

*Archaeological Theory***The Quest for Modern Human Behavior: Breaking a Stalemate**

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The Archaeology of Identities: A Reader (2006) TIMOTHY INSOLL, Editor. Routledge, New York, 347 pp., \$37.95 paper. ISBN 978-0-415-41502-6.

Archaeological Semiotics (2006) ROBERT W. PREUCEL. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, U.K., 352 pp., 45 illus., \$93.95 cloth. ISBN 1-5578-6657-0.

A few years ago, I published an article in this periodical wherein I considered some of the literature revealing diametrically opposed views concerning the emergence of “modern”¹ behavior as it relates to the study of modern human origins, aka MHO (Bower 2004). I believe that anyone who has kept an eye on MHO research over the past four years would agree that there has been little, if any, progress toward resolving the contradictions described in my earlier article. So, in the spirit of “rushing in where angels fear to tread,” I have chosen to review a body of literature whose core concepts and insights seemed capable of helping to break the stalemate. But, before leading the reader on, I hasten to note that the outcome is frankly more speculative than substantive, more tentative than conclusive. This is essentially an exploratory piece, *ergo, caveat emptor!*

By way of setting the stage for what follows, let me briefly reprise the issues addressed in my earlier article (Bower 2004). From one point of view, the emergence of “modern” human behavior can be traced to at least as far back in time as the origin of modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) around 200 KA, if not substantially earlier (cf. McBrearty and Brooks 2000). We can call this the “early emergence” model. From the opposing perspective, the “late emergence” model, “modern” behavior is not archaeologically manifested until about 40 KA, broadly coinciding with the replacement of Middle Stone Age/Middle Palaeolithic cultures by those grouped in the Later Stone Age/Upper Palaeolithic (Klein 2002). The “early emergence” model admits the possibility that the origin of “modern” behavior is linked to the origin of *H. sapiens*, while the “late emergence” model

uncouples the origin of “modern” behavior from the origin of the modern human species. The two models also differ radically with respect to the packaging of evidence for “modernity,” such that in the “early emergence” model various indications of “modern” behavior are scattered over a time span from 200 KA to 40 KA, while the evidence for “modernity” in the “late emergence” model is tightly packaged, appearing more or less simultaneously around 40 KA.

In part, the differences between the two models stem from differing lines of evidence, as well as differing criteria for “modernity”. For example, the “late emergence” model draws heavily on evidence of human predatory competence, while the “early emergence” model inclines more toward indications of technological and symbolic capabilities. Such differences point to what I regard as a major problem in searching for the dawn of “modernity,” namely, the amorphous, basically undefined character of the goal (Bower, in press). In the absence of a clear research objective, the quest for “modernity” has given rise to something resembling a dialogue of the deaf. Simply put, one cannot compare, let alone evaluate, scenarios for the emergence of “modern” behavior without first defining what constitutes “modernity.”

There is, to be sure, a variety of notions on the subject, but most are problematic and none can be said to have become established as a widely accepted definition of “modernity.” However, most reflect a shared sense, sometimes explicitly stated, that “modernity” is basically underwritten by advanced mental competence. And some, a smaller number, point toward culture in the anthropological sense as a defining expression of behavioral “modernity.” But, overall the quest for “modern” behavior seems to rest on a pervasive sense that its definition is intuitively obvious, thereby exempt from formal consideration. In a mildly bizarre way, this “we’ll know it when we see it” frame of mind has been retroflected on MHO research, to wit: “The archaeological record does not always reflect people’s behavioral capacities. However, this is the only source of real information about modernity, for we contend that ‘*human populations are modern when they behave in modern ways, no matter what they look like*’” (Wolpoff and Caspari 1997:445, italics added). What a tangled web is here confectioned, though surely

not deceitfully intentioned!

Returning to the issue broached at the outset, I suggest that the establishment of a workable² definition of modernity will not only help resolve the stalemate in question, but also point the way toward related, though as yet unexplored, areas of inquiry that offer possibilities for greatly expanding and deepening the contribution of MHO research to our understanding of the human condition.

To my sense, a workable definition in the context at hand is one that meets two basic criteria: (1) it reflects a strong anthropological consensus regarding an essential aspect of the behavior of living humans and (2) it is archaeologically accessible, being expressed in the form of durable material remains. With these criteria in mind, it may be possible to construct a definition of behavioral “modernity” that is substantial enough to occupy a more or less determinate spatiotemporal position. And the discovery of its location in space and time should open the door to investigating the causes and consequences of “modernity’s” emergence, an evolutionary development that is of comparable importance with such landmarks in prehistory as the rise of bipedalism, lithic technology, and food production.

