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A Response to the Archaeology of John C. Barrett

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Chapter 17

Critical discourse and creative labours: learning and teaching archaeology with John C. Barrett

Brian Boyd

[T]he validity of our interpretations of the past cannot be evaluated against the past itself (for that no longer exists) nor can it be assessed against absolute truths about humanity because our understandings of what it is to be human are open and are contentious. Archaeological narratives may therefore be numerous and at times conflicting, even when they are about the same material; this is not a 'problem' needing some final resolution, because such discontinuities are simply an essential feature of those many traditions of knowledge which include archaeology.

Barrett 1991, 211.

Introduction: the University of Glasgow 1987–1991

This chapter offers some personal reflections on learning with John Barrett, the teacher, at the University of Glasgow from late 1987 to mid-1991. I trace a learning experience from an introductory undergraduate lecture on uniformitarianism to final year classes on material culture, later prehistory and mortuary practices. This experience is discussed in the context of the development of archaeological theory in the UK at the time – the early post-processual writings. John Barrett was in the midst of producing a series of influential articles, and was writing text for two theoretically interrelated books – *Landscape, Monuments and Society* (Barrett *et al.* 1991) and *Fragments from Antiquity* (Barrett 1994), both of which informed substantial parts of John's undergraduate courses. This was my introduction to archaeology and, specifically, to archaeological theory, although the Department of Archaeology at Glasgow did not have, at that time, any undergraduate class specifically dedicated to archaeological theory. John was something of a lone voice in terms of espousing post-processual approaches, slipping discussion of, for example, emerging theoretical approaches to landscape archaeology into quite traditional courses on the 'Recovery and Analysis of Archaeological Materials' and, impulsively it seemed, replacing scheduled 'Identification of Pottery' lectures with a critique of Binford's middle range theory and a discussion on archaeological discourse as textual criticism.

My very first undergraduate lecture in archaeology at Glasgow was given by John in early October 1987. The course was 'Introduction to Archaeology'. The topic was 'Uniformitarianism'. An unfamiliar concept to me, in this lecture John introduced us to the theoretical problems of archaeological inference, focusing on the operational assumptions in connecting the present-day static record and the past processes and dynamics that created that record. He used Lewis Binford's (1978; 1981; 1983) influential ethnoarchaeological research into modern hunter-gatherers, which examined how humans procured, killed and butchered animals, and the ways in which such animals were subsequently consumed and their remains disposed of. The observed bone refuse patterning allowed Binford to make inferences – based on uniformitarian assumptions about the nutritional value and economic utility of animal species – about past human behaviour and animal exploitation strategies. John discussed how this initial research in Alaska led Binford to East Africa, where he carried out extensive taphonomic experiments on how to distinguish between the residues of human and non-human (mainly hyena) hunting and scavenging activities, thus providing insights into early hominin animal food procurement. His conclusions – that many bone assemblages were the result of animal predators rather than human hunters, who only subsequently scavenged the carcasses – opened up a whole new field of hunter-gatherer-animal related research, albeit one criticised by some researchers at the time for being entrenched in problematic uniformitarian assumptions. The nature of uniformitarian assumptions in archaeology more generally was the focus of John's opening first-year lecture.

I realised only in later years how unusual it was to introduce the subject of archaeology to a class of 100 new undergraduates by discussing issues of, ostensibly, quite abstract theory. To give context, our main assigned readings in those first-year courses were textbooks such as Kevin Greene's *Archaeology: an introduction* (1983), Philip Barker's *Techniques of Archaeological Excavation* (1982), Tim Darvill's *Prehistoric Britain* (1987), and so on. But John's lectures were full of references to Binford, Hodder, Renfrew, Clarke, Flannery, names that did not appear on any of our course's recommended readings. I went to the University Library and tracked down a couple of Binford's early 1970s books, but I found them rather inaccessible, not knowing where the ideas were situated in terms of disciplinary thinking or history. And then browsing the stacks one afternoon I found *In Pursuit of the Past*, a collection of Binford's lectures presented in Britain and Scandinavia in 1980–1981, and reworked and published in 1983 (Binford 1983). Here was the ethnoarchaeological work John had been talking about in his lecture, accompanied by Binford's revelatory (for me) notion that the archaeological record is a contemporary phenomenon, it exists in the present. He stated clearly on the first page of chapter one: 'Since observed facts about the archaeological record are contemporary, they do not in themselves inform us about the past at all' (Binford 1983, 19). I had thought we – as archaeology students – were supposed to be learning about *discovering* something about the past. As I grappled with this new idea, things became even more complicated a week or so later when I came across two recently published

