Chapter 23

Thoughts about Rethinking Materiality

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I am very grateful for the invitation to participate in this symposium. I welcome the opportunity to interact with so many of those at the forefront of contemporary British archaeology, and I welcome the openness to input from scholars from elsewhere. We can all profit from more exposure not only to one another’s ideas, but also to more data and examples from regions outside our own geographical specialties. The general topic of ‘materiality’ is of great interest to me, and I think it has received rather less attention in North America than in Britain. I can bring a somewhat external, but friendly, perspective on the British work, and at the same time hope to be one of the cultural brokers (or infectious agents — pick your metaphor) raising awareness of this topic in the US. At the same time, especially by giving more emphasis to power differentials than I see in many (though not all) of the papers here, I want to draw attention to the quite concrete social contexts in which material objects can be used in more than utilitarian ways to advance interests of individuals and social sectors.

In the space available, it is impossible to say something meaningful about each of the papers in this volume. I focus on topics that particularly interest me, and I try to capture major aspects of where we are now and the things that might best repay further work.

Materiality and environmental studies

Many archaeologists in the US are increasingly involved in interdisciplinary projects with environmental scientists, particularly ecologists, biologists, and geographers. The papers in this symposium put more emphasis on interaction with some schools and topics in psychology. These different interdisciplinary projects have the potential to be mutually reinforcing. One of the most important things anthropologists and archaeologists can offer scientists concerned with physical environments and biological ecology is a greatly enriched body of knowledge and thought about the ways in which human cognitive and behavioral propensities differ from those of any other species. To take a single example, if the concept of ‘landscape’ has any useful technical meaning, it is its emphasis on the distinctive capacities of humans to perceive, think, and feel about environmental settings, and how these distinctively human traits have consequences for the ways humans interact with natural environments.

Holding on to, neglecting, terminating, resisting, and replacing

As contributors to the volume have noted, some grave goods were probably ‘inalienable’ objects, intended to remind the dead of those left behind and thus to keep them connected with specific surviving individuals. In contrast, other objects were intended to keep the living connected with the dead, and thus might have been kept as heirlooms rather than deposited in mortuary offerings.

There is also a continuum from highly-ephemeral phenomena (both actions and objects) to highly-durable objects, and there are reasons for emphasizing one or both. The intrinsic property of high durability of some materials (e.g. hard minerals or metals resistant to decay and corrosion) or kinds of objects (e.g. large earthen structures) makes them obviously good choices for metaphorically bolstering the durability of socially-constructed relationships, institutions, and concepts. At the same time, many societies make considerable use of intrinsically-ephemeral materials and structures, such as Navajo sand paintings, or objects made of paper, which will very rarely be recovered by archaeologists. Nevertheless, we should be alert to any traces of evidence for ephemeral objects and, especially, think about reasons underlying a preference for ephemeral materials. Note
also that, while many materials are unavoidably ephemeral or durable, great pains may be taken to preserve fragile objects in some cases and great efforts made to deface or smash intrinsically durable things in other cases.

This brings up the matter of termination and the contrast between reverential and desecratory termination (e.g., Mock 1998). Objects associated with a deceased person are sometimes dealt with by reverential termination, as is the case with worn Torah scrolls. Similarly, a superseded sacred structure may be reverentially terminated rather than simply razed — implying continuity of the meaning of the old structure and the practices associated with it, even as the structure itself is replaced. There were plenty of fine examples of desecratory termination in the twentieth century, such as the toppling of dictators' statues and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, and we have seen this more recently in Iraq. Yet, remnants of the Berlin Wall are now valued and kept as objects with a meaningful history.

