
An Archaeology Of Gesture: Symposium Review

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Introduction

In the tranquil surroundings of University College Cork, the most recent in a series of semiotic symposia was held, this time on the subject of 'The Archaeology of Gesture: Reconstructing Prehistoric Technical and Symbolic Behaviour'. The round-table session was organised as part of the 11th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists held between the 5th and 11th of September 2005 in Cork, Ireland, the European Union's 'City of Culture' for 2005.

The session was attended by approximately thirty people, the majority of whom stayed for the entire duration of the afternoon and many of which contributed both position statements and questions, with the overall attitude toward the notion of the archaeological study of gestures being a positive one.

This brief symposia review is an attempt to bring together and expand upon some of the ideas and lines of enquiry that were raised during the course of the afternoon as a consequence of both the position statements presented by a number of the contributors, and through the questions and comments made by the attending delegates.

The notion of the archaeological study of gestures is a provocative one as it suggests we can access the bodily practices of people in the past. Organising such a session implies two things: first, that the study of gestures in the past is a viable research agenda, and second, that gestures from the past are archaeologically identifiable. The recent concern in archaeology with such apparently ephemeral practices as identity formation and maintenance, consumption and emotion, suggest that the study of

gestures might indeed represent an important contribution to contemporary archaeological research.

Perspectives: figurines, fragmentation and historicity

The contributors to the roundtable, whose papers can be found on the symposiums website (<http://www.semioticon.com/virtuals/archaeology/arch.htm>), presented a diverse number of approaches, perspectives and materials that addressed the concerns of the session.

Beginning the afternoon was Eszter Bánffy (Archaeological Institute of the HAS, Budapest) who addressed the subject of ritual practice during the Late Neolithic and early Chalcolithic in Eastern Europe. Whilst the purposeful practice of object breakage and fragmentation is well known from this area (e.g. Chapman 2000), Bánffy instead looked at the possibility of exploring other ritual objects, such as house models, anthropomorphic vessels and miniature altarpieces in terms of similar practices. In doing so, she ontologically opposed the ‘technical’ gesture, as a way of doing something, with the notion of the ‘social’ gesture: an act as a gesture. In referring to symbolic processes of production, destruction and fragmentation, Bánffy argued that the process of material practice were meaningful gestures - be it of simple material destruction or perhaps material acts of remembrance. This issue of fragmentation was a recurring theme in the discussion but it was interesting that whilst a degree of craft or esoteric specialised knowledge is quite often assumed to be important in the manufacture and use of objects, a concern with who gets to break them was not addressed, and was instead left typically ambiguous, residing under the rubric of ‘ritual’ practice (cf. Insoll 2004).

The question of the representation of such prehistoric figurines as a source of evidence for gestural practices (e.g. Morris and Peatfield 2002) was perhaps inevitable. However, as a consequence of the limited repertoire of positions and poses that many of these figurines represent (predominantly with arms outstretched, by their sides, or flexed across the stomach), it was suggested that they were of limited value. No one raised the question however, of whether such anthropomorphic figures are in fact



Figure 1: Prehistoric figurines from Cyprus. Top to Bottom) Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age (not to scale).

representational of the human corporeal form and whether they therefore constitute a viable source of data regarding the study of gestures or the body to begin with.

For example, when we compare the anthropomorphic figurines from prehistoric Cyprus (Figure 1), it is clear that the figures from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic are quite different from those of the Bronze Age, and not just in form, style or complexity but rather in terms of what they may have stood for. Whilst the latter denote the performances of social, ritual and economic life (human-animal relations, agricultural, domestic and religious practices), their form, whilst simplistic, are more realistically representational in terms of signified practices (e.g. hunting). The former however, appear to be concerned almost entirely with the matter of being human – its form and function, birth and life – with the aesthetic of the figures being significantly stylised. As such, it might be argued that the predominantly absent representation of non-human animals during the Neolithic-Chalcolithic is very telling indeed, with the earlier figurines representing skeuomorphic artefacts concerned with what it meant to Be human – or what we might term a ‘material philosophy of Being’ – and are therefore wholly unsuitable, compared to the more literally representative figurines of the

Bronze Age, for studying such things as gestures (see Matthews manuscript).

