

The Archaeology of Gesture: The Challenge of Reconstructing Prehistoric Technical and Symbolic Behavior

The ultimate goal of prehistoric archaeology is the reconstruction of past human behavior for which the only evidence comes from the material culture record. Macro-behavior, that is, the movements involving large populations such as migrations, displacements, or trading flows over long periods of time, can be inferred from the presence or absence of some characteristic features of durable implements left by these populations. Micro-behavior, that is, the motor activities of individuals or small interacting groups taking place within much shorter temporal frames, such as the gestures performed in technical skills or symbolic demeanor, is far more elusive. The production and manipulation of artifacts (tools, weapons, ornaments), hunting and fishing techniques, social interactions and rituals, necessarily presuppose gestures that are both virtually certain and inaccessible directly. Ever since the discovery of the earliest proofs of human mindful industriousness, relentless efforts have been made to credibly represent the assemblages of patterned movements that brought these artifacts to existence and those which were generated by the individual and collective uses of these artifacts. There are no good reasons to assume that Neandertals and anatomically modern humans were endowed with a lesser gesture repertory than later members of traditional cultures such as those, for instance, of mediaeval Europe which are somewhat better documented through sporadic iconographic and textual record (e.g., Schmitt 1990).

Attempts at reconstructing Palaeolithic and Neolithic micro-behavior form a large part of archaeological discourse in search of plausible representations of the conceptual ground of such behavior. Indeed, this would be the surest way to unlock the meaning of the artifacts record. Prehistorians usually rely on heuristic replications in restricted conditions, interpretative imagination constrained by an assumed knowledge of the context, and tentative extrapolation from modern ethnography. However, the artifacts themselves afford a great deal of interesting information regarding their making and their use, and they provide rigorous sets of constraints for the conjectural reconstruction of the conceptual organizations and gesture assemblages they presuppose and for which they represent an indirect but reliable record. This is particularly true when artifacts are unquestionably associated with fossilized anatomical remains and ecological data (terrain, climate, flora and fauna). But, with some notable exceptions, the dynamic reconstructions of gesture has remained somewhat too general, vague and tentative for being able to yield reliable information. New means of investigations seem to make possible a different approach leading to more interesting information than mere plausible speculations.

The first purpose of this round-table is to critically examine the efforts made so far in prehistoric archaeology to infer gestures from artifacts, more particularly to make explicit the presuppositions that constrain such inferences and can considerably bias the kind and range of possible reconstructions. Secondly, this round-table will endeavor to examine the potential of new technologies such as computer simulations, anatomical and conceptual reconstructions, and heuristic explorations of alternative hypotheses in order to expand the range of possible inferences from artifacts to gesture.