archaeology books on the library's new acquisitions shelf. I borrowed these, and then made my way to a pub on Byres Road close to the University where I had arranged to meet with some fellow undergraduate students. John also happened to be there with a few postgraduates. We all got talking and at one point I produced Kevin Green's textbook, and the two others I had just borrowed from the library. 'How on earth do we connect *this*', I said, indicating the Greene book, '...with *these*?', and I placed the two books, one black, one red on the table. The postgraduates exploded with laughter, but John took my question very seriously. He replied, gesturing to the two new Shanks and Tilley volumes (1987a; 1987b), 'Archaeology will never be the same again...'

During my third and fourth undergraduate years at Glasgow, I took John Barrett's special courses 'Later Prehistory' and 'Religion, Magic and Burial'. The lectures for the latter covered an eclectic range of perspectives on death, mortuary practices, Roman religion, early Christianity, Protestantism and more, but also introduced us to foundational perspectives in social theory from Marxism to poststructuralism, and the scholars who informed John's own theoretical thinking at the time, Foucault, Bourdieu and, in particular, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. Our lectures and seminars saw John working through many of the ideas – and he always stressed how research must be predominantly *ideas*-driven – that had been, or were soon to be, published in a series of influential articles and books in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which questions of human agency and social reproduction were the common theoretical threads woven through insights into the nature of the archaeological record, gender, and death. Some titles: *Fields of Discourse*, *The Living, the Dead and the Ancestors*, *The Monumentality of Death*, *Food, Gender and Metal*, and the book *Fragments from Antiquity* (Barrett 1988a; 1988b; 1989; 1990a; 1994).

January 1991, returning to the undergraduate course titled 'Recovery and Analysis of Archaeological Materials' mentioned above, John was supposed to be giving two lectures on 'The Identification of Pottery' (he is, lest we forget, a specialist in British Late Bronze Age ceramics). Clearly, he had different ideas for this class. Instead, he read a paper that he had presented in a session at the April 1990 Society for American Archaeology conference in Las Vegas. It was indeed about pottery: 'The meaning of things: a consideration of the archaeological treatment of the "Beaker Phenomenon"'. In this paper, John offered two different accounts, two different histories, of the late 3rd millennium BCE 'Beaker network' of Britain and northwest continental Europe. Two different accounts of the same archaeological material. The theoretical scaffolding central to his argument (and his argument for this presentation strategy) read as follows: 'the understanding that the past only occurs in our own texts; we write or speak it into being. Because the past is created in language, the critical evaluation of that past must take the form of a textual criticism. We cannot escape language into some form of pure experience against which to evaluate our linguistic creations, because all experience is linguistically mediated. We are therefore committed to the reworking of our texts through other texts and these enable us to look in upon our labours' (Barrett 1990b, 2).

So, whereas Binford had argued that a record of the past existed as a contemporary phenomenon that could be accessed via middle range theory and its inferential methodologies, Barrett rejected this form of processual knowledge evaluation (as well as, it must be emphasised, the search for ‘meaning’ by some contemporary post-processual approaches), instead arguing for archaeology as a historical discipline that recognises the difference between *the past* and *history*: our written or spoken representations of events or processes that we assume to have occurred in the past. Those historical representations can be therefore evaluated through the ways in which different and differing accounts are written, the language used, the assumptions and prejudices contained therein, and so on. In other words, and as Barrett later wrote, ‘History is therefore our construction and it represents the way we think about our relationship to the past; it is not the past itself’ (1995, 2).

