

Engendering Social Dynamics: The Archaeology of Maintenance Activities

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BAR International Series 1862
2008

This title published by

Archaeopress
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports
Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED
England
bar@archaeopress.com
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S1862

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ISBN 978 1 4073 0345 1

Printed in England by CMP (UK) Ltd

All BAR titles are available from:

Hadrian Books Ltd
122 Banbury Road
Oxford
OX2 7BP
England
bar@hadrianbooks.co.uk

The current BAR catalogue with details of all titles in print, prices and means of payment is available free from Hadrian Books or may be downloaded from www.archaeopress.com

3. Thoughts on a method for zooarchaeological study of daily life

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Henry James repeats an incident which the writer Prosper Mérimée described, of how, while he was living with George Sand, he once opened his eyes, in the raw winter dawn, to see his companion in a dressing-gown, on her knees before the domestic hearth, a candle-stick beside her and her red *madras* round her head, making bravely, with her own hands the fire that was to enable her to sit down betimes to urgent pen and paper. The story represents him as having felt that the spectacle chilled his ardor and tried his taste, her appearance unfortunate, her occupation an inconsequence, and her industry a reproof, the result of all which was a lively irritation and an early rupture (James in Shapira (ed.) 1963:157-158).

Adrienne Rich On Lies, Secrets, and Silence 1979, p. 37

Introduction

Household maintenance activities are intrinsically social, involving various divisions of labor and supporting relationships among the members of domestic groups and the larger communities of which they are part. Moreover, only a little reflection will indicate that the small maintenance practices of daily life – making the morning cup of coffee or tea, collecting and reading the daily newspaper, or logging on to the online version, feeding a pet, feeding children – are themselves rituals, which make our quotidian lives feel safe and secure. As Bourdieu would have it, we structure our new day through these small acts that arise from the structures of everyday life as lived in our past. The dislocation of these small practices, their prevention or postponement, is one of the aims of terrorism, in its mission to destabilize the sense of security and normalcy people possess and thereby to discredit the power of states of ensure such conditions for their citizens. We see about us, regardless of pronouncements and grand gestures by heads of state, that the common person's resistance to terrorism is to continue those everyday practices in the face of heightened risk in doing so.

This paper is an essay, in the sense of '*un ensayo*', an attempt, to explore conceptual linkages within archaeological method and theory. My attempt here begins with my fundamental belief that archaeological interpretation must be based in a verifiable body of evidence from which plausible interpretations are made. By 'evidence', I do not mean a positivist view of 'facts speaking for themselves', but rather, as Wylie (1992) has insisted, that arguments for the occurrence of past events, everything from the collapse of an economy to instances of spousal abuse, must be based upon the existence of interpretable evidence upon which there is some agreement among observers.

By 'interpretable evidence upon which there is some agreement', I mean those meanings of the evidence (counting here both interpretations of objects and of patterning in data drawn from objects as evidence) that most archaeologists are willing to accept as strongly warranted 'givens'. By 'plausible', I mean commonly agreed upon touchstones to which we can resort when developing arguments that account for changes (or lack of them) over time in the human lives we wish to study. This area of evaluating plausibility pertains to what David Clarke (1973) called 'archaeological metaphysics'. I believe we are still in the process of developing a clear understanding of how we evaluate the archaeological data and interpretations embedded in arguments, that is, how and why we believe some to be plausible and others less so. This area of inquiry has largely been overshadowed by debates over processual *versus* postprocessual theory. However, as archaeology moves onward from this confrontation – or in the case of much of Europe – in parallel with it, it becomes clear that, when archaeologists of any theoretical persuasion make arguments about what went on in the past, the plausibility, or 'truth claims', of specific evidence is absolutely essential to the process. The intention of this essay is to focus on such issues, with respect to studying households, social relations, and gender.

It may be good to specify a bit more about my own theoretical leanings, and why I have felt the need to draw from several theoretical and methodological sources. I write and speak from the position of a zooarchaeologist with strong interests in building theory and method in my own subfield for studying social relations, including gender. If only because I view human subsistence as intrinsically social, I have long believed that animals and their use by people must be viewed in a social matrix.

