions of life. If the ways that humans 'have related to the world' is something that we might aim to understand using the traditional practices of archaeology, in which the forms of archaeological things are treated as a record of the actions that had generated them, then it would appear that a traditional archaeology is condemned to explain material change by seeking the human motivations for those changes. However, as Olsen has objected, he is 'tired of the familiar story of how the subject, the social, the episteme, created the object; tired of the story that everything is language, action, mind and human bodies. I want us to pay more attention to the other half of this story: how objects construct the subject' (Olsen 2003, 100).

Olsen thus introduces us to another form of the relatedness between things and humanity, in which it is objects that create the human subject. He tells us that he has found this way of thinking 'pertinent to a fundamental ontological inquiry central to my research: how do things, objects—the material world in general—relate to human beings and what generally is thought of as "social life"' (Olsen 2003, 87). Olsen is however strangely silent about how this relationship might have worked historically and how it might be understood archaeologically. Instead, his emphasis turns towards the dynamics of material things. If we were to follow Zoë Crossland, however, and reject the claim that archaeology is 'a discipline of things' and accept instead that archaeology is 'a discipline of traces' (Crossland 2021; 87), then the archaeological question becomes: what are these things the traces of? If archaeological relics are not taken to be a record of human actions, but rather traces of the 'conditions of possibility' (Barrett 1988; Ko 2021), that map the voids once occupied by forms of humanness, then archaeology should seek to understand something of how those traces were occupied.

One reason why the relationship between humans and their material conditions has proven to be so problematic for archaeology is in part because an early post-processual archaeology analysed the material data from the perspective of a Saussurean semiotics (Preucel 2006; 21–42; Crossland and Bauer 2016, 3). As a result, the meaning of things was treated as if it were comparable to the way that words/things supposedly carried their meanings by the structural (grammatical) context

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into which words/things had been situated (e.g. Hodder 1999, 48). The historical question then concerned why certain structural arrangements had been generated. Because language use has been widely assumed to express the cognized ideas of the author/speaker, then the design and use of objects was similarly assumed to have been an expression of the agent's cognitive strategies. Meanwhile the actual material context within which the agent's life was lived (the referent in the Saussurean scheme) had all but disappeared as a result of this analysis (cf. Kirby 1997, 12). Consequently, material culture was treated as if the meaning of its design, and use, had originated in the minds of its human makers.

An alternative theory of semiotics is to be found in the work of C.S. Peirce (Hoopes 1991). Peirce treated the sign as comprising three components: (1) the sign itself, which stands for (2) something else, and whose significance, value or meaning is recognized by (3) an interpretant (Preucel 2006, 44–65, and 2016, 4). The meaning of the Peircean sign therefore emerges, not in the conditions of its genesis but rather through its interpretation (and it is clear from Peirce's work that he did not intend the interpretant to be limited to that of humanity). The difference between the semiotics of Saussure and that of Peirce is considerable, although at first sight, both would seem to pose similar problems for a traditional archaeology. If archaeology was indeed limited to establishing what things had once meant, and if meaning was treated as if it had once resided in the minds of those who are now long dead, then how could such a meaning ever be established archaeologically? However, if we follow Crossland and treat archaeology as a discipline of traces, and if we revise the task of archaeology, not to interpret the residue as if it were the product of some cognitively derived process but rather to understand how forms of humanness had once understood their world by occupying a place amongst those traces, then I would argue that analysis does become possible. This is because the form of the inhabited material had intervened in the ways that various lives were lived by ensuring that certain lines of communication and performance were open and were 'coloured' by their references to specific material things, while other performances were closed and prohibited by those same material conditions (Fletcher 1995). The relationships between the form of the material and its constraints upon the possibilities of human performance are thus partly visible in archaeological terms.