John presented his two accounts of the Beaker material, followed by discussion on how archaeology may move to a critical evaluation of each text in terms of the language of their production, In other words, how did each text give meaning to the evidence and thereby bring the past into being? At the time, I found this to be an illuminating theoretical exposition on the distinctions between the past and history, and on discourse analysis, but years later as a university lecturer I found myself drawing upon John’s presentation as a teaching or pedagogical strategy to help students grapple with the ways in which archaeological data is selectively drawn into our writing of different historical narratives, and how such narratives deploy such selected data and evidence along with theoretical ideas and concepts to produce provisional, and often contentious accounts of the same archaeological material. As a teaching strategy, this approach tries to instil a sense of the importance of close reading of source material, and emphasises that the processes of text production are open to evaluation and assessment just as much as the arguments presented within the text (and see Barrett 1987).

Conflicting narratives: a teachable moment

In teaching my own undergraduate classes – first at the University of Wales Lampeter (1997–2006) and Columbia University, New York (2006–present) – on the prehistory of southwest Asia, I use this teaching strategy to introduce students to the theoretical assumptions in the interminable debates surrounding the so-called ‘Neolithic transition’. I attempt to discuss how by drawing a distinction between different ways of writing about the same archaeological data we can assess the validity of different theoretical perspectives which often claim to speak about, and for, the past people who are the object of archaeological enquiry. In this particular example, I discuss the Later Epipalaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities archaeologists name Natufian.

The following accounts are not meant as exhaustive discussions of the debates around the Natufian vis-à-vis the origins of the Neolithic. They are simply a demonstration of a teaching strategy to highlight the nature of the relationship between

the past and the representational strategies of writing historical narratives. That is, the philosophy of writing about phenomena that no longer exist, or exist only as fragmentary traces in the contemporary world.

First account

One of the most distinctive archaeological features that emerged and developed during the millennia from approximately 15,000 to 11,500 years ago in some parts of south-west Asia is stone architecture. Over the past 70 years, since the first discovery of such features in the southern Levant, archaeologists have placed this material prominently in the 'origins of the Neolithic' narrative, in which it is argued that stone architecture reflects increasing sedentism and settlement permanence in the evolutionary shift from a hunter-gatherer life to an economy based on the cultivation and domestication of certain food crops and the domestication of certain food animals. Archaeologists have spent a great deal of time and energy in discussing and ordering this material, trying to locate its origins and subsequent development or evolution from the ephemeral brush huts of the Early Epipalaeolithic, to the circular and oval stone dwellings of the Late Epipalaeolithic Natufian, followed by increasingly complex square and rectangular forms during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, and the eventual appearance of the permanent Neolithic village sites that characterise the archaeological landscapes of the 7th and 8th millennia BP in the region (*e.g.* Byrd 2005; Goring-Morris & Belfer-Cohen 2008).

The late Epipalaeolithic Natufian culture is regarded as the 'harbinger' of these Neolithic settlements. The discovery of fairly substantial stone architecture at a number of sites dated as early as around 15–12,000 years ago indicates, for some commentators at least, the shift to sedentary villages in the Early Natufian phase. Typically, Natufian dwelling structures are oval or circular, with some internal divisions and features such as hearths, postholes or supports and bedrock mortars evident at some sites. A few examples of such circular structures were built inside caves. These are sometimes referred to as 'non-domestic structures', but the more substantial examples (around 7–15 m in diameter) are restricted to open-air locations in the landscape and are generally regarded as 'residential'. It is assumed that these structures were roofed with organic materials such as reeds, brush, hides, and so on.

In addition to seemingly permanent architecture, the archaeology of the Natufian also displays a number of material traces or signatures that seem to set the stage for the principle archaeological characteristics of the Neolithic as traditionally defined: the shift in settlement pattern towards sedentism, significant social and economic changes in subsistence and technology – particularly the common occurrence of stone 'sickle blades' and occasionally their bone hafts, heavy ground stone objects such as mortars and pestles – and the evolution of social organisation as reflected in artistic, ritual and symbolic practices. These changes are often discussed against a background of extreme and rapid climatic changes. Environmental fluctuations wrought by the successive Late Pleistocene Older Dryas-Bolling-Allerod-Younger Dryas sequence, and other more localised climatic episodes and conditions, resulted in, it is

argued by many archaeological commentators (*e.g.* Bar-Yosef & Belfer-Cohen 2002), a social evolutionary shift in the systemic adaptation of human communities away from traditional hunter-gatherer-fisher ways of subsistence towards an increasingly settled existence and a new resource base by sometime during the 11th millennium BP.