For some thirty-five years, I have analyzed faunas from African sites with early pastoral livestock (Gifford-Gonzalez *et al.* 1980; Gifford-Gonzalez 1998, 2000). I also have spent time with contemporary pastoralists, and have read widely on pastoral peoples in various settings. In the process, I have assessed a range of theoretical perspectives for their utility in thinking about the issues. My own personal experience compels me to view pastoralists in the context of regional ecosystems and the non-negotiable demands that the weather and the herd animals make upon these people. Likewise, my own experience compels me to see pastoral people as actors in complex political, economic, and ideological webs that both mediate and clash with environmental trends, and that structure their choices in managing their livestock, households, and social relationships. Finally, I have seen firsthand and read about how men and women negotiate

their lives from very different social positions in pastoralist groups, where age as well as gender delegates to a person specific rights, responsibilities, and limitations.

Sometimes these theoretical worlds are remarkably compatible, for example, as when behavioral ecological and Marxist paradigms take a fundamentally economic approach. Both share a concern with the costs and benefits of efforts humans exert to achieve goals within a social context, albeit viewed from very different standpoints and calibrated with different currencies. Likewise, feminist and Marxist theory share preoccupations with power, ideology, and the position of the viewer/investigator, but their commitments sometimes diverge. These approaches occasionally contradict each other in troublesome but interesting ways. I believe that the friction itself is a context for defining in more detail what is needed to work productively with archaeological materials.

However, when I resort to these bodies of theory, what is consistent is drawing expectations from them and assigning meaning to actual archaeological materials, with which to confront and assess those expectations. This process involves the application of what Clarke (1973) called 'interpretive theory' and is essential to all archaeological analysis. I believe this process is more complex than the term 'middle range theory' would imply. This essay seeks to explore possible links in a system of theory and method for understanding 'maintenance activities' and other socially mediated activities, and for addressing the difficult problem of how to study gender in the absence of cultural or historic continuities with textually documented groups. I am not here suggesting new theory and method. Rather, I am bringing into juxtaposition extant ones that thus far, to the best of my knowledge, have not been explicitly related to one another. My hope is that this thought-experiment might provoke others to consider the possibilities of multiple approaches to investigating this vital area of archaeological research.

Zooarchaeology and Domestic Maintenance Activities

A brief note is necessary here regarding my use of the word, 'zooarchaeology' This increasingly favored in U.K. (Mulville and Outram 2005), North America, and segments of Latin America (Mengoni Goñalons 2004), rather than 'archaeozoology', to refer to the archaeological study of animals remains. I am most accustomed to use this phrase, and I am in agreement with the argument, advanced by other Anglophone authors, that 'zooarchaeology' more clearly implies the archaeologically focused nature of our research with animal remains. In any case, I will use this term as interchangeable with the continental European 'archaeozoology' here.

The use of animals obviously articulates with the physical and social reproduction of domestic groups and of

communities. The most banal and pervasive construal of zooarchaeology in the general archaeological literature is that it deals with a kind of 'natural' evidence, parallel to pollen rain and geological sediments, intrinsically non-artifactual and germane only to environment or subsistence. According to this time-honored model for archaeological interpretation, shared by members of culture-historic, processual, and postprocessual camps, only artifacts, architecture, and space-use can shed light on social and symbolic worlds past.

However, it has been stressed by several workshop participants (Gifford-Gonzalez 1993; Montón 2002, 2005) and by others (e. g. Claassen 1991; Hendon 1996; Moss 1993), to conceptualize household maintenance and subsistence activities as *outside* the social and the cultural realm alienates a central part of human endeavor from society and culture. Thirty years ago, in a very different register and from a very different perspective, feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich (1979), addressed the ideological underpinnings of a view of 'significant' history which excludes the activities normally assigned to women in Western cultures – childcare and maintenance activities. Archaeological frameworks that relegate faunal and floral evidence solely to 'subsistence and environment' reveal a particular, and I would argue unconsciously androcentric, political economy of archaeology, which reflects the depreciation of such activities by Western societies as a whole.