Sometimes the contrast between desecratory and reverential termination may have been blurred even in the minds of the ancient actors involved, who may have had strongly ambivalent attitudes toward the concepts, events, or practices represented by the terminated objects. But even when they had a clear idea of whether action was reverential or desecratory, it may be very hard for us to be sure which it was, and this poses problems of method that remain challenging. There are ambiguities of this kind at the ancient city of Teotihuacan, which flourished as the capital of a sizable regional state in the highlands of Central Mexico, c. 100 BC—AD 650 (Cowgill 2000; 2003). Sometime during the AD 300s, a large pyramid with the most elaborate and labour-intensive three-dimensional stone carvings of any structure in the city, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid (or Temple of Quetzalcoatl), located in what may have been the political centre of the city, was burnt and partially defaced. Superficially, this might seem another instance of the reverential termination of temple pyramids common in Mesoamerica, where an earlier structure was terminated before being replaced and wholly covered over by a larger pyramid on the same spot. But the damaged Feathered Serpent Pyramid was never covered over. Instead, it seems that it remained largely visible, while a new large stepped platform covered much of its front. This, and the intensity of the destruction, suggest that this termination was more desecratory than reverential (Sugiyama 1998), and it may well have accompanied revolutionary changes in the political system of the Teotihuacan state.

Several writers, including Millon (1988), Pasztory (1997), and Cowgill (1997; 2000) speculate that there may have been a shift from highly-centralized and autocratic (or even despotic) rule ship to a system where the power was more widely shared among elite families. In the terms proposed by Blanton et al. (1996), there may have been a shift from networking to more corporate strategies, bolstered by new rules for the political game — in effect new social facts structuring the kinds of political maneuvers possible. I (Cowgill 1997) went so far as to wonder whether a system similar to that adopted in Venice in 1297 and maintained until 1797 might have been created (whereby doges succeeded to office by election from among many eligible elite families, rather than by inheritance). Somewhat similar ‘republican’ institutions tended to be subverted by great families or ‘houses’ in other North Italian small states, as the Medicis did in Florence, but Venice resisted this tendency. Whether the political system of ancient Teotihuacan ever resembled any North Italian system very closely is less important than the recognition that it may have changed significantly over time. We should not assume that all early regional states were hereditary monarchies. It seems to me that it is mainly through a ‘materiality’ approach that such conjectures can be tested.

Whatever its political system, the Teotihuacan state persisted long after the destruction of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, and it became even more influential in Mesoamerica until its decline and collapse, probably some time in the AD 600s. The political collapse is marked by what is pretty clearly desecratory termination that targeted the major temples and other civic-ceremonial structures (Millon 1988; 1992). The ethnic identity of the people who occupied the city in the ensuing centuries is still controversial. I suspect that it included a sizable influx of newcomers, perhaps together with survivors of the earlier city. At any rate, whoever they were, these inhabitants lived mainly outside the former civic-ceremonial core and used pottery with a strikingly different repertoire of motifs. It seems likely that they were consciously distancing themselves from the former state and its symbols. Nevertheless, sites probably not much later, elsewhere in Central Mexico, show eclectic mixes of symbols derived both from Teotihuacan and from elsewhere in their sculpture and mural paintings (Nagao 1989). In the Lowland Maya region, some thousand kilometres to the east, imagery at Late Classic sites referenced Teotihuacan as late as the early 900s (Stone 1989). Much
Thoughts about Rethinking Materiality

later, during the 1400s, the Aztecs in highland Central Mexico recovered Teotihuacan artefacts and structures and fostered their revival in some of their own iconography and monumental structures (López Luján 1987; Umbarger 1987). By this time, any resistance to the Teotihuacan state had long since become irrelevant. Aztec élites could utilize and reinterpret Teotihuacan materials as one source of support for their own political dominance.

We also have to recognize that termination of many objects or classes of objects would in some cases not have been very meaningful at all to the ancient people involved. That is, much of what we term 'other people's garbage' may well have been viewed as just that — insignificant material simply ignored once it was no longer of use and cavalierly discarded.

Furthermore, in considering large monuments, we should remember that even the largest don't represent that much effort in comparison with routine and endless day-to-day work that leaves few durable material residues, such as obtaining and producing food, food preparation, child care, ritual observances, and information exchange. Even gossip should not be dismissed — it is an important kind of activity involved with solidarity and the exchange of information as well as significant kinds of misinformation.