The exact nature and details of such assumed changes in subsistence practices involving plants are unclear due to a paucity of Natufian sites with well-preserved botanical remains in context, but some 'origins' researchers argue that evidence for the intensification of plant gathering practices, along with experimentation in the cultivation of selected wild species, can be detected as early as 20,000 years ago (some 10,000 years before bona fide plant domestication), in one case at least. What is certainly clear, in the light of recent archaeobiological and genetic analyses, is that the earliest domestication of the founder crops of einkorn and emmer, and pulses, along with the initial domestication of sheep, pigs, cattle and possibly goats, took place in the Upper Tigris and Euphrates valleys around 11,500 years ago. But again, scholars concerned with the earliest origins of such processes have placed emphasis on the domestication of the dog, which seems to have occurred during the Epipalaeolithic Natufian. This has led to much discussion not only over the pivotal role of pre-Neolithic communities in the earliest stages of the domestication process, but also of the ways in which archaeologists use the concept as a theoretical lynchpin in the Neolithic narrative. For example, it has been argued that Natufian communities regarded domestication as a way in which to insert animals into human society and culture, thus removing them from the wild and nature. Supporters of this perspective point to the inclusion of domestic dogs in two human burial contexts, one belonging to the Early Natufian, the other to the Late phase, both predating the Neolithic by some millennia. In the former case, a 3-5-month-old domesticated dog (puppy) was buried with a 45-year-old woman.

The Natufian also witnessed a relative flourishing of artistic representation compared to earlier periods. This takes the form of stone and bone (wild) animal and, more rarely, human figurines and other carved objects. Some notable examples of art that have been incorporated into the narrative of the dawning Neolithic are green stone beads, interpreted in terms of their symbolic associations with agriculture, or an incised limestone slab possibly, it has been argued, depicting a map of territories or agricultural fields. Other forms of apparent 'symbolic behaviour' include large numbers of stone, bone and shell beads and pendants, seemingly used as personal adornment and body decoration. Many such items were recovered from burial sites, which increase dramatically in number and size when compared to the preceding periods. Natufian burials – currently totalling around 500 individuals – occur in cave sites, on terraces adjacent to caves, and also at a number of open-air locations. Graves contain single, double and group internments, with little in the way of consistent body position, and only occasional body decoration and grave good accompaniments. Very few graves display substantive evidence for internal features or architecture,

although a few examples contain dressed stone slabs, head rests or supports, and there are also several examples of possible organic materials used for binding, wrapping and containment of corpses as indicated by the presence of plant phytoliths, and revealed by archaeothanatological analysis of the treatment of, and post-depositional history of, the grave and the corpse. Only a small number of graves contain animal deposits, including the domestic dog examples mentioned above. One late Natufian example contains a great many tortoise shells along with other animal and human body parts, buried with a 45–50-year-old woman. This example is often referred to as ‘the shaman burial’. Similarly dated graves from one or two cave sites appear to have been lined or decorated with flowers.

Natufian mortuary practices, it has been often argued, suggest an egalitarian social organisation, or at least an ideological representation that masks social differentiation. In some cases, individuals have been afforded special treatment such as body decoration, burial with animals or animal parts, elaborate funerary feasts, and so on. The general view is that the transition to permanent settled life and agriculture involved fundamental social and economic changes, and these changes probably also entailed equally fundamental ideological changes which in turn transformed ritual practices (e.g. Grosman & Munro 2017).

To conclude, the social, economic and cultural transformations that took place during the Natufian culminated and terminated in the Neolithic Revolution, as reflected in the fully sedentary communities, permanent architectures, and the domesticated plants, animals and landscapes of the 7th and 8th millennia BP.