In reality, the anthropological literature shows that animals are both food and, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss (1963), food for thought. Animals nearly invariably possess high symbolic and economic value in human societies and are the foci of much human attention and energy. They are either highly desired as living creatures and food, or avoided as both (Tambiah 1969). Among human foragers, farmers, pastoralists, and members of complex societies, animals and their products are pivot points of conflict as well as a major means of mediating it. In documented human societies, access to animals and animal foods is intensely socially mediated, subject to economic manipulation and, often, asymmetrical access, according to age, gender, or social standing. Ingold (1980) has delineated the differences in the extension of humans' allocative power over animals, depending upon whether they are wild, when power of allocation commences at the death of the animal, or domestic, when it begins at the birth of the animal. Given ethnographic documentation of wide variations in the gender of those holding control over animals in both contexts, we may imagine that in the past similar variability would have existed. For example, among the Navajo, women own and allocate living herds of sheep, and among the Nunamiut, once the carcasses of prey reach the residential camp, the senior women of households control the distribution of their parts (Waugespack 2002).

For zooarchaeologists the problem is not whether animals are woven into human social relations in important ways, but how we might obtain information about their places

in past social contexts from the archaeological evidence. Although we can expect that differential control of animals, their effort, and their products existed in the past as it does now, specifying who exercised that control is not a simple matter of applying uniformitarian principles. What faces us, now that we have opened up the hitherto closed door to the kitchen and house yard, is how to write human history using the archaeological documents relevant to the structures of everyday life. The next section addresses some aspects of theory and method relevant to this endeavor. I seek to maintain a delicate balancing act in this essay. On the one hand, I will explore ways to push the limits in giving agency, and perhaps gender, to persons who lived in archaeologically documented pasts, while at the same seeking to remain conservative and self-conscious in the application of plausible 'middle-range,' interpretive theory.

Practice Theory and Middle Range Theory: Is there a Relationship?

Bourdieu's theory of practice offers archaeologists valuable conceptual tools for understanding the material outcomes of everyday life that form the preponderance of archaeological deposits. The concept of *habitus* provides a way of understanding the redundancies, or 'patterning', of evidence in archaeological sites and samples as the outcomes of the activities of everyday life. We suppose that repetitions of acts, either as intentional, evocative gestures or as unselfconscious, everyday activities, create the traits 'constantly recurring together' (Childe 1929) that archaeologists have long studied.

With specific reference to the archaeology of household and community maintenance activities, practice theory is especially useful. As Hendon (1996:46) puts it, 'it is the practice [in Bourdieu's ... sense of the term] of the household – what people do as members of a domestic group and the meaning assigned to their actions – that is critical to an understanding of household dynamics'. An ever-growing number of archaeological studies have deployed aspects of Bourdieu's work, while remaining attentive to the dynamic nature of structure and agency (Joyce 2003; Lightfoot *et al.* 1998; Stahl and Das Dores Cruz 1998). Several sophisticated archaeological discussions have reminded archaeologists that the structuration of everyday life is flexible, subject to improvisation, and symbolic renegotiations through the very practices 'set up' by the structures of prior experience (Dietler and Herbich 1998; Stahl 2001; Joyce and Lopiparo 2005).

From my point of view, two issues emerge from this broad acceptance of practice theory as a conceptual tool for understanding archaeological sites and materials. These may be phrased as questions. First, what is the relation of the view of archaeological materials produced by *habitus* and the body of theory normally called middle range theory? Second, does the perspective on archaeological materials enabled by practice theory have implications for the construction of historic narratives in

archaeology? This section discusses the first question, while reserving brief remarks on the second for a later section.

Middle range theory, as defined by Binford (1977, 1981), focuses on specific, redundant sets of evidence that are considered 'uniformitarian' in the sense that they are produced by known processes which have consistent outcomes, or 'signatures', in many times and places. According to this perspective, middle range theory is essential for archaeologically addressing general level research questions, because it permits reliable assignment of meaning to archaeological evidence. Such meanings may implicate natural processes, human activities, or specific emergent processes, such as 'population growth'. It can certainly be argued that, before Binford's articulation of the distinction between middle range and general theory, archaeologists were implicitly or explicitly assigning meaning to patterning in archaeological evidence that readily falls under the heading of middle range theory. For example, many argued and more accepted that an increase in the number and/or size of sites per unit time in a specific area reflects population growth. However, explicit recognition and construction of middle range theory has permitted a more critical evaluation of the 'terms of engagement' of archaeological data with such generalizations, as well as specification of the relative strength of the interpretive linkages.

