

# 16 On the archaeology of choice

## Agency studies as a research stratagem

*Elizabeth M. Brumfiel*

The papers in this volume cover the length and breadth of human history. They examine archaeological contexts from the Palaeolithic and Neolithic of the Old World to Precolumbian America, Renaissance England, and nineteenth-century America. What could this miscellany of archaeological cases share in common? Very little, except to provide evidence that agent-centered perspectives have much to offer archaeology.

### **The nature of agency**

The contributors to this volume share an impressive core of agreement concerning the nature of agency. They all agree that agency refers to the intentional choices made by men and women as they take action to realize their goals. All would agree that these actors are socially constituted beings who are embedded in sociocultural and ecological surroundings that both define their goals and constrain their actions. All would agree that a dynamic interaction exists between actors and structures: actors are rooted in social and ecological contexts, and these contexts are transformed by the actions of individuals (although not always in the ways that the individuals intended). All the contributors share the conviction that archaeological accounts that recognize structurally-constrained human agency are better than those that do not.

However, this cheerful unanimity quickly dissolves in the effort to define the agents who peopled the archaeological past. Did these agents work toward goals that are in some way cross-culturally predictable, or were their goals defined by unique culturally and historically specific logics and values? A majority of the contributors (Wobst, Joyce, Clark, Pauketat, Walker and Lucero, Sassaman, and Shackel) argue the former case. These contributors share a Marxist sense that the goals of individuals in a given society are defined (in Cowgill's words) by "socially constructed interests," that is, goals that are determined by the position that individuals occupy within the social structure. Struggles over power and resources generate efforts to dominate or resist, compete or seek allies, exclude or include, accommodate or deceive. In this view, societies with similar social structures generate similar types of tensions, creating similar goals for actors who occupy analogous social positions. This view highlights struggles between groups of social actors as an important source for social change. No account of the past would be complete without an analysis of these struggles and how they were negotiated by individuals operating within their particular ecological and social circumstances.

A smaller group of contributors (Gero, Cowgill, Barrett, Chapman, Sinclair, and Johnson) argue for actors whose subjectivity is unique to their cultural and historical moments. These contributors argue that goals are determined not just by socially

constructed interests, but also by deeply embedded cultural values, commitments, and "projects" (to use Ortner's 1984 term). Agents design strategy according to culturally specific patterns of cognition, logic, and meaning that shape the actor's understanding of reality. Particularly influential in determining agency is the actor's sense of identity, that is, the actor's ideas about what kind of person he or she is and how people like that ought to act. In this view, there is no assurance that people will pursue their interests in any predictable way since actors with different subjectivities will have different responses, even when confronted with identical circumstances.

In contrast to the other contributors, Hodder argues that studies of agency should focus on the individual. He is critical of studies of embodiment and practice (such as those presented by Chapman and Sinclair) because they omit consideration of individual lives. Hodder argues that individuals are important to archaeologists for three reasons. First, structure and system are never fully determinative of choice; second, in the absence of the individual as a unit of analysis, all variability must be dismissed as "noise" as opposed to the "situated construction of difference;" and third, the contradictions and conflicts generated by structure are worked out at the level of the individual.

Hodder's emphasis on the individual is provocative, opposed both to postmodern efforts to deconstruct the individual (see Dobres and Robb, Gero; also Johnson 1989) and to archaeological pronouncements that individuals cannot or should not be the focus of archaeological research (Cowgill, Sassaman). However, the fine chronologies that archaeologists now employ means that they can, in fact, identify the projects of individual leaders (Clark, Walker and Lucero), and in historic archaeology particular structures can often be linked to individuals (Johnson; also Leone 1984). In Hodder's own analysis, individuals are firmly rooted in structures and, in the case of the Ice Man, yield an effective archaeological narrative. In this analysis, Hodder recounts the structural circumstances that would have made decisions to undertake solitary journeys into the Italian Alps fairly common, which in the Ice Man's case resulted in death.

### Research agendas

These contrasting conceptions of social actors highlight quite different problems for archaeological research. For those who see actors' goals as determined by socially constructed interests, much is already given. Presented with evidence of social inequality, these archaeologists are likely to presume the existence of competition within the emerging dominant group and struggle between dominant and subordinate strata. Consequently, the most pressing questions for these archaeologists concern strategy: how did some actors accumulate power while others tried to resist their efforts (Joyce, Clark, Walker and Lucero, and Shackel)?