Like Hawkes (1954) infamous ‘ladder of inference’, Bánffy argued that this was as a consequence that the further we go back in time the less archaeological evidence there is to draw upon to infer such practices as ‘gestures’. Although there has been a lack of social contextualisation of lithic practices in studies of the Palaeolithic (the exception being Gamble 1999), the use of the ‘chaîne opératoire’ to reconstruct the production sequences of individual stone tools (e.g. Schlanger 1996), demonstrates that this is clearly not the case. On the contrary, this author’s own initial research into the archaeological study of gesture was in fact centred upon the material culture of the Late Mesolithic Ertebølle tradition of southern Scandinavia (Matthews 2003).

The idea that we are somehow constrained by the archaeological record in terms of the resolution of certain social practices can be argued to represent an adherence to the notion that there exists an intrinsic objective reality to the world beyond what we perceive as a consequence of our own social and cultural biases. However, whilst archaeology would certainly appear to study material things, objects are only able to reveal themselves to us as a consequence of these historical conditioning, under which the construction of knowledge imposes certain ontological constraints upon an object, and thereby rendering it culturally intelligible as something, in this case ‘material culture’, and it can be argued that it is in fact these constraints that we study rather than the objects themselves (Figure 2).

Later in the afternoon, Ulf Ickerodt (Niedersächsisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Hannover, Germany) further explored this issue of the historical and cultural conditions for the construction of knowledge (cf. Thomas 1996a, 2004), and questioned whether these conditions can ever be overcome given that as a consequence of our own historical specificity we can’t ever possibly understand the meaning behind any particular gesture and therefore is there any point in wanting to know? However, Mark Pearce (Department of Archaeology, University of Nottingham, UK), clearly determined to play the role of agent provocateur, quite rightly pointed out “well, yes, I do want to know!”



Figure 2: Left) An 'object' without cultural constraints lacks any intelligibility - it does not reveal itself to us as meaningfully recognisable; Right) An object that discloses itself to us as recognisable, in the first place as a 'pot' and in the second place as a 'Beaker pot' is a constraining condition of allegorical consequence of the historical and cultural specificity related to the construction of knowledge about the world.

Perspectives: Context, place, space and landscape

Discussions of practices by people in the past in archaeology have traditionally centred upon place, site, structure or region. Archaeology requires context, a locale. Social action is discussed within the spaces that are formed by these contexts: the architecture of a tomb, the enclosed forum of a stone circle, the habitat of a domestic dwelling. The gesture, the instantiated act, however, is an act that has no site-specific context, it transcends locale. Its context is the moment, the event, the conjuncture of performance between person and person, or as an archaeological object of study, between persons and artefacts. One response to this has been the hybridisation of disciplinary boundaries that has emerged in a theatre/archaeology (Pearson and Thomas 1994; Pearson & Shanks 2001) and is highly relevant to discussions regarding archaeologies of gesture and of context, particularly the concept of second-order performance. The notion of a second-order performance is in 'making sense of what was never firm or certain' (Ibid: XVII)



Figure 3: Human-artefact-environment relationships constitute meaningful landscapes of social practice that relate to the performance of symbolic postures and comportments as people move through architecture and between places

However, Fay Stevens (Institute of Archaeology, University College London, UK) reminded us that gestures relate to more than just the interaction of persons and artefacts in the sense of small portable objects but that the landscapes, locations, places and architecture that constitute the world within which people dwell (Figure 3) all have a tremendous effect upon the way that people choreographed their movements (e.g. Richards 1993) and were experienced as meaningfully constituted places of special virtue (cf. Tilley 1994; Bradley 2000).

This point was highlighted by Dragos Gheorghiu (Centre of Research, National University of Arts in Bucharest) in his discussion of a South Eastern European Chalcolithic tell-settlement. Outside of France, the *chaîne opératoire* (see Schlanger

2005) has resolutely remained a functional perspective in archaeology, despite the emphasis upon the social and symbolic dimensions of ‘technological choices’ (cf. Lemonnier 1993). Gheorghiu however, goes further than just subverting this functional perspective of the chaîne opératoire, an approach that is usually utilised to discuss small-scale human-artefact relations in the manufacture of material culture, by instead applying it in his discussion of the additive and subtractive processes relating to the changing formation of a Tell settlement, and thereby questioning the normal notions of small-scale space-time relations relating to human technical gestures and material practices.