Several researchers (e.g. Gifford-Gonzalez 1991) have stressed that middle range stipulations of meaning are most powerful when they include strong relational analogies between modern 'source-side' contexts (Wylie 1989) and the archaeological evidence. Animal bodies and their constituent elements have been viewed by Binford and many zooarchaeologists as supremely useful 'uniformitarian materials' (e.g. Gifford-Gonzalez 1981; Lyman 1987) that permit us to access the deep past because they have not altered in their physical properties over many millennia.

Middle range theory encompasses evidence produced by non-human actors and processes, such as carnivore gnawing or subaerial weathering. However, the purview of middle range theory also includes evidence produced by people that are certainly the products of *habitus*. To give a zooarchaeological example, Binford's detailed descriptions of Nunamiut butchery and meal preparation in *Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology* (1978) describe repetitive actions which are in part driven by regularities in the anatomy of the prey species but which are also embedded in Nunamiut expectations and practices of everyday life. Thus, these are simultaneously functionally and culturally structured activities.

Herein, I believe, is a linkage between these two disparately derived types of theory. Despite the widely different notions of agency in processual and postprocessual writings, the value of analogical sets is accepted, as much in Shanks and Hodder's (1995)

‘universal material processes’ as in Binford’s (e.g.1981) ‘uniformitarian relationships’, but the specific utility of these has seldom been highlighted through specific arguments. The plausible meanings given in middle range theory, the sequences of actions laid out in descriptions of *chaînes opératoires* (Lemonier 1986), in Schiffer’s (1987) ‘behavioral chains’ or in the analyses of sequences of actions at a greater temporal and landscape scale, *chaînes de travail* (Joyce and Lopiparo 2005) are ‘anchor points’ that allow archaeologists explore the more subjective aspects of culturally specific practices we encounter archaeologically.

Why are these ‘anchor points’? Although all practice is culturally and psychologically embedded, some practices are more determined by the exigencies of the materials than others. Some materials – clays, metal ores, animal bodies, plant structures, etc. - require specific types and sequences of handling to produce desired outcomes. These determinative relationships of practice – when materials dictate human action to one extent or another, and sometimes to a specifiable degree – are important because they permit us to delimit other outcomes of habitual practice which are *not*, in any obvious way, driven by the same ‘uniformitarian’ constraints. In the process, what we can plausibly know about the deep past – the challenges any human being would face in handling certain materials, regardless of the details how they rise to those challenges – allow us to construct a more densely textured ‘lived past’ (cf. Stahl 2001:19-40).

One might, for example, seek to more closely stipulate the material parameters of each aspect of culinary practices, as outlined by Montón (2005), to specify the ‘material worlds’ inhabited by persons engaged in the procurement, processing, preparation, preservation, and presentation of foods. While no one can ever pretend to inhabit a culturally mediated world identical to that of ancient persons, some of the material considerations of the everyday lives they experienced *can* be appreciated in some detail. This opens our eyes to the possible trade-offs that members of households must have had to make in their quotidian existence, between satisfying basic demands of the human body, of the animals and plants under management, and of materials manipulated, on the one hand, and personal or corporate social projects requiring an investment of energy and time, on the other.

Figure 1 attempts to portray in simple form the ‘interpretive space’ enriched by inferences based upon such relational analogies. The denser such certifiably ‘middle-range’ sets of analogical relationships are, the richer is our sense of the practical environment in which past persons experienced their lives. Equipped with a web of such analogic relationships, we mobilize bodies of theory to explore the possibilities of the ‘interpretive space’ (Wylie 1985).

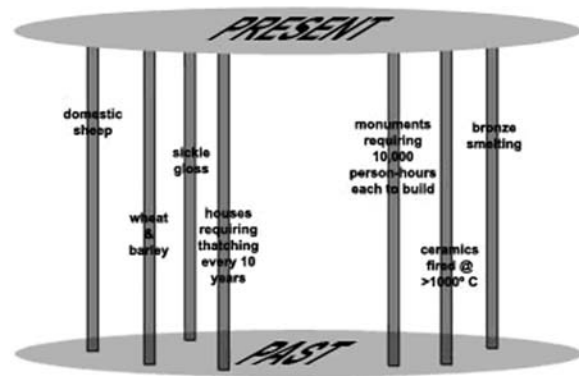


FIGURE 1. Schematic showing the relationship of ‘uniformitarian’ analogical materials and processes to the ‘interpretive space’ of the study of the past, given present knowledge of material properties, *chaînes opératoires*, and other forms of relational analogies.