It is also notable that, in some societies, people make rather a point of forgetting. We must not assume that every ancient society was interesting in using materials to remember. If we ourselves didn't think it was important to recover the past, we would have done something else with our lives and not become archaeologists. So it is very natural for us to assume that all earlier people were also interested in their pasts, and interested in using materials to preserve or at least evoke memories. But we must not take this for granted. As Helms, Pollard, and others in this volume note, some societies, perhaps especially egalitarian mobile foragers and shifting farmers, may actually institutionalize practices of forgetting. In other cases, memory can be highly selective. Sometimes this is just a matter of emphasis — of what is thought important or unimportant to remember. In other cases there can be deliberate and even Orwellian tampering, including conscious forgeries.

Finally, objects, symbols, and images are often put in the service of social sectors or factions who oppose those in power, e.g. at the time of the French Revolution (Hunt 1984), or the kinds of art sponsored by regimes such as various fascist governments, the Soviet Union, or the PRC. That is, it is art used (at least initially) to express a certain kind of resistance.

The innately universal and the contingently local

Certain propositions concerning materiality have by now been sufficiently examined that I think we can treat them as axiomatic, and move on from there. Among these is the argument that, despite a significant degree of indeterminacy, the ranges of plausible meanings of material objects are by no means as limitless as they are for nearly all words. This is especially so for objects whose more metaphorical meanings are derived from or somehow related to the utilitarian uses of the objects. It is less so for decorative motifs and representational scenes. Also, whatever may be the case for computers, human brains are so constituted that operations we label reasoning or cognition cannot be disentangled from those we label emotions or attitudes (cf. Tarlow 2000). These two points are interconnected in that the physical properties of an object, simply as object, as well as the activities entailed in procuring the materials for the object and the range of plausible intended uses for the object have relevance for its plausible meanings, and also for the emotions and attitudes evoked. For example, anything we would label a spearpoint, whether or not it was ever in fact used for that purpose, inevitably evokes notions of conflict and intent to inflict damage or the potential for such action — even if it is as metaphorical as Cupid's darts. Knappett's (this volume) discussion of affordances seems helpful here.

Nevertheless, we must be endlessly on guard to avoid misinterpretations of objects. I am reminded of a Gary Larson ('The Far Side') cartoon ('So what's this? I asked for a hammer! A hammer! This is a crescent wrench! . . . Well, maybe it's a hammer . . . damn these stone tools'), as well as Motel of the Mysteries (Macaulay 1979), where a toilet seat is interpreted as a Sacred Collar.

In addition to recognizing the extent to which objects, however meaningful, need to be understood in ways different from, or at least additional to, the ways we understand verbal texts, we can also dismiss any extreme version of the tabula rasa model of the human mind. I suggest, moreover, that we avoid language that encourages us to think of 'mind' as a noun, as if it were an object. I would suggest that we use the verb form, 'minding', as a generic term for many of the activities of brain organs, in much the same way that 'digesting' is a principal activity of gastrointestinal tracts, except that 'mind' is already
in use for something else (as in 'I don't mind what I have for lunch', or 'Mind the gap!', or 'He is minding the child'). Whatever term or terms we use, we must get into the habit of thinking of mental processes and properties of mental processes, rather than of 'minds' as objects. I suppose this has long since been worked over by students of mind/body issues, but it seems to me both valid and not always well enough recognized by archaeologists.

Perhaps we also need no longer belabour the fallacies and shortcomings of m™ extreme versions of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, although these remain surprisingly durable in some quarters. But merely dismissing extremes does not mean that we can then move on to 'something entirely different'. Quite the contrary. I believe that one of the most pressing unresolved issues in the social disciplines in general, and extremely relevant for archaeology, is getting clear about the relative roles of inbuilt features of human brain organs and the historically-contingent experiences of individuals in their life histories of interactions with their environments. Assuredly, both are far from negligible. I have a hunch that genes play a somewhat larger role and contingent experiences a somewhat smaller role than many think, but I am careful to say that this is no more than a hunch, and progress will come not from assertion and reassertion of beliefs and intellectual loyalties, but from further empirical research, much of it by psychologists. Perhaps the largest contributions that archaeologists and anthropologists can make are: 1) disabusing psychologists of ethnocentric assumptions that can invalidate even the most carefully-controlled experimentation; and 2) providing examples from past societies that can support or challenge the propositions of psychologists. We must be far more interdisciplinary and we need fruitful collaborations between archaeologists and psychologists. Several of the participants in this symposium have embarked on strategic collaborations of this kind, and this is very welcome.