However, Sassaman, Wobst, and Pauketat pose some other types of research questions that emerge from this Marxist, internal-conflict perspective. One such question deals with the identification of social cleavages other than class. While emerging rank and class inequality leave fairly obvious hallmarks in the archaeological record, other forms of social division do not. These other divisions (age, gender, ethnicity, lineage, locality) are sometimes important components of the social field within which agents operate. Sassaman's approach highlights technological variation and change. Observing that humans use material culture to define the boundaries of social groups, Sassaman suggests that the adoption of new technologies and styles define emerging cleavages in past societies. Similarly, Wobst suggests that artifact style is used to promote group unity in the presence

of internal contest and unresolved stress. Thus, the degree of stylistic elaboration signals the intensity of conflict within the group. Other efforts to empirically determine social groups and interests include Saitta's (1994) focus on the extraction and use of surplus and Ensor's (in press) discussion of the mode of production.

Pauketat argues that social change comes not just from competition and conflict but also from the rare occasions when the interests of opposing groups coincide. Such a coincidence of interests produces only temporary cooperation, but it permits the realization of large-scale projects with unanticipated and irreversible outcomes. For example, Pauketat suggests that Mississippian mound-building was a joint consequence of leaders' search for power and commoners' efforts to create meaning, order, and identity through mound construction. Mound-building forged the otherwise divergent interests of leaders and followers into a stable social structure.

For those who see agents as deeply embedded in unique cultural circumstances, the research agenda focuses on developing methods to recover unique cultural definitions of identity. Chapman suggests that culturally specific identities might be defined in the dimensions of variation in burial programs that distinguish men and women, different age groups, members of different families, and so forth. (Joyce (in press) also considers how burial programs permit the definition of culturally significant criteria of social identity). Sinclair uses the skills and character traits required to produce specific types of artifacts to reconstruct the social values of the tool-makers (Keightly (1987) makes a similar effort for Shang-period pottery). Johnson inspects changes in architectural form to document the emergence of a new social identity, a "new" man, in Renaissance England.

### The theoretical importance of agency studies

What does the study of agency contribute to our understanding of traditional problems in sociocultural evolution, and what new perspectives on the past does it introduce?

At a minimum, an agent-centered perspective provides an argument for the internal origins of at least some social change. In older, processual views of cultural evolution, cultures responded (adaptively) to stresses brought about by external forces such as climatic change or population growth. An agency perspective argues, however, that the impetus for at least some social changes was the desire of men and women to realize their (socially-determined) goals. Furthermore, an agency perspective argues that the timing of cultural change may be determined by evolving social circumstances rather than ecological conditions.

Beyond that, an agency perspective on individual lives reveals much about how social change occurs. In the manner of Hodder's Ice Man narrative and Johnson's description of Robert Dudley, we can ask how particular individuals embodied existing social trends and contradictions, and how the contradictions were worked out at the level of the individual and the event. Why did these individuals produce changes while others did not? Did they occupy unique positions within the social structure that posed unique problems or opportunities for them as social actors? Did evolving circumstances in other social spheres present them with access to resources that others lacked, and if so, how did these resources alter the processes of social reproduction? Did these individuals set forth new ideologies; if so, whose loyalties were influenced? Did they create new social institutions and, and if they did, how did the redistribution of social roles and resources affect the existing balance of power?

Beyond explaining social change, agent-centered analyses can add texture to descriptive narratives of the past. Agent-centered analyses incorporate all the variables that have

entered into archaeology's grand narratives, but an agent-centered account encourages archaeologists to examine how these variables affected different categories of people. Rather than generalizing about the effects on the population as a whole, an agent-centered analysis could examine the range of consequences that a single variable might produce for individuals differently positioned within the social system. For example, warfare could result in death for one individual, in glory for a second, in the profits from the arms trade for a third, and in the loss of household labor for a fourth. An agent-centered analysis can examine the long-term changes in resource use and social structure that result from the consequences experienced by these different actors. Thus, agent-centered archaeology can provide more nuanced and varied understandings of events and processes.