Second account

One of the most distinctive archaeological features that emerged during the period from around 15,000 to 11,500 years ago in some parts of southwest Asia is a range of mortuary practices which involved the placing of the corpse, or parts of the corpse, in specially selected locations in the landscape. Some of these bodies were interred or arranged relatively close together, with each new burial event involving decisions by the living community as to its precise placement in relation to the earlier, existing graves. Initially, these burial locations may have been chosen by hunter-gatherer communities because of a historical connection to that particular place: a traditional hunting ground, perhaps, or close to a significant landscape feature such as a river, a mountain, a stone outcrop. Maybe a clearing in the forest where seasonal gatherings took place, a place talked about in local stories and histories. Archaeologists, of course, have no access to those stories and histories, nor to the logic and reasoning behind the decisions made by these past hunter-gatherer communities in their understandings of how death intervened in their everyday events and lives. But archaeologists do have access to the remains of the material conditions within which such stories were created, told and retold, and they can try to make sense of, interpret, how those material conditions may have been created and reworked through the practices of

inhabitation across time. In this way, archaeological analysis can trace how possible past understandings of place, space and landscape may have informed and structured the arrangement of the archaeological material that presents itself according to a logic very different from our own.

Consider how the material conditions of burial locations may have been established, reworked and renegotiated over time. One possible narrative might proceed as follows. By 15,000 years ago, the largely forest-dwelling communities of what we now call the 'Mediterranean zone' of southwest Asia undoubtedly had a long history of hunting, gathering and fishing in the mosaic landscapes of the region. They would have known intimately the nature of the terrain, and that of the seasonally changing and moving communities of large and small animals, plants, birds, fish and so on. They would have known the precise locations from which to acquire the materials for tool and weapon manufacture, for clothing and for shelter construction, and they would have known the precise locations of drinkable water sources, springs and available bodies of freshwater. Their seasonal movements across these landscapes would have probably involved encounters with other people, some familiar and known, others strangers. Each encounter would have involved the negotiation and exchange of knowledges, histories and materials between different groups, as people oriented themselves to see what possibilities were available, to understand how to find a place for themselves in the world in relation to others.

On one such occasion, an elderly woman, possibly the oldest in this community and too frail to make the journey to the river valley to the east, perhaps decided to remain behind at the encampment close to the shore of the freshwater lake. When the others returned, she had died. It was decided that her body should be properly prepared and placed in the ground, the first such time a member of the community had been buried in this forest clearing where they had made their temporary camp. She was laid on her left side and placed in the specially dug grave along with the body of a young dog with which she had had a close affinity. It is unknown whether or not the dog was killed especially for the burial rite, or had recently died as well. The place in the forest, near the lakeshore, had now been marked.

In the years, decades, maybe even centuries following this death and interment, each time a member of the community died, their bodies were returned to this location and buried close to the old woman and the dog. Twelve in all: three men, five women, one child, and three newly-born children. Some of the dead wore items of clothing decorated with shells brought from the ocean and modified into beads. These may have been gifts, items of exchange from other communities. At some point after the last of these bodies was buried, it was decided to construct a shelter above them, perhaps to embellish the important location. For the first time in this place, local stone was chosen as the appropriate material for the construction of a large semi-circular outer wall, which was then covered by a roof of brush and reeds collected from the lakeshore and the forest. The roof was supported by upright wooden posts, each of which were driven into the ground surface and held in place by stones

smaller than those used for the wall. This building served as a dwelling or shelter where stone and bone objects were manufactured, and where food preparation took place, but other kinds of practices – involving the deliberate and careful placing of stone objects on the floor surface, perhaps held within bags or containers, also took place here. These were possibly ceremonial practices relating to the abandonment of the dwelling, and may also have referenced the ancient dead buried under the floor surface. Some years, decades or centuries later, people returned to this location in the forest, and rebuilt, reworked the dwelling, levelled a new living floor, and established other smaller dwellings in the familiar forest clearing. After some time, further collections of colourful stone objects, non-human animal body parts (gazelle, fox, hare, snake, tortoise, dog), and the top of a human child's skull, were intentionally placed on the floor, perhaps marking some kind of closure in the long history of returns to this particular dwelling.