It was the inhabitant who, by acting as an interpretant of the things amongst which they moved, therefore came to recognize the significance that they saw in those things. Things were meaningful simply because people found a way to live meaningfully amongst them, and I take that to 'live meaningfully' was to have lived in a way that was both recognizable to, and understandable by, others. To live meaningfully was therefore to live publicly (it still is). Two things follow. First, the ways that the body performed its engagement with things, including its performances of production, was a sign that could be read by others. The behaviours of an individual relative to things, such as the ways a building was entered, food was consumed and things were produced and used, demanded a level of conformity to the expectations of those others. By conforming, the performer would have secured their recognized place as a valid member of a wider community. As a result, the self-monitoring of how to behave aright occurs as part of the desire to be accepted by others. This will explain why patterns of behavioural regularity generated regions of social identity. Second, while things might have been interpreted as signs that stood for something else, they might also have been interpreted as revealing their own inherent qualities. Today we are inclined to regard the inherent qualities of things as being given by their physical composition, but at other times and in other places, the inherent qualities of things might have lain in their animist or in their sacred character, or have derived from the geographical locations from whence they had originated. These considerations of the ways that things might be interpreted will mean that all of the things recognized, including the bodies of others whose movements had respected, or indeed disrespected, things, can be treated as the apparatus through which different kinds of reality, including the place of the interpretant within that reality, came to be recognized.

The archaeology that we might now seek is not a 'social archaeology', if by this we mean to write the histories of humanness as if they were represented materially by the relationships that

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had existed between different categories of people (Barrett 2022). Instead, archaeology needs to build an understanding of how the relationships that once existed between human bodies and things had given rise to the historical conditions of humanness (cf. McGinn 2015). This introduces us to the politics of accepting, or refusing, the significance that others might have assigned to things, and it moves our analysis away from a central consideration of the historical processes of material formation and towards a form of recording that recognizes how absent lives might once have gained their own significance by being entangled amongst things (cf. Cullen 2021; Hamilakis and Jones 2017; Hamilakis 2021; Hodder 2012).

The ways we record the relics of the past determine how archaeological data are produced, and these data are the apparatus by which we engage with the realities of the extinct lives that now interest us. Consequently, our methodologies cannot be neutral with respect to our interpretive desires. Current UK field procedures are constructed around the assumed neutrality of single context recording (Carver 2009; Roskams 2001), and these procedures are designed to record the sequential deposition and truncation of contexts. However, human history is a lot more than a matter of sequential deposition. A further political distinction is one that currently occurs between junior 'technicians', those who do the fieldwork and the recording, and the more senior members of the profession, who supposedly interpret the significance of what has been recorded.

The politics of context

There is a politics in all these aspects of human life. Relations between different lives will have included relationships of authority and obligation by their acknowledgement of those forces that were believed to have shaped the resources of the world, and where lives continue to be lived situated amongst those resources. Politics expresses the obligations that an individual might believe that they owed, or resisted owing, to other people and material things and to other forms of life. These obligations expressed the desire to behave meaningfully by submitting, or refusing to submit, to the forces that the wider community accepted as having made sense to their encounters with the orders of the things.

The traditional expectation of archaeology, which has been supported by frequent references to anthropological models (e.g. Fried 1967; Service 1971), is that systems of extinct political obligations are visible archaeologically as a result of their surviving material residues. These patterns of residue are widely treated as if they represented such conditions as the operation of political institutions (such as the networks of material exchange and ritual consumption) and differences in the status of particular humans (seen mainly in the differential treatment of the dead). These approaches have then modelled the form of an extinct political structure, which was then assigned to one of a small number of organizational types. For example, Renfrew and Bahn (2004, 177–230) clarify this traditional reasoning by asserting that analysis should start by identifying the politically independent unit or 'polity', which they claim can be equated with a decision-making and autonomous 'unit'. By reference to the anthropology of Service (1971), they propose four geographical scales over which these autonomous polities might have extended: small-scale bands of mobile hunter-gatherers, segmentary societies, chiefdoms, and states. Renfrew and Bahn (2004, 181) acknowledge that the Service scheme can only provide archaeology with a very simple social typology, although they do not doubt the basic principle, that human history traces the evolution of autonomous units of administration. (If this evolutionary sequence were to be accepted as a reflection of historical reality, then the implication is that the state represents the culmination of the histories of human social organizations; cf. Graeber and Wengrow 2021). They then proceed to argue that a role for archaeology is to explain the rise of increasingly complex organizations which, they suggest, are marked by the need to integrate increasing levels of specialist activities amongst a polity's members (Renfrew and Bahn 2004, 181–182).