Agent-centered analyses also promote the study of cross-cultural variation in social institutions and practices. For example, in this volume, Joyce explores how the power of rulers in Formative Oaxaca rested upon local notions of reciprocity and sacrifice between humans and their gods. These particular ideas provided both opportunities for rulers seeking to enhance their power and constraints impinging on their actions. Elsewhere, Gillespie (1999) attempts to reconstruct the prehistoric Olmec rulers' notions of "power" and "agent" through the analysis of two classes of material culture, colossal stone heads and massive stone altars. She also suggests how these concepts might have influenced the way that social inequality was perceived by Olmec subjects and how Olmec rulers and subjects negotiated the issue of social inequality.

Agent-centered archaeologists might also want to go beyond questions of power. As Gero and Paukert observe, power is not the only prize capable of generating social transformation. Other projects can inspire collective action and irreversible change. Potentially, the exploration of other types of cultural "games" (see Holland 1998; Ortner 1996) would provide new narratives for archaeology beyond the well-told stories of human evolution, ecological adaptation, and evolving political hierarchy.

Finally, an agent-centered archaeology can supply new perspectives on our own lives. To the extent that archaeologists can recover the experiences, values, and commitments of past populations, they can broaden our conceptions of "the meaning of things." For example, the meaning of warfare is defined both by its practical consequences and by its place within a framework of cultural values and associations (retribution, masculinity, etc.). Today, the point of much of cultural anthropology (and much public archaeology) is to provide critical self-reflection upon our own assumptions and values by examining the assumptions, values, and experiences of others. As archaeologists become more expert at reconstructing the situations faced by humans in the past, they can participate more fully in critical examinations of the present (Leone *et al.* 1987; Wilkie and Bartoy in press).

### *The methodological importance of agency studies*

In the history of archaeology, new theoretical approaches have frequently increased the range of data brought into analysis. For example, the cultural reconstruction approaches of the 1940s and 1950s stimulated interest in the functional and technical attributes of artifacts as well as the stylistic attributes previously analyzed by time-space systemists. The New Archaeology introduced the chemical analysis of raw materials and artifact residues. Post-processual archaeology enhanced our appreciation of archaeological context. Agency theory encourages its own expansion of what is relevant in the archaeological record.

The contributors to this volume emphasize the importance of context and variation in asking about agency. Wobst points out that context can define the social frame (i.e., the

social situation) in which artifact use occurred. Context provides clues to the social identities of artifact makers and users, the messages and claims involved in artifact manufacture or use, and the likely audience for these messages. Walker and Lucero show that an analysis of context enables archaeologists to reconstruct the "life history" of an artifact or structure, which in turn helps to define how the artifact or structure was used and the purposes of the agent(s) who made and used it.

Variation in the archaeological record is very important to an agent-centered analysis. In processual or structural archaeologies, certain kinds of variation, such as the differences among artifacts assigned to the same "type" or the unique attributes of burials or structures, have been treated as "noise." Such variation was not considered suitable for analysis; on the contrary, it was regarded as hindering the definition of culturally meaningful patterns. In contrast, agent-centered approaches are founded on the premise of social heterogeneity, which can only be identified through variation in material culture. Therefore, agent-centered archaeologists are predisposed to seek out variation and to explore its meaning.

As Shackel observes, variation indicates the existence of viable choices for individual actors, or "the ability to have done otherwise," to quote Clark. Because variation implies choice, Shackel can use variation or difference in the ceramics of managers and their workers to suggest that some factory workers chose not to embrace the cultural practices of the industrial order (for other examples of resistance defined through contrasts in material culture, see Brumfiel 1996; Ferguson 1991). The presumption of choice also grounds Sassaman's argument that technological and stylistic variation between contemporaneous groups is evidence of ethnic diversity as a strategic choice made by social actors (also see Barth 1969; Schortman and Nakamura 1991).

Variation also enables archaeologists to gauge of the degree of social conformity demanded by past societies, as observed by Wobst and Chapman (also Dobres 1995). Low coefficients of variation would imply strict adherence to social norms; high coefficients of variation would imply a more relaxed social atmosphere.

### *The study of agency in archaeology: problems and prospects*

While the prospects for an agent-centered archaeology are encouraging, agent-centered studies must be strengthened in two ways. First, they must confront the issue of ethnocentrism, and second, they must concentrate on presenting strongly supported arguments.