This particular example, where stone architecture can be associated historically with the human burials in the same location, reminds us that the dead were already established as a presence at particular locales in the landscape prior to – and were possibly the very reason for – the establishment of architectural projects and associated rites or ceremonial practices which made repeated, persistent reference to the subterranean existence of communities of the dead. These were hunter-gatherers, returning time and time again to ancient burial grounds to embellish those places through building and reworking not only the materials of place, but also to carry out historical obligations to the dead, obligations that resulted in the particular material signatures that archaeologists have subsequently encountered. These are the material conditions, the narratives of presence, understood and inhabited by these hunter-gatherer communities.

A few centuries after these events had taken place, in a different landscape to the west and closer to the ocean, another, perhaps related community also placed a dead woman in the ground. In a small cave, high above the forested hunting grounds and overlooking the sea, here too a first burial event took place. The woman was of a similar age to the woman buried with the young dog in the forest clearing further to the east, around 45–40 years old, but she was infirm, had difficulty walking, and rarely left the encampment far below in the forested valley. Over the years, many members of her community had been buried within, or close to, a large cave down there. Three of these dead were wrapped in cloth, and had been placed in the ground entwined with the bodies of dogs, gazelle horns and tortoise shells. Their bodies were also pinned down with stones. But the infirm old woman's corpse was taken to this secluded, high place for burial.

The journey must have been a fairly arduous one. The body was prepared and carried. Many people from both local and distant communities may have attended, each carrying gifts or offerings to be placed in the grave: shells from the ocean, bone objects, parts of animal bodies from the forests and valleys, bird feathers. A funeral feast was prepared, many gazelles and tortoises were consumed. All these creatures

had given themselves to the hunters and collectors, in the continuing reciprocal cycle of human-nonhuman animal relationships, and now parts of their bodies – tails, bones, feathers – accompanied the elderly woman into the specially constructed stone-lined grave inside the cave. These intimate relationships were understood, known, only by these communities of people and animals. Again, this first burial event marked the place. Subsequently, many more members of the surrounding communities were buried here, feasts took place, and perhaps stories of the old woman and the animals were recounted, histories established, a sense of the world created and recreated, a mosaic of strategies forming and reforming social identities and relationships generation upon generation.

As these simplified accounts demonstrate, we now have two narratives of the same period and data. Both are equally grounded in the material evidence, and both highlight social, economic and ideological changes in the pre-Neolithic period in the southern Levant region. How, then, might we critically assess such archaeological interpretations? Is one narrative a ‘better fit’ in terms of the material evidence, or should we accept simply that there can exist a range of possible and equal narratives, a pluralistic past that cannot be ‘proven’ one way or the other? As John Barrett wrote emphatically in his 1990 SAA paper, ‘Of course not!’ But we should also accept that there are histories where no final or absolute statement will ever be reached, and allow for the conditions of possibility, rather than constructing histories according to a false polarity, or dichotomy, of truth or falsehood.

The available evidence obviously accommodates both accounts. The first account regards the Neolithic as the culmination, or termination point, of, systemic changes in hunter-gatherer Epipalaeolithic Natufian (and earlier) societies, explaining how developments in architectural forms reflect concomitant changes in social organisation and complexity. Some scholars see these changes as linear and evolutionary, beginning in the Early Epipalaeolithic and ending in the Neolithic. Others disagree and emphasise discontinuity, experimentation, dead-ends and constantly changing adaptive strategies, some of which succeeded while others did not. But there is a general consensus that research on the Natufian Culture, or the Epipalaeolithic-Neolithic transition more generally, should focus primarily on and emphasise the hunter-gatherer point of departure and the agricultural destination. At the heart of this endeavour is the archaeological preoccupation with the retrospective search for origins, in this case ‘the origins of agriculture’, meaning the processes of plant and animal domestication, the domestication of nature, the wild, landscape, water and people. Becoming Neolithic. The archaeologists’ objective is to fit every element of material culture, every object or feature, activity and practice into the Neolithic narrative of settling and domesticating: the ‘permanent’ architecture, the ‘domesticated’ dog burials (note how the elderly woman is secondary to the signifier of domestication in this case), the green stone beads that symbolise agriculture, the incised stone representation of ‘fields’, and so on. I won’t labour the point, but it is clear that in this narrative – seen retrospectively through the Neolithic lens – the Natufian occupies a