In the US, few archaeologists seem to consider psychology even potentially relevant. 'Thinking interdisciplinarily' is considered important, but it overwhelmingly means connecting with the biological and physical sciences. I would never argue for neglecting these fields; it's rather that we must also connect more with psychology. As individuals, we will be spread too thinly if each of us tries to connect with everything important, but as a research community, some of us must connect more with some psychologists, and make the results of those connections felt broadly within the profession.

Knowledge before language

Knowledge that we can’t put into words is largely shared with other animal species. Birds, who seem so dumb in many respects, amaze me by how much more they know than I do about aerodynamics, without their knowing that they know it. Our ancestors had huge amounts of knowledge long before they had language and they routinely acted on this knowledge. The addition of language does not mean that inarticulate (and inarticulable) knowledge became unimportant. To underline this point, I quote from Mark Twain (1874, 75-7), who tells how, as an apprentice pilot on a Mississippi riverboat, he nearly ran the boat ashore trying to avoid a non-existent reef. The pilot says to him

'Now, don't you see the difference? It wasn't anything but a wind reef. The wind does that.'

'So I see. But it is exactly like a bluff reef. How am I ever to tell them apart?'

'I can't tell you. It is an instinct. By and by you will just naturally know one from the other, but you will never be able to explain why or how you know them apart.'

It turned out to be true. The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book — a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice.

We all acquire such incommunicable knowledge to varying degrees and to far greater degrees on topics that matter most to us and about which we have the most experience. Some years ago, visiting a social anthropologist, I commented that he was using a mano (maize-grinding stone) for a doorknob. He was amazed that I had somehow discerned that it was not just any natural smooth rock, and asked me how I could recognize it. I, in turn, was rather at a loss, for all I could easily think of was to say something to the effect that it was just obviously a mano. To be sure, with some reflection, I could explain at least some of the indicators that it was an artefact. Nevertheless, to me his question was very much like being asked to explain how I could identify an object as, say, a screwdriver.

The lesson, perhaps, is that what is obvious to a person with one kind of experience is not obvious to a person with different experience. Nevertheless, I suggest that, with the right attentiveness and the right experience, we can to some degree participate
in some of the non-verbal knowledge of this kind that was held by the ancient people we study. Indeed, precisely because such knowledge is acquired non-verbally, we may (in spite of the hazards I noted earlier) be at a lesser disadvantage than we are in trying to infer discursive knowledge in the absence of texts.

**Incentives for new kinds of engagement**

Renfrew’s (2001) chapter, ‘Symbol Before Concept’ makes many excellent points, especially in its nuanced exposition of the fact that we cannot be satisfied either with facile cross-cultural comparisons based on shallow and externally-imposed categories, or with richly-particularistic interpretations that do not lend themselves to generalizations. We must find ways to derive useful generalizations that utilize, rather than homogenize, the local particulars. Nevertheless, I am uncomfortable with some aspects of his chapter and I will suggest some modifications. These generally relate to non-sedentary societies and the earliest sedentary ones, topics on which I have done no research and not a tremendous amount of reading. Because of my limited knowledge of such societies, I feel both tentative and reckless, willing (I hope) to admit that the things I suggest may be easily refuted by very clear evidence, yet free to offer some speculations and see how they will be received.

Setting aside the question of just how sharp the social and behavioural differences between *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens* were, I think we still do not know enough to say whether the cognitive, behavioural, and social differences between early and modern *Homo sapiens* groups developed gradually, with no thresholds, ‘catastrophes’ in the sense of René Thom (1975), or ‘punctuations’ (sensu Gould and Eldredge), or whether there were, indeed, definite discontinuities. Both the discontinuities perceived by some and the continuities perceived by others seem to me functions of insufficient amounts of data of the right kinds. It seems likely, however, that these issues will be resolved within a few more decades if research addressed to them continues at its recent rate.