As previously noted, the prevailing criteria for behavioral “modernity” generally fall into two, non-mutually exclusive categories, one relating to mental competence and the other to the practise of culture. I have elsewhere commented extensively on the mental criteria (Bower 2004; in press) and will not repeat my detailed critique here. Suffice it to say that, in general, the proposed benchmarks for mental “modernity” are not workably defined in the sense proposed a paragraph ago. Apart from this, it seems to me that, for reasons to be developed anon, a criterion for “modernity” should include some reference to the social dimension of human existence (cf. Renfrew 1984:39–44). As will presently be discussed, this dimension certainly entails a crucial element of mental acuity. But the social dimension has its own ontological status whose properties give rise to aspects of “modernity” that leave a substantial imprint on the archaeological record. And I suggest that these aspects of “modernity” have precipitated a major inflection point in the human career.

Earlier in this paper, I have referred to culture

“in the anthropological sense.” To specify somewhat, with all due respect to the plethora of definitions that have been proposed (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952), I am basically comfortable (*mutatis mutandis*) with Tylor’s (1871) articulation of the concept as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man *as a member of society*” (italics added). But it needs to be emphasized that this definition refers to *living* people and therefore admits the possibility that the behavior of early prehistoric humans may have included an attenuated version of culture, what could be called protoculture, distinguished in part by the absence of “society” as seen in the true culture of living populations, while still exhibiting some of the characteristics of true culture, such as the social transmission of knowledge. Thus, for example, one can imagine a repertoire of protocultural behavior that includes some form of language, which is a quintessentially symbolic practise, but lacks any form of social organization resembling what we would recognize as “society” (cf. Müller-Beck and Porr 2004).

From such an incremental perspective on cultural emergence, there comes into view a way of breaking the stalemate described at the outset of this article. Few would deny that the behavioral record of Later Stone Age/Upper Palaeolithic times is closely comparable with the kinds of behavior observed in living hunting-gathering societies (Klein 2002:8). In other words, the “late emergence” model is focused on a point in the human career that clearly reflects true culture, but not necessarily its earliest expression. Thus, the issue confronted by the “early emergence” model can be recast as a quest for the earliest conclusive evidence for true culture, a quest that hinges mainly on evidence of *socially* mediated behavior. The stalemate between the “early emergence” and “late emergence” models has been resolved as a result of refocusing the search for the origins of “modern” behavior on its social dimension, thereby admitting the possibility of a third model we could label “in between emergence.”

All well and good, but a major question remains unanswered, namely, what kinds of archaeological evidence can attest to socially mediated behavior? Indeed, how can we define

socially mediated behavior in archaeologically workable terms? Such questions provided the motivation for my review of the works listed at the top of this article, the rationale for which needs to be exposed. (There is a long version of this, which I will here condense into its points of articulation between socially mediated behavior and the archaeological record.) Drawing mainly on the literature of psychology and social psychology (e.g., Mead 1934; Ashmore and Jussim 1997), it seems clear that human society is fundamentally rooted in two kinds of identity, one stemming from self awareness and the other from group awareness. As summarized in Ashmore and Jussim (1997:12), "At the most inclusive level, self and identity figure in the production and reproduction of societies and cultures." Thus, it can be suggested that archaeological confirmation of such awareness would constitute convincing evidence of socially mediated behavior and therefore the existence of true culture.

To my knowledge, there are few prehistoric artifact types that are routinely accepted as incontrovertible evidence of self and/or group awareness, and most are substantially younger than the time frame under consideration. However, various kinds of decoration, including beads and pendants, have been represented in archaeological discourse *as if* they were a material expression of identity; in effect, symbols for personal and/or group identity (Bower 2004; in press; Hodder 1982). Since this notion clearly involves semiotic concepts, I turned to Preucel's (2006) publication in hopes of discovering an approach to testing the presumed symbolic relationship, an approach which circumvents Binford's (1987:402) critique of the assumption that "all artifacts...are direct semiotic evidence,...[presenting] themselves as clues to the intellectual determinants of the ancients' behavior." In this case, we are concerned only with assessing the possibility that a specific kind of artifact may yield credible evidence of its role in mediating prehistoric human social behavior. While Preucel's book has proven edifying, covering a wide variety of topics that range from linguistics through pragmatic anthropology to cognitive archaeology, interweaving relevant aspects of semiotics along the way, it has failed to yield the hoped-for method of demonstrating the manner and extent to which prehistoric

body decoration is a material expression of identity. Perhaps Preucel's most illuminating observation on the subject is to be found under the heading "Reading Material Culture" (pp. 135-137), in which he notes Hodder's (1987) conclusion that "most semiotic analyses provide an inadequate base for understanding both meaning content and the relationships between signs and the world of material action."