Modern technologies and ancient philosophies

Paul Bouissac (University of Toronto, Victoria College, Canada), in discussing his paper, demonstrated a concern for the origin and development of gestures and bodily communication in the evolution of hominids, and raised the issue of ‘new technologies’ and the possibility for virtual reconstructions of the muscular and skeletal capacity of ancient homo, such as Neanderthals. The human body itself can carry significant evidence of past practices effectively ‘inscribed’ onto the interior of the body, such as in skeletal traumas, and therein going beyond the usual association of material culture and bodily exteriors, allowing for the body in its own right to be considered ‘material culture’ (e.g. Steen & Lane 1998; Sofaer Forthcoming; see also Kirby 1997). A good example of this type of work can be found in Strassburg’s (1999) study of Late Mesolithic burials from Zealand, Denmark, who inferred social and material practices from skeletal evidence.

Studies of the human remains from these burials revealed a high degree of right lateralisation of female arms but which was not observed in male remains, suggesting that women had overused their right arms, having performed more repetitive and uniform actions than men. Studies of the legs, however, revealed an absence of sexual differentiation, possibly reflecting a situation where both sexes shared similar activity regimes regarding stance and locomotion, such as seasonal movement, hunting-and-gathering expeditions and paddling stances in dugout canoes that were participated in equally by both men and women.



Figure 3. A male burial from the Late Mesolithic cemetery at Vedbæk, Jutland, Denmark: note the position of the hands (Photo: Vedbaekfundene, Søllerød Museum, Denmark)

Conversely, the burial position of females suggests that they were associated with what Strassburg interprets as a ‘passive’ right hand and an ‘active’ left hand. This division is further emphasised by the almost exclusive internment of children and young adults against the right side of females. The opposite phenomenon is noted for male graves, with a ‘passive’ left hand, placed by their side, and an ‘active’ right hand, placed on top of the thigh (Figure 3). Strassburg argues that the pattern of male graves with the right hand ‘activated’ in the grave functioned as a form of symbolic compensation, therein balancing the social control that women may have exercised over children and young adults, as well as in the exclusive spheres of material practice in which women alone engaged.

Although Bouissac’s argument for the reconstruction and simulation of the bodily practices of earlier hominids met with resistance by some of the audience, he is correct in asserting the necessity of combining studies regarding the pre-conditions or Generative Principles for reconstructing object-orientated gestures, such as: the environmental affordances and constraints of the world upon both bodies and objects; the physical potentials of the human body, such as skeletal and muscular capacity; and the property-potentials of objects themselves. Many bodily gestures, such as head-nods, beckoning and pointing, are universal and can be found amongst societies throughout the world, as a consequence of the human body’s limited physiological

propensity to certain forms of movement. Linking observations such as these to human osteoarchaeological evidence and material practices provide important information regarding the sorts of limited variables that could contribute to simulating the corporeal habits of earlier hominids.

However, earlier in the session, whilst attempting to explain one particular theoretical framework for the study of gestures that drew upon the works of Marcel Mauss (1973), Andre Leroi-Gourhan (1993) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002), I also met with significant chastisement by one Swedish delegate, whom was clearly unhappy with this use of “obscure French philosophies”, and therein raised what I believe to be an important, but rarely explored, dilemma for archaeologists: new technologies and our relationships to them. Whilst archaeology continually, and quite often uncritically, embraces modern scientific technological apparatus, our technologies for thinking, for interpretation, might be argued to significantly lag behind (S. Koerner. pers. comm). The ‘thinking’ behind archaeological practice, or ‘theory’ as it is more commonly known (and quite often used as a derogatory term), is far less developed than more scientific processes in archaeological enquiry and yet consistently come under attack from these scientific or specialised quarters of the discipline for its unruly and radically subjective statements. Mistakenly, theory or Interpretative Archaeologies (see papers in Thomas 2000) are considered to be anti-science and therefore some individuals feel personally and professionally threatened, particularly as such theoretical discourse, although engaging only a minority of archaeologists compared to the number of excavators and other specialists, has come to dominate the published archaeological literature, with the number of mainstream theoretical or synthetic studies far outnumbering the publication of mainstream site reports or scientific manuals.