However that may be, I suggest that probably the people of the Upper Palaeolithic already fully embodied the evolutionary changes that distinguished modern humans from archaic *Homo sapiens*. That is, Upper Palaeolithic societies were composed of people with fully modern cognitive and social capacities and propensities. Renfrew tends to speak of sedentism as something that enabled new developments. Such language lends itself to a notion of progress, of movement toward some goal, which I take to be that of fully realizing the potential inherent in these modern capacities and propensities. For him, the delay in realizing these possibilities constitutes a problem.

I propose that we move back a step in the causal chain postulated by Renfrew, Watkins, and others in this volume, by adding a more explicit consideration of power and new kinds of asymmetrical social relationships. By this I mean relationships in which some persons exercise claims on some of the labour or products of the labour of other units (typically families or households), in exchange for which they provide something different (such as being effective conduits to supernatural benefits, providing organizational services, sponsoring ceremonies and buildings that express and reinforce group solidarity and group self-esteem, or offering protection from others). These services offered in exchange may or may not be perceived as reasonable compensation by other members of the ancient society, or by us.

Here, I am using ideas that bear at least a family resemblance to Marxist thought, but without, I hope, dogmatically introducing any baggage of problematic categories and assumptions. The gist of my suggestion is that it is the growing importance of asymmetrical social relationships of these kinds, and increasing prevalence of differences in power within specific age and perhaps sex categories (especially power differences among adult heads of households), that provide both the resources and the incentives, or motives, for what Renfrew calls increasing engagement. I suggest that the reason that modern humans waited so long to do things that they had the cognitive capacities to have done much earlier is that, for a long time, they had no good reasons to do them (or, indeed, perhaps had good reasons not to put much effort into them). I believe that some of the suggestions in Robb’s chapter (this volume) have something in common with this view.

I suggest that, for low-density non-sedentary societies, there was no perceived good reason for highly-developed engagement with materials not directly useful for subsistence. By now it is a truism that no known society is really altogether egalitarian. Nevertheless, in societies composed of small groups, with few persons per unit area, and limited storage technology, such inequality as there is seems to be based almost entirely on sex, age, and individual differences in skills, temperament, and charisma. In such societies, where individuals are well known to one
another and people are sufficiently impressed (or unimpressed, as the case may be) by one another's personal characteristics, there seems little need to bolster one's standing by use of meaningful objects. Indeed, such attempts would likely be ineffective.

To me, the critical variable is the number of persons over whom it is worthwhile or even feasible to exercise some degree of ascendancy. Quite aside from levelling practices that may or may not be prevalent, if you want to be the big shot in a group of 25 or 50, elaborate material symbols are probably not needed if you have the right personal characteristics, and probably won't help much if you lack those personal characteristics. It seems to me that it is only when the relevant groups are somewhat larger that: a) asymmetrical social relations begin to offer the opportunity to extract large enough surpluses from others to make the effort worthwhile; and b) some of those surpluses can be used to acquire spectacular material objects that can impress people; and c) some members of the group will not have sufficiently intimate personal knowledge of some other members to make attempts to impress by means of symbols ineffective.

Concerning point (a) it may be unconventional to think of one's fellow humans as another species that might be 'harvested', but I think it is useful to do so. To be sure, literal consumption of other humans (i.e. cannibalism), has probably always been far too rare to have been a significant part of the subsistence of human groups, whatever its symbolic significance may have been in certain times and places. I'm thinking instead of the 'harvest' of the labor and products of labor of other humans, at a rate that does not threaten their survival. Quite simply, if this 'crop' is too sparse and patchy, it is not likely that it will be perceived as a very attractive competitor with alternative sources of satisfactions. It will not be perceived as having high utility.