The model of the archaeological process offered by Renfrew and Bahn might be characterized as an archaeology of governance, or of management (cf. Gilman 1991, 147). It assumes that the communal undertakings by all agriculturalists (the case for 'mobile hunter-gatherers' is less clearly

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stated) required a co-ordination that was provided for by the leadership of a central authority. The legitimacy of this assumed leadership presumably lay with local ideologies, and its existence is sought archaeologically by its representation in the occurrence of 'central' building complexes and 'rich' burials. It is an approach that continues an earlier reasoning (Childe 1951; Redman et al., 1978; Renfrew 1973 and 1984), in which human societies are divided into social and administrative units ('polities'), where these polities are represented by a degree of material cultural uniformity that was assumed to be the product of the conformity and influences of their members' behaviour (Childe 1956, 111–112). It is also an approach which represents history as evolving along a sequence of political types. However, as I will argue below, history has always been made by diverse practices that are lived both temporally and spatially (cf. Duwe and Preucel 2019; Soja 1989).

Fried argued that the origins of human social activity lay with the sharing of resources (and thus, I assume, with the mechanisms that had enabled exchange) (Fried, 1967, 106). Service similarly saw an origin of the 'social' lying within the practices of sharing and cooperation, covering such activities as child rearing, defence, grooming and sexual activity (Service 1971, 27). It would seem reasonable (if we were to accept the traditional approach) to require that archaeology should offer an account as to how these social processes of cooperation had supposedly fallen under the control of some form of centralized authority (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 502–507).

I argue that distinctions between people were constructed by being performed with reference to the form of the material and by their bodies' locations amongst that material. Most simply the distinctions between participants could have been achieved by the orientation of their bodies relative to some resource (cf. Barrett 1994), but the significance of those orientations had to be learnt. The resulting performances could have involved the physical development of routes of access towards, and barriers around, a significant resource. As an example of how the material world might have intervened in the performance of human differences, and how behaviours were learnt, we might cite the complex development of serving vessels, implying an increasingly refined etiquette in the service and consumption of liquids. Etiquette involves behaving correctly in the eyes of others, and as Michael Boyd noted in the case of the sauce boats of the Cycladic Bronze Age, their use had to be learnt from others as it could not simply be deduced from the shape of the vessels alone (Barrett and Boyd 2019, 75ff.). Similarly in the case of architecture, the spaces that distinguished between performers and observers might be archaeologically visible, but the times and ways these spaces might have been occupied had to be learnt. Ilse Schoep has explored how the structural developments of the buildings, access routes and the overall arrangements of the 'court compounds' (Driessen 2002) at bronze age Knossos divided communities between observers and those who were observed (Schoep 2021). Her re-analysis of the earlier stratigraphy at Knossos (Tomkins 2012) has enabled her to argue that it was only by the restructuring of the architecture on the Kephala hill from EM IIA onwards that certain relations of authority and difference could have developed. This means that the development of the Middle Minoan 'court compound' on the Kephala hill, along with the other so-called Minoan palaces of Crete, did not reflect a pre-existing social hierarchy, whose origins would now need explaining but rather it was the development of these compounds that were the architectural means by which emergent distinctions between people were constructed.

Archaeology has previously sought to identify types of political structures by means of the spatial patterning of the material residues, and to define politics as originating functionally with an integrative mechanism ensuring the continuity of the polity's increasingly complex organization. The alternative interpretation of the residue is to treat it as a trace of the material constraints that had acted on individual bodies during their engagements with, and references to, other people and things. These traces are the remains of the apparatus which had enabled a certain order of the world to be seen and thus interpreted spatially and temporally by its occupants. The difference between these two approaches has significant implications for the practice of archaeology.

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The making of a human presence

For any action to be described as being 'social', it must have developed by recognizing something of the other as the self. Social actions are therefore actions that are understandable and can be assessed by others. My argument has been that this sympathy with the other was established in the observed displays of performances which linked an embodied movement across the regions and features of the landscape/environment within which that body was situated (cf. Cullen 2021). It was in this context that forms of political constraint emerged. This is an approach that employs a definition of 'performance' as behaviour amongst things that was observed by others, and this is a broader definition of performance than has been employed by many other archaeologists (cf. Inomata 2006; Soar 2014). It also treats the political as being the force that constrained the movements of that individual's body. This is the role which Roland Fletcher has observed in material operating 'as a fundamental regulatory factor which assists the growth of human communities, and as a restrictive, potentially deleterious constraint on social life.' (Fletcher 1995, xix)