These post-processualist or Interpretative Archaeologies are viewed as attempting to construct reflexive or philosophical methodologies, and in this they have often been considered to have failed. But, in my view, this entirely misses the point: theory does not sit in opposition to science. Rather, post-processual archaeology’s success has been in revealing the historical and cultural specificity of science and objectivity, and in particular, archaeology’s relationship to social practice and historical contingency in the form of modernity (cf. Thomas 2004), with scientific procedures having been

revealed to be only one particular way of viewing the world, as opposed to an absolutist approach to the world.

It is interesting for this author that whilst we can embrace uncritically each and every new technological development that the modern world has to offer, we continue to feel increasingly threatened by the first science, philosophy, revealing a worrying situation where describing the world should be considered more important than thinking about the world. There is of course a moral and ethical imperative here also: where and how were such technologies developed? Whilst many, including myself, suffer serious doubts regarding the contribution of authors as Martin Heidegger (1962), and his relationship to National Socialism for instance, has made to contemporary archaeology (see Gosden et al. 1993; Thomas 1996a, 1996b), on the other hand it seems far too little consideration is given to how and why certain technologies are developed. For example, GPS has found significant use in archaeology, and GIS has become a rather overtly fashionable device for lending scientific legitimacy and authority to archaeological research in recent years, yet both of these technologies were developed in relation to military research and industry in the United States of America during the Cold War period. We have to ask ourselves whether our use of such technologies can ever truly ‘rescue’ them from what is without doubt a morally dubious industry or whether it does in fact render us complicit in their use and deployment in conflicts around the world. Clearly, the validity of technology and science within archaeology must be widely questioned, particularly upon a moral and ethical basis (Matthews Forthcoming b), particularly as the days of defending the myths of so-called scientific objectivity and political neutrality have been challenged for sometime (for a discussion of this in relation to archaeology see, for example, Ucko 1987).

Although it is true that the number of gestures the human body is capable of reproducing is limited due to its physiology. For example, Hewes (1957) has argued that the stable range of human postures may number perhaps only a thousand. However, whilst the number and range of these gestures may be limited by the medium of the human body, the ability of these gestures to impart meaning is not similarly restricted and is instead symbolically infinite.

Roles, structures and institutions

Moving beyond the micro-archaeological study of individual gestures, my own discussion was concerned with exploring the symbolic aspects of gestures in relation to what we might term the Generative Structures within which they would have operated in any given society. Admittedly influenced by social constructivist approaches to social phenomenon, my own research is concerned with the cultural and historical specificity of gestural practices. With regard to gestural phenomenon during the European Bronze Age, I attempted to explore the communicative aspect of technical gestures by discussing how they were socially and institutionally structured, for example, in the manufacture, use, disposal and deposition of bronze swords in relation to a particular social group: warriors. Rather than assuming any generalised notion of ‘gestures’, I have suggested that the study of technical gestures should focus instead upon their differentiation within and between specific social groups: for example, how age, gender and class, all contributed differently to the creation and maintenance of different forms of local and supra-regional identities during the Middle and Late Bronze Age in Europe (Matthews 2004).

My own approach does of course assume a considerable historical generalisation however: that, based upon historical and contemporary studies of bodily communication, gestures played an equally significant role in the prehistoric past. Whilst studies of contemporary and recent historical cultures have yielded a considerable wealth of information regarding the importance of non-verbal communication amongst Western societies (e.g. Efron 1941; Jorio 2000), the question of such practices not only mattering but even existing in the past is very much open to debate, and the argument that we are dealing with physically and cognitively modern human beings is no assurance that we can confirm that ‘gestures’ did indeed exist and matter in the past.

Frameworks: Normative & non-normative notions of ‘gesture’

A normative understanding of gestures, such as describing them as ‘body language’ presents the first challenge: is this the most productive conceptualisation of gestures, and if so, what are its consequences for their study archaeologically?

Accepting a normative or contemporary understanding of ‘gestures’ narrows the focus of the study of gestures to only one possible type of evidence: representational. From such media as illustrations, paintings and figurative representations we can see or observe our object of study: the gesture. Without such representation then a study of gestures is not possible.