Interpretation is thus not dictated by uniformitarian relationships, it is *enabled* by them. Understanding that some such relations are the enacted outcomes of everyday practice further enriches our interpretation. From such a standpoint, as Joyce and Lopiparo (2005:369) state, ‘recording and analysis [of archaeological materials] are transformed from a description of products of unexamined action to sequences of action that can be recognized as traditional or innovative, intentional or unreflective’. Lacking the direct historic analogies mobilized by Joyce and Lopiparo in their Maya research, many archaeologists may feel themselves to be a considerable distance from the engagements with material and meanings. However, I believe that the synthetic study of the Vallès region of Catalonia by Colomer *et al.* (1998) represents a permutation of the strategy advocated here, in which various forms of evidence are first analyzed from a *chaîne opératoire* perspective, then monitored over time, when certain classes of evidence (settlements, levels of agricultural production) are seen to change radically, while others remain consistent from Early Bronze Age to Early Iron Age times. These diachronic trends are then interpreted with an approach that incorporates aspects of theories of production and gender.

I stress that I am not advocating the use of the formal characteristics of productive activities to generalize about their social and economic associations, which would be a misuse of analogy. As has been stressed by Brumfiel (2006), it is entirely unwarranted to assume that a given activity, Mesoamerican weaving in her discussion, is either ‘timeless’ in its gender associations or always in the same structural position in a political economy. As Brumfiel elegantly demonstrates, the physical act of producing cloth has varied historically in terms of the relation of weavers to economic and political power, and weavers have used it differently in response to the varied demands of those structural contexts.

To sum up, middle range theory includes some types of evidence that can be assumed to also fall within the realm of *habitus*. The advantage that such ‘uniformitarian’ properties offer to archaeologists is simply that they help us to think creatively about the choices that past people would have had to make in coping with the demands of certain materials as they handled them, and to ask further questions of the evidence. What kinds of energetic demands, human, animal, other, does fabrication or use of a specific material impose? How many person-hours are needed? Can the energy and time invested be broken up into installments, or must they all be invested at one time? Is there a better or worse time of the year to do so? Is there an age below which persons cannot reliably or safely accomplish these tasks? These are only a few of many questions that implicate age, gender, the timing and social organization of labor, and so forth, which follow from thinking through *chaînes opératoires*.

The Problem of Studying Gender in Deeper Time

Archaeologists interested in the study of gender in the lived past encounter special challenges in the use of analogy. As Hendon (1996: 56-57) has put it:

‘Modeling the relationship between material culture and social construction, however, represents the most serious challenge for archaeology. Where should we look for analogies to help us interpret out archaeological remains? Archaeologists able to draw on visual imagery or historically specific written documentation have been readiest to talk about social actors such as male and female, adult and child, and to interpret the cultural system of value that informs domestic relations... The benefits of these sources are not unalloyed, however, and must not discourage archaeologists from dealing with issues of practice and meaning’.

The richest and most detailed archaeological studies of gender have indeed been carried out within a ‘direct historic’ context, in which ethnographic, ethnohistoric, or other textual sources provide a rich web of associations of children, women, men, and, occasionally, other genders, such as among the Chumash Indians (e.g. Hollimon 2001) with specific social roles and occupations. Brumfiel’s (e.g. 1991) elegant study of changes in the nature of gendered work, and its impacts of household activities, in Huexotla under Aztec rule rests upon Spanish-sponsored accounts of such gendered labor, written only a century after the Aztec takeover of this outlying area. Stahl and Das Dores Cruz’s (1998) analysis changes in the lives of women and men in the Banda chieftancy as this polity was affected first by the Asante kingdom, and then by British colonial rule, makes artful use of evidence to demonstrate shifts in gender roles, yet it relies on many continuities of practice to make their well-grounded arguments for social change. Likewise, archaeologists of the southwestern United States have used colonial and ethnographic sources to apprehend what was *different* in ancient Puebloan gender relations,

versus those in the documented past (Crown 2000; Habicht-Mauche 2000).