Social and political conditions were therefore constructed, and continue to be constructed, with specific reference to the regionalization of material conditions within whose details the possibilities of certain kinds of life were and are performed. Seemingly banal acts, such as the digging of a ditch with its upcast bank, or the orientation of a house, or the positioning of a storage vessel on the floor of a building, invited certain movements and constrained others. The care for the detail of the arrangements of the material residue is basic to archaeological practice, but the detail is quickly lost in the generalization and abstract modelling currently demanded by an archaeological 'synthesis'. The challenge that faces the development of an archaeology of an inhabitant's possible movements within an 'archaeology of material detail' is considerable. As Barad has put it: 'A *performative* understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything . . . . . into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real' (Barad 2003, 802). However, can history, which is lived locally and by performance, be represented in any form other than by language? Can historical conditions be understood in any terms other than those expressed as linguistic abstractions and generalizations? Further, if the language of generalization is the only means by which we can attempt to know the past, then is archaeology simply guilty of reducing an understanding of the intimate histories of extinct lives into the elite languages of academic theory? Perhaps we now need an exploration of other ways by which archaeology creates and delivers an understanding of human history with the same immediacy as that which is encountered in the processes of fieldwork and excavation.

The ideal would be for archaeological fieldwork and excavation to increase the historical understanding of those who actually undertook that fieldwork, and the processes of knowledge building could then be shared with a wider community of interest, rather than the archaeological practitioner being reduced to the role of a recording technician. Sadly, this is not currently one of the aims of the excavation process. Instead, field practices appear to be aimed at creating an archive of the deposits and structures encountered (Lucas 2012), with the intention of offering that archive for future interpretation (Andrews, Barrett and Lewis 2000). The archive includes a description of those archaeological encounters, along with an initial analysis of the recovered materials (Roosevelt et al. 2015). The wider availability of these data is normally presented in a, largely unread, printed report, and the data are assumed to contribute ultimately to a historical synthesis (Huggett 2020). This sequence, running from particular findings to a general synthesis of the historical process, evokes the image of the historical process as if it might be expressed in abstract and theoretical terms, in other words as a process of downward causation. Current practice therefore attempts to explain the sequences of material that were recovered from any particular location as the local detail of a more general historical process. The alternative that I am seeking here is to treat history as a process that was created from the bottom up, in other words a history that was

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created as the accumulation of local performances. The expectation would be that the excavation of a particular location should establish some understanding of the historical processes that were at work at those places and at those times and were expressed in the ways that the relationships between people and their material conditions made the creation of particular forms of humanness possible. This argument should change the archaeological agenda.

People will have indicated the significance that things had for them by the ways that they approached and engaged with those things. The meaning of things will therefore have emerged, or will have been confirmed, for the practitioner/interpretant as they had performed various actions in relation to those things. These material conditions will concern the ways things could have been seen, approached and used regionally, that is, by the ways that the relationship between things and the human practitioner was structured. Thus, instead of the archaeological interest focussing upon the largely unrecoverable, cognitively registered meaning that the things/apparatus might have had for the interpretant, the more productive archaeological concern would be to consider the conditions of possibility that were offered by the form and distribution of any material assemblage. Let me briefly attempt to illustrate this approach with an example.

Pre-Roman, Iron Age activity at the hillfort of Danebury in southern Britain, along with its immediate environs, was the focus for an archaeological research programme that ran from the late 1960s until the early 2000s (Cunliffe 1984a; 1995 and 2000; Cunliffe and Poole 1991 and 2000; Palmer 1984). It was during the British Iron Age that the hilltop of Danebury was enclosed within the earthworks of a hillfort, although the hill had been the focus for earlier activity (Cunliffe 1984a, 11–12). The Iron Age activity continued during the use of the hillfort, the hill being encircled by a ditch and bank which was part of a larger reorganization of the landscape, that might have begun sometime during the second millennium B.C. but which had continued to be reworked throughout the Iron Age (Cunliffe 1984a, 22, 42, and 1995, 16). Simplifying a very complex sequence of earthwork refurbishment and gateway development (Cunliffe 1984a, 15–46), the hillfort itself had developed from an enclosure that was initially established by single timber-revetted rampart with two opposed entrances, which in the later Iron Age, developed into what Cunliffe has identified as a 'developed hillfort' (Cunliffe 1984b, 16-30). This had been achieved by building an additional line of ditch and bank, the substantial redesign of the timber-revetted rampart into a glacis-style earthwork and the eventual abandonment and burial of the south-western entrance of the first enclosure, along with the re-design of a more architecturally dominant eastern entrance (Cunliffe 1995, Fig. 3).