Gero raises the issue of ethnocentrism in a critique that goes unanswered by the other contributors. Particularly in studies of political development that postulate the existence of political aggrandizers (e.g., Clark and Blake 1994; Flannery 1999; Hayden 1995), the agents of cultural change are assumed to have qualities that are remarkably masculinist (Gero) and capitalist (Saitta, personal communication 1993) in nature. Agents are portrayed as opportunistic, innovative, self-interested, decisive, and assertive. It is true that political leaders often possess these qualities. As Earle (1987: 294) observes, political leadership is an inherently competitive, pragmatic process that may require a maximizing strategy. However, more corporate leadership strategies are certainly conceivable (Blanton *et al.* 1996; Gillespie 1999). Given this possibility, the presence of aggrandizers in the archaeological record should be demonstrated rather than assumed.

The trap of ethnocentrism is not solely of concern to those who focus on political competition; it is a danger even to those who attempt to recover the culturally-specific values, commitments, and projects of prehistoric agents. For example, Sinclair suggests a link between the techniques of biface manufacture in Solutrean culture and the



(re)creation of qualities that were particularly valued in Solutrean hunters: perseverance, boldness, and adaptability. Who was endowed with these characteristics? Given the evidence for game drives at the type site of Solutré, and given the ethnographically-known foraging societies where both men and women participate in game drives, we might expect Sinclair to conclude that these qualities were admired in both men and women. Thus, Sinclair's declaration that a separation existed between hunting and other non-hunting activities comes as a surprise. It seems to reserve the valued qualities of Solutrean hunters for men only, an unfounded inference but one that conforms to our own association of hunting and men.

Agent-centered analyses seem as vulnerable as other modes of archaeological interpretation to the projection of our own values onto past societies. Although an emphasis upon the embeddedness of agents in their sociocultural and ecological surroundings should prevent this sort of thing, it apparently does not. And agency theorists have simply not responded to this critique when it has been levelled at their work. However, as alternative models of cultural change are developed, models that ascribe different cultural principles to past actors (corporate models of state formation, for example), archaeologists continuing to employ ethnocentric assumptions will be forced to defend these assumptions. It will be an interesting discussion.

Agency theorists must also concentrate on presenting strongly supported arguments. Several presentations in this volume are intriguing, but not totally compelling. For example, more than any other contributor, Joyce embeds the stratagems of emerging leaders in Oaxaca in culturally specific commitments, in this case, the covenant of interdependence between the people and their deities. But his model would be stronger if he could show that the idea of the covenant motivated leaders as well as being used by them to attain more wealth and power. Why would leaders be any more cynical about this idea that commoners were? Likewise, Pauketat might supply more details on how Mississippian commoners found meaning, order, and identity through mound construction. Walker and Lucero successfully demonstrate that ritual activity was removed from the household to special facilities in the Southwest, but in the Maya area, ritual activity continues in households even after elites introduce more elaborate forms. How, then, did Maya leaders appropriate traditional rituals to perform "social alchemy" and promote "collective misrecognition"? Shackel's argument for resistance in nineteenth-century America would benefit from a conclusive demonstration that workers' adoption of unfashionable cream wares was not forced upon them by poverty.

Sinclair's analysis of technology offers a promising methodology for exploring what Cowgill calls palaeopsychology; however, this method needs to be verified through ethnographic testing. Does an inspection of the technologies of ethnographically known peoples actually demonstrate that culturally-valued skills and character traits can be read from production techniques of material culture?

Agent-centered archaeology clearly has its work cut out for it. But the diversity and originality of the analyses collected in this volume suggest that agency studies have made and will continue to make important theoretical and methodological contributions to archaeology. Agent-centered archaeology expands the questions we ask about the past and the data we use to try to answer these questions.

Humans, because of their intelligence, are able to contemplate a wide array of variables as they decide what to do next. But even with their expanded awareness, humans are often at a loss as they contemplate their options. Information is never complete, optimal strategies are rarely evident, moral choices are often ambiguous, and discursive spaces are

difficult to find. Perhaps because agent-centered studies attempt to fit all of the complexities of daily life into their frame of analysis, they can render past actors more believable and supply accounts of the past that are more true, relevant, and interesting than studies where humans are the passive victims of dumb luck or circumstance.

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