For those of us dealing with times beyond the reach of ethnography, historic sources, visual representations, and other sources of meaning for archaeological sites and materials, the problem is how to explore gender without falling into the trap of essentializing gendered social roles and everyday practices. Conkey and Gero (1997) note that, after twenty years’ gender research in archaeology, some ‘archaeology of women’ has produced equally unjustified associations of women with certain occupations, activities, and social roles as produced by earlier, and equally suspect, androcentric interpretations. Assuming that women were always potters, weavers, and so forth flies in the face of a key precept of feminist theory: gender is social constructed and, as such, it is nearly infinitely mutable. This point was also raised by Diaz-Andreu (2005) concerning the assignment of tasks and activities to specific genders. Having just returned from a visit to cousins in a small village in northern Spain, it is all the more clear to me that ‘maintenance activities’ are assigned to both genders in complex ways in ‘traditional’ settings. Archaeologists’ common association of household maintenance with women may be more the product of a 20th Century European and American view of both ‘households’ and gender roles than a realistic one to impose on the past.

Archaeologists who accept that all societies of anatomically modern humans structure their social lives by age and gender but who reject gender essentialism face a profound challenge. Rather than assume that any activity, even the cooking of daily meals, is an intrinsic property of one gender, we must treat any such assertion as a research question to be studied. The problem is how to proceed systematically, with the aim, to paraphrase Sarah Milledge Nelson (1998:287), not of ‘*finding women*’ but rather of ‘*discussing gender*’.

In this connection, the approach that has been variously called ‘contextual’ (Hodder 1986), epistemological ‘tacking’ (Wylie 1993, 1989), ‘multiple frames of reference’ (Binford 2001, 1987), or simply, ‘multiple independent lines of evidence’ (Gifford-Gonzalez 1991; Lyman 1994) may be of special utility. To frame this as a question, are there lines of evidence that, independently of one another, point to similar associations of a given gender with an activity? Rather than assume these associations, we must stipulate them and make an evidence-based argument.

A major but largely untapped source of ‘middle-range’ or uniformitarian lines of evidence pertaining to gender, and especially to female persons, is evolutionary and reproductive ecology. Simply because archaeologists who take a constructionist view of gender find reductionist behavioral ecological ‘explanations’ as applied by some archaeological colleagues to be distasteful, they should not ignore the rich potential of the original studies. Many such studies permit archaeologists to consider factors

affecting women's lives, such as the positive and negative sides of increasing numbers of children on childcare, time allocation, and work schedules in different of subsistence economies (e.g. Bird and Bird 2005, 2000; Homewood and Rogers 1991; Kramer 2004; Vitzhum 1994; Wienpahl 1984). Because the day has twenty-four hours, because specific tasks (*viz. chaîne opératoire*) take time, because a pregnancy lasts nine months, because children need a minimal level of nutrition to grow and thrive, because certain types of food can only be consumed if intensively processed and cooked, this literature on workload, reproduction, and household constitution can provide archaeologists with at least general uniformitarian parameters for studying the lives of children, women, and men in past times.

My advocacy that archaeologists seriously consider this literature should in no way be interpreted as a statement that, for women, 'biology is destiny'. The ethnographic and historical literature show that women negotiate the physiological constraints of childbearing and child-rearing quite variably in different societies, in concert with a wider circle of cooperating persons. However, archaeologists must appreciate these arrangements as well as energetic and workload demands, to construct textured narratives of change or continuity at the household and community level.

Agency, Narrative Structure, and an Archaeology of Everyday Life

Having raised a number of issues of method and theory already, I will only lightly touch on one final topic that I must confess is not an area of expertise for me, but one of considerable concern. This is the implications of notions of agency grounded in practice theory for writing archaeological narratives. As stressed by Joyce and Lopiparo (2005), many archaeological narratives now focus at multiple scales, beginning with the individual or the household and moving outward or vice-versa. Such 'multiscalar' approaches acknowledge that in human affairs, causality - both that which supports continuity in practices and that which encourages change - may reside at any of several levels of scale (Joyce and Lopiparo 2005; Lightfoot *et al.* 1998). Toward the end of his life, James Deetz noted that only by studying a second colonial enterprise in South Africa, separated by time as well as space from the North American colonies he had initially researched, did he apprehend the role of global-scale processes in both contexts (Deetz and Scott 1995).