The Iron Age use of the hill of Danebury was by agriculturalists whose livelihoods, and thus whose working lives, were lived out on the land around that hill. Today these lands carry the evidence of field lynchets and areas which were once, presumably, pasture. Post-harvesting treatment and storage residues from both the interior of Danebury and from a range of additional settlement enclosures attest to the dominant cultivation of spelt wheat and six-row barley over this landscape, with some changes in agricultural practices occurring towards the end of the Iron Age, which might have been a response to soil deterioration (Jones in Cunliffe 1995, 44, and Campbell in Cunliffe 2000, 46–47). It was from the labours of cultivation associated with settlement in the wider landscape that threshed grain was transported into the hillfort for further treatment, mixing and storage (Sharples 2010, 73-76; Jones in Cunliffe 1984, Fig. 9.13; Jones in Cunliffe 1995, Fig. 20) and where the animal bone residues attest, among other things, to patterns of sacrifice (Grant in Cunliffe 1984a, 533–543), as well as to the limited consumption of meat (Cunliffe 1995, 50–52). Meat consumption, like the transporting of harvested grain into the site, might have marked festivals associated with cycles of seasonal activity (Grant 2002, 84ff.), and the issues that are raised by these data are twofold. First, while archaeologists tend to look at the landscape from the centrality of the 'site', such that it was the site of Danebury that is assumed to have somehow dominated that landscape, drawing into itself the agricultural, metal, stone and clay products from a surrounding territory (e.g. Cunliffe 1984a, Fig. 10.3), those who had once laboured in the fields and who had tended the livestock will have looked towards the enclosed hill

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of Danebury from a perspective that was dominated by those communities' labours across the regionalized 'taskscapes' of the wider landscape (Ingold 1993). Second, the temporality of the year was very likely to have been mapped by the temporality of the agricultural cycle. This temporalty provided for a sequence of perspectives and movements, from the fields towards the hill, which was defined by its enclosure within ramparts and earthworks. It is tempting to evoke this movement for the participants as the seasonal re-awakening of their identification with a wider community and the hill itself, a movement that was ultimately dominated by their passage through the redesigned eastern entrance, before the houses, pits and four-post structures of the interior could have been seen and employed upon entry. The immediate skyline of the hilltop was defined by a series of small rectangular enclosures or buildings, which the excavator has interpreted as shrines (Cunliffe 1984a, 84–87 and figs. 4.31–4.34, cf. Downes 1997), and these buildings must also have been initially visible from the fields that surrounded the hill. House structures confirm that occupation had taken place on the hill, although the extent and form of that occupation remains unclear (Stopford 1987).

It was these embodied and regionalized performances of labour and movement that defined the politics of the hill (cf. Soja 1989), built the histories of Danebury and will have been recognizable to others. By cataloguing what remains of the material conditions of life, our archaeological concern now shifts towards the ways in which archaeological data might allow us to understand how those regional sequences of performance within certain material conditions had enabled various forms of humanness to come into being.

Concluding comments

Archaeology is the study of the human past by means of its surviving material residues. The current consensus is that such a study can be pursued by treating those residues as a record of past events. From this perspective the sequence of materials is explained by establishing the events that created those materials. The alternative, followed above, is to understand the past as a sequence of forms of life that are explained by the material conditions that made those forms of life possible. The diversity of human life is described as various forms of humanness that grew and developed by the ways humans had performed their lives amongst the sequences of materials. If gestures that are visible to others are connected with the development of language (e.g. Noble and Davidson 1996, 144), then performances in the context of various things, accompanied by various forms of linguistic expressions, have always been the means by which a human presence has been able to express its own existence and thus become recognizable. These performances enabled the material to be treated as an apparatus through which an order of things could be recognized and thus their origins speculated upon. Performances were understandable to, and their appropriateness could be judged by, others.

If this alternative reasoning is followed, then an archaeological analysis of the material traces of the past will seek to understand something of how that material might have guided performances in an analysis of the specific conditions under which the trajectories of human histories were once constructed. This will differ from current attempts that construct histories from the synthesis of an accumulating material record. Given the increasingly widespread use of machine-based storage for the information that is recovered in particular programmes of fieldwork (e.g. Boyd et al. 2021), it would be imaginative to consider how an understanding of the information for the ways that people's movements, actions and perspectives were structured by material conditions might make best use of the newly available visual technologies. These technologies might not only provide for an exploration by the excavators of the ways that various historical locations could have been inhabited but also for an analysis that could be shared amongst a wider community of interest.

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