However, problems with this approach include the assumption that a contemporary notion of the nature of what gestures are is in any way correct or useful. Furthermore, there is the question of whether what we are observing as being ‘represented’ is intended to actually be ‘observed’ as we understand the nature of ‘gestures’, ‘representation’ and ‘observation’. The issue there for is the historical conditions concerning the construction of knowledge: past societies may not have understood their bodies, their movements or their material mediums in the same way that we do today.

For example, returning to the subject of prehistoric figurines, some figures may indeed be considered to represent actual bodies or some form of observable exterior sense of the corporeal form, or in other words ‘figure = body’. Other figurines may have been representative of the idea of notion of the body and therefore may not represent an appropriate object of study in terms of these normative notions of gestures or representation.

A non-normative or critical approach to gestures assumes that the way that we understand gestures and our bodies is a product of the historical conditions regarding the construction of knowledge. By borrowing from other disciplines we ignore the historical conditions under which certain types of knowledge and concepts have been constructed by those disciplines, particularly within realms of economic and political conditioning and the maintenance of authority in terms of the legitimisation of science and truth within modernity. By accepting uncritically the ideas passed to us by other disciplines we implicitly support and worse contribute to the maintenance of certain

forms of knowledge and understanding that stand in a relationship with political and economic agendas that may be ethically and morally opposed to the conditions of archaeological research and science (see Matthews Forthcoming)

Therefore we must consider a non-normative approach to the notion of gestures that does not require modern senses of understanding or visual representation or in other words, we must consider a corporeal object of study in terms of that which we can not see nor witness, i.e. bodily gestures, in terms of the current conditions of the construction of archaeological knowledge, i.e. material culture. However, the relationship between material culture and gestures, has within archaeology a historicity regarding a normative notion of material culture and a relationship to gestures, or other wise known under these conditions as ‘technical gestures’.

Two things are required here: First is to consider the restrictive nature of ‘gestures’ under the agenda of other disciplines and to re-consider the nature of the relationship between traditional notions of bodily ‘gestures’ to other bodily practices such as technical gestures, behaviour, emotional dispositions, techniques of the body, etc. Second, is to consider the ontological nature of ‘material culture’ within the historical discipline of archaeology itself and third compatibility/incompatibility of material culture with the study of normative/non-normative understandings of ‘gestures’.

Conclusion

With the afternoon drawing to a close the discussion ended with a single question, presented by Laurent Olivier (Conservateur du département des Âges du Fer, Musée des Antiquités nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France), that was directed toward the two organisers of the session: “why an ‘archaeology’ of gestures?”

In terms of an answer, it is interesting to note that the position papers produced by the session organisers, Paul Bouissac and myself, both of which have only briefly been described above, demonstrate two quite divergent approaches to the study of gestures. Are these apparently opposing approaches compatible or do we need to consider them more in terms of a theoretical ‘toolbox’, whereby the right approach fits particular

contexts, materials and research questions? I would argue that it is the latter case, but with both types of approach feeding into and contributing to one another. Bouissac argues that the social and symbolic aspects of gestures are significant, and elsewhere (Matthews 2003) I have developed arguments regarding bodily communication in relation to human skeletal evidence within a social constructivist perspective. These ‘complementary’ differences might best be described as a differentiation between Bouissac’s concern with the identification of the constraining properties of environment, materials and body, or what I have termed Structuring Principles, with regards to the reconstruction of gestures, and my own concern with the social and cultural affordances related to the construction of symbolic meanings, or Generative Structures, for the interpretation of gestures, and therefore representing quite distinct, but not necessarily conflicting, ontological positions.

In this authors view, the answer to Olivier’s question is no, we don’t need an ‘archaeology’ of gestures as to form yet another sub-discipline or specialisation. However, should archaeology be concerned with gestures? Yes, most definitely. In this brief review I have tried to explore two critical themes that I consider to be prerequisites in developing an archaeological approach to the study of gestures: the nature of material culture and of gestures. At the heart of any new idea or approach, such as the study of gestures, lies the question of disciplinary boundaries and objects of study. In order to be able to study gestures we must first rethink what gestures are and what archaeology’s primary object of study, material culture, is.

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