A metaphysical question, in David Clarke's (1973) sense of the term, emerges: what constitutes a satisfying narrative, once one acknowledges that so much archaeological evidence is constituted by repeated acts of quotidian living? In developing our multiscalar narratives, does one skip over the sameness and look for disjunctures, because that is what history has been about, traditionally? Does one feature the micro-scale account of past lives and underplay the effects of regional or global-scale processes on local lives? Does one privilege, as

most archaeologists have previously, a simplified narrative of 'prime movers', at the most general level, processes such as climate change or commodity market collapse, or - in the case of some postprocessual narratives - enduring cultural mindsets that work themselves through human agents over long spans of time? Is history as qualified in our present archaeological analyses still about large-scale causes? Is it 'thick description' at the local level? What is its narrative structure? What does 'continuity' in material practices mean? Is it actively produced or unconsciously enacted? Certainly, one probably does not wish to write narratives that resemble Andy Warhol's film of the Empire State Building through twenty-four hours, the film itself being twenty-four hours long. However, how do we sort out the relations of describing everyday practice and developing narrative?

Conclusion

On the surface, the study of maintenance activities appears to be a straightforward enterprise. Archaeological animal bones, plant remains, hearths, broken pots, discarded tools for processing daily meals and keeping the household abound, as sometimes does architecture. However, even the term 'household' should be qualified and used with circumspection (cf. Hendon 1996; Wilk 1989; Yanagisako 1979). Likewise, facile linking of specific tasks with age and gender classes may say more about modern cultural contexts than it does about the lives of the ancient people.

Archaeologists lacking direct historic analogies based on documentary sources, representations, and the like confront special challenges, but they are also usually more aware of the dangers of over-extended and simplistic formal analogies. The problem of imputing gender to specific activities, *chaînes opératoires*, or social roles is especially difficult in situations that lack cultural continuities with documented groups.

I have argued that the conceptual and methodological tools exist for approaching such challenges in the study of social relations in the past. I have advocated constructing research frameworks that acknowledge that humans' maintenance activities are structured within habitual yet variable practices, and that some of these involve materials that respond to manipulation in uniformitarian ways. Moreover, I have endorsed the view that aspects of human physiology structure human action but that, far from biology uniformly dictating destiny, these constraints are negotiated variably in different societies. When practiced from a critically self-conscious viewpoint, I think the interpretive moves outlined here can be considered a form of the archaeological hermeneutic advocated by Hodder (1991). The more or less uniformitarian aspects of materials and biology serve as the guarantors of the 'guarded objectivity' Hodder delineates as part of the self-conscious process of interpretation. This process is precisely the terrain

described by Wylie in her 1992 discussion of the role of 'evidential constraints' in archaeological interpretation.

I have also suggested that, as archaeologists work through these issues, they attend to the implications of approaches focused on 'the structures of everyday life' (Braudel 1981) for the nature of historical narrative, as has Stahl (2001, 1999).

As a final point, I suggest that, in attending to the role and study of maintenance activities, it is well to recall the other part of Braudel's book title, '*le possible et l'impossible*'. By this, and departing from Braudel's original meaning, I refer to archaeologists and their projects. When exploring the possibilities of studying the lived past, we must honestly accept 'the limits of the possible' with archaeological data. I do not advocate a defeatist position, but rather echo the point that Bruce Trigger raised in several chapters of his recent book (2006): if the information needed to answer a certain question is lacking, archaeologists should admit the problem and move on to other questions that they can answer. As we approach these challenges, may we have the insight and the courage to do so.

Acknowledgments

It was an honor to be asked to participate in a conversation among distinguished scholars of several intellectual traditions in the workshop, 'Interpreting household practices: reflections on the social and cultural roles of maintenance activities', and I wish to thank the organizers Sandra Montón Subías, Paloma Gonzalez Marcén, and Marina Picazo Gurina, as well as the sponsors of the event for their generous invitation. I thank as well all participants for a fascinating and enjoyable set of sessions. I am especially grateful to Liz Brumfiel for suggesting that I read her paper on weaving and also to Margarita Sánchez Romero for sending me her articles and book, *Arqueología y Género*, after the conference.

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