special place in social evolution, and each site excavated seemingly has implications for the origins of, and transition to, agriculture, farming economies and ultimately the development of complex societies. These are the grand narratives of large-scale processes and social totalities, the big stories of human evolution, complexity and, ultimately, 'us'. There is a third narrative in here, of course, one that highlights the story of how the inevitable trajectory towards the Neolithic was born of European colonialism and its self-narration, and how that story has been dominant in the ways in which prehistoric archaeology of southwestern Asia has been written ever since. Therefore it is our – that is, the archaeologists' – agency that is presented through this particular kind of historical writing and narrative.

The second account attempts to write a history of small-scale changing material conditions from the point of view of the inhabitation of particular locales, spaces, places, landscapes. The aim here is to think about the Natufian not from the perspective of several thousand years in the future looking back, and discovering that the Neolithic was the inevitable product of radical environmental change or abstract long-term social processes. Instead, the emphasis is on how people's inhabitation – acting, talking, understanding – of places and landscapes reworked their material conditions as their subjective experiences and cosmological understandings of those places changed over the courses of their everyday lives. In the story of the burial of the old woman and the young dog, architecture is a later addition, and is about the gradual embellishment of a once intimate place, building and reworking as acts of remembrance, in what may have been for the most part a silent and unchanging landscape. Only archaeologists connect these small moments to social constructions of their own making millennia into others' futures.

Similarly, the later cave burial of the old woman and the animals invites us to think through the possible range of relationships between the woman, the animals, the visitors to the burial event, the journeys made to this high place in the landscape. Note that there are no 'domesticated' animals involved, and so the Neolithic narrative can only struggle to categorise, instrumentalise, the animals in terms of bestowing an arbitrary identity upon the human – the 'shaman'. As the second account suggests, hunter-gatherer communities tend to negotiate deeply complex relationships with the animals they encounter, involving mutual respect, reciprocation and ritual practices that ensure the future of both communities. To reduce those relationships to a single narrative of human dominion over nature merely reflects the reduced state of much archaeological thinking on the human-nonhuman condition.

These small-scale narratives are microhistories. Microhistories offer narratives, interpretations, of people, animals and materials that may or may not have anything to do with larger-scale abstract social, economic or ideological processes – 'becoming Neolithic' in this case – and certainly have little to do with events millennia in the future that people could never have imagined or comprehended. I am not, of course, suggesting that we strive to write into existence some sort of prehistoric *Montaillou* – we are not privileged to observe the people whose lives once inhabited

the material residues we study – but acknowledgement in our sometimes unavoidably coarse-grained writings that people in the deep past were informed and guided by understandings of the world quite different to our own would seem an obvious first principle to establish.

In this spirit, I end with a typically clear and sobering reminder by John C. Barrett (although I'm sure he never intended any of his book reviews to be abstracted in this manner) of our intellectual, and yes, moral and political, obligations and responsibilities as archaeologists when we take it upon ourselves to write our histories of other people's pasts:

One answer would be to write of those historical traditions which do not recognize the existence of a material record of a uniformitarian past, where the archaeological record means nothing, where the past is fabulous and foreign and where the authority which makes these histories acceptable is quite different from the rationalism of our own intellectual traditions. Such histories will define the margins of the discipline of archaeology and through them we may gain a clearer understanding of the social contexts of our own intellectual endeavours, for we will confront those for whom our own work means little or nothing.

Barrett 1991, 212.

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I thank the editors for their generosity, good humour and, above all, great patience, in the long process of writing this narrative. Usually when I write a piece on the pre-history of southwest Asia, the Natufian, and so on, I can sense my intended audience looking over my shoulder, shaking their heads and rolling their eyes. For this chapter, from the first word, I worried only about what John would think of my efforts. He may – as he did with the first draft of my undergraduate dissertation proposal, write in red ink in the margin, 'Obviously, you don't know what you're talking about here', but that's just fine.

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