Clearly, we have reached a dead end in this direction. However, before embarking on a different tack, I would like to enlarge on what I had hoped to obtain from Preucel's study of archaeological semiotics. If one considers the semiotic role of body decoration in the modern world—say, for example, in football uniforms—the link between symbol and identity is perfectly clear to those who know anything about the sport. Not only does the design of the uniform identify the player's team membership, but the numerals on the jersey also identify within broad limits the player's role on the team, since lower numbers are generally identified with ball handlers (backs and receivers) while higher numbers are commonly identified with those who protect or tackle the ball handlers. Thus it can be said that a player's "body decoration" (i.e., uniform) is semiotic evidence of that individual's identity in the world of football, but *only for those who are familiar with the sport*. For all others, the semiotic evidence is non-existent, barring information from a knowledgeable source. Since Preucel failed to serve as a "knowledgeable source" with respect to the kind of semiotic problem with which I am concerned, I am left with an *inference* regarding the relationship between prehistoric human body decoration and the identity of the wearer, but no conclusive *evidence* to that effect.

So I conclude this paper with a look at the volume edited by Timothy Insoll on "The Archaeology of Identities" in hopes of finding what was not available in Preucel's book. As readers on archaeology go, this one contains a highly varied and interesting assemblage of papers, ranging across such titles as *The Politics of Identity in Archaeology*; *The Constitution of Archaeological Evidence: Gender Politics and Science*; *Beyond Mother Earth and Father Sky: Sex and Gender in Ancient Southwestern Visual Arts and Ethnography*; *Archaeology's Humanism and the Materiality of the Body*;

and Changing Identities in the Arabian Gulf: Archaeology, Religion and Ethnicity in Context. Included in this diverse collection of seventeen previously published articles, plus an extensive introduction, are numerous insightful comments on archaeology's contribution (or potential contribution) to such identity related issues as ethnicity, interethnic tensions and animosities, territorial claims, and multiple, overlapping identities, to name but a few. In short, Insoll's reader is a highly useful exploration of the place of identity in archaeological research. Moreover, Insoll's introductory chapter (Configuring Identities in Archaeology) confirmed not only the central role of sociology and anthropology in developing theories of identity, but also the urgency of such inquiry in the world today and the opportunity this opens for archaeology to produce work of contemporary relevance. It is also worth noting that this chapter includes an explicit recognition of the problem of self identification, to wit: "The archaeology of identities is essentially concerned with the complex process of attempting to recover an insight into the generation of self at a variety of levels: as an individual, within a community, and in public and private contexts" (p. 14).

Upon reading this passage, I experienced a surge of optimism regarding the prospects of finding a path toward the discovery of a form, or forms, of evidence that could clinch a connection between prehistoric body decoration and self/social identity. However, the optimism soon faded as I read the opening lines of the chapter's last paragraph: "Finally, for the archaeologist of the future, new challenges seemingly await. Material culture is emblematic of identities..., but *we do not want to simplify what are undoubtedly complex processes of identity manifestation and interrelations*" (p. 15). To its credit, the book certainly does not simplify "complex processes of identity manifestation and interrelations." Nor does it point the way toward the path I sought therein.

So, as promised in my introductory paragraph, I arrive at my inconclusive conclusion. But, however, discouraging as this may seem, let me hasten to proclaim my continuing commitment to the proposition that the rise of true culture at some as yet undetermined point in late palaeolithic time depended on human self awareness and the resulting emergence of

human society. And I remain committed to the possibility of discovering a line of archaeological evidence that will demonstrate a link between material culture and self/social identity. □

FOOTNOTES:

1. I put "modern" in quotation marks to indicate that the adjective is used in a special sense, referring to the broad behavioral competence of living humans, not their actual forms of behavior (such as bottle feeding infants or studying for diplomas).

2. I distinguish between working and workable definitions, the former being tentative and provisional, the latter being convincingly and purposefully linked to a particular conceptual framework.

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