This leads, of course, by a somewhat roundabout route, to sedentism, because, at least for the most part, it is only with subsistence technologies that require some degree of sedentism that groups occur that are large enough to present the conditions where there are incentives to develop much in the way of material symbolism. I realize that the concept of carrying capacity is highly plastic and culturally relative. Nevertheless, there are few environmental settings where hunting and gathering will sustain human groups that are not too small and scattered to offer many incentives for elaboration of material symbols. I understand that sedentism is strongly associated with specific settings unusually rich in natural resources for humans, or else at least some degree of food-production.

In the midst of so much tentativeness, one thing I strongly oppose is the notion that regional densities of Homo sapiens populations inexorably increased because of an intrinsic tendency for fertility to outstrip mortality. I have argued against that notion elsewhere (e.g. Cowgill 1975a,b; 1996; 1998), and I won't repeat those arguments here.

Why, then, did sedentism ever happen at all? This is a good question. I can only suggest that perhaps, during all those millennia of the Upper Palaeolithic when it may seem that nothing of any importance was changing, there were in fact significant cumulative changes in technology, leading to more effective tools, techniques, and strategies to harvest more plant and animal species, process harvests more effectively, and improve their storage. The eventual upshot was increasing prevalence of societies large enough to make imposition of claims on some of the labour (or products of labour) of other humans outside one's own household an attractive strategy. This, in turn, could have furnished motives for elaborating material symbols. I imagine the immediate incentives for adopting new technology during the preceding Upper Palaeolithic to have not been new institutional facts, but, rather, considerations such as reducing work loads, more assured success rates, less physical danger, lower perceived risk of shortages, and perhaps tastier foods. Even without some intrinsic tendency for fertility to outstrip mortality, such innovations could have led, essentially as a side effect, to greater population densities in certain localities. These higher densities, in turn, could have been conducive to new institutional facts, including increasing possibilities for asymmetrical social relations and for greater degrees of what Wolf (1999) calls 'structural' power. I believe that Watkins's chapter (this volume) on Epipalaeolithic sites in the Near East is, if not clearly supportive of this model, at any rate not obviously inconsistent with it.

We now recognize that the concept of 'sedentism' itself is not simple, and it should not be regarded as a binary opposite to 'mobile'. Recent work and thought in the southwestern US deals with these concepts in sophisticated ways and appears to have much to offer archaeologists working in other parts of the world. Varien (1999) is an especially notable example. Other important studies include B. Nelson & LeBlanc (1986), M. Nelson (1999; 2000), and Nelson & Schachner (2002).

I should add that I am not suggesting increased
reliance on material symbols in opposition to models emphasizing other strategies, such as competitive feasting. On the contrary, it seems likely that many of these strategies went on hand-in-hand, though with different mixes and different emphases in different cases.

Renfrew uses the term *engagement* to refer to human interactions with natural materials. To me, hunters and gatherers are (and were) highly engaged with the natural world as regards subsistence, and also in their experience of natural phenomena, including landscapes, weather, and the activities of other animal and plant species. Even in hunter-gatherer societies there are also symbolic engagements, both with immovable objects and with portable materials, such as the exotic objects that often form part of the equipment of shamans. People in more complex societies differ in their increasing engagement with materials that you cannot eat, cannot use directly to harvest food, provide shelter, or gain other material benefits, and that won’t do anything to you (or for you) unless you first do something to them. That is, certain people in these more complex societies have stronger incentives to acquire objects that come from a distance or are otherwise hard to get, are hard to create, or have mysterious properties, because such people have more to gain from asymmetrical social relations. They also, by virtue of having asymmetrical relationships with a larger number of people, have the resources to acquire more of the precious and/or sacred objects that, in turn, help to underwrite their claims on other people.

Finally, I avoid any suggestion that these developments represent some realization of what was immanent all along in the biological evolution of modern humans. Although I do not assume that the lives of hunter-gatherers are or were idyllic, I am also avoiding any suggestion that post-Paleolithic developments represent progress or improvement in any clear sense. Above all, I reject any ‘maturation’ metaphor, and any teleological attitude. It seems to me that post-Paleolithic changes are best seen not as movement toward some goal, nor as delayed realizations of an innate potential, but as movements away from the institutions and practices for which modern humans are biologically adapted, and toward heaven knows what.

**References**


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