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CONTENTS PAGES

retrospect

The first fact: discourses of "culture" in anglophone archaeology

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This paper is a very small contribution to the project of giving medieval archaeology something that should be the prerequisite for any empirical science: a theoretically clear, rigorous and explicit intellectual base. Such a project has been underway for some time now, certainly since the development of New Archaeology in the 1960s and 70s, and the application of the ideas of New Archaeology and then postprocessual archaeology to medieval topics in subsequent decades. However, in the view of this author, it is equally true that this theoretical project has only been partially successful. In this paper, I probe some of the reasons for the partial and incomplete nature of this achievement.

I take it as a given that if it is to be a responsible and rigorous human science, then medieval archaeology has to have a responsible and rigorous theoretical foundation. Such a foundation cannot simply be assigned to categories of common sense, what is self-evident or obvious reasoning, though these categories are often appealed to in rhetorical rejections of what is [mis]characterized by opponents as abstract theory (as discussed in Johnson 2010, Chapter 1). Throughout their historical development, the natural and human sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, economics, sociology, history etc.) have had a consistent record of advancing not through common-sense acceptance of the obvious, but rather through the questioning of what appeared to contemporaries as

obvious or what everybody knows, the interrogation of what was previously regarded as common sense.

In the past, polemics and position statements on the place of theory in medieval archaeology have addressed a number of different topics. These topics have included the alleged disciplinary subordination of archaeology to history (Austin 1990; Moreland: Johnson 2007, pp. 81-113), histories of particular institutions and the place of medieval archaeology within them (Gerrard 2003), or more or less comparative accounts of different regional and national traditions (Diaz-Andreu 2013).

In this paper, I will take a different analytical lens: I attempt to get to grips with the intellectual issues involved by looking at the development of the concept of *culture*, both as an analytical term and in terms of its popular usage and currency. For such a small and apparently innocuous word, culture carries an enormous intellectual baggage and conceptual freight. As we shall see, the ambiguities and resonances in the term are legion. In some ways, the history of the word "culture" and the way its meanings have evolved and been deployed is a microcosm of the development of the humanities and human sciences as a whole.

Before embarking on this task, I must be clear in the limits and qualifications to this paper. I will be discussing the archaeology of the High and Late Middle Ages, c. AD 1000-1550, and making little reference to the earlier Middle Ages. Early medieval archaeology has followed a different (and, arguably, more fruitful) intellectual trajectory which I will make reference to in passing but not explore in depth. Second, my comparison is principally between two Anglophone contexts, that is theory and practice in North America on the one hand and the British Isles on the other. Again, I will make reference to wider European contexts, and it is also important to include consideration of medieval traditions in other contexts around the world such as Africa and Asia (Insoll 1999; Sinopoli 2003); but it is beyond the scope of this short paper to engage in a comparative study of different European national traditions or to explore other areas of Europe in depth.

1. Boasian anthropology and the definition of culture

The word "culture" has a long and complex history that has been charted in depth by the cultural critic Raymond Williams, who writes that it "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to

be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and several distinct and incompatible systems of thought" (1983, p. 87). There is only space here to deal with a very few elements of this history. I will start with the anthropological conception of culture as it developed in 19th and early 20th century North America.

In North America, the discipline of anthropology developed in the course of the 19th century around the central and empirical project of the study of the American Indian. The field was defined, in part, through the practical arrangements of this study. Scholars approached the study of the American Indian through physical and biological makeup (biological anthropology), analysis of cultural beliefs and practices (cultural anthropology), the study of languages (linguistic anthropology) — and their past (archaeology). This conceptual division into four subfields of the discipline came to be configured and known as the "four-field approach".

The intellectual ancestry of the four-field approach to culture is complex: it can be traced back to the German philosopher Herder, via the 19th century anthropologist Tylor and also via the German training and background of Franz Boas. Dan Hicks has traced an alternative history of the four-field approach, going back to the British ethnographers and museum curators Pitt-Rivers, Haddon and others; there was certainly ongoing communication between British and North American anthropologists, and Hicks' observation that the four-field configuration arose in part from the problems of classifying and presenting collections of material in museums is also true (Hicks 2013).

However it emerged, histories of North American anthropology rightly emphasize that aspects of this four-field approach in its form at the end of the 19th century, as seen through the lens of the early 21st century, were highly problematic. The American Indian was treated as a passive object of study by an overwhelmingly white Academy; part of the rationale of the study of the American Indian was articulated in terms of being a vanishing or soon-to-be-extinct grouping or way of life, whose features needed to be recorded before what was implicitly or explicitly seen as their inevitable disappearance. By consigning study of the past to archaeology, the past of the American Indian tended to be seen as something static or even backward, devoid of "progress", dynamism or creativity (Trigger 1980; 2006). In early evolutionary schemes tribal groups tended treated as fossils or artifacts of earlier stages of cultural progress, to be ranked on an evolutionary ladder that had moral as well as temporal connotations, rather than as societies in their own right. Much of early biological anthropology concerned itself with the study of skull types and other factors whose analysis came to be seen as explic-

itly or implicitly racist. Even after such earlier racist models were reject-
ed, the four-field approach and the intellectual makeup of an anthropo-
logical archaeology practiced within its parameters conspired with a view
of American Indian culture as static and timeless (Trigger 1980).

Nevertheless, the fourfold configuration has survived and continues
to be the dominant means of organizing North American anthropology.
Its refinement into modern anthropology is associated in particular with
Franz Boas and his students (Stocking 1960 and 1974). Boas was a Eu-
ropean immigrant of German-Jewish ancestry, and his intellectual make-
up included important elements from German traditions, including
Herder's work on folk culture and his assertion that thought was condi-
tioned and determined by language.

In its developed form, Boas' definition of culture was one that, in its
essentials, has come to form one of the basic building blocks of North
American anthropology (Boas 1904, 1929, 1940). I will discuss each
essential component of the Boasian approach to culture in turn, but I
want to make their intellectual status clear. For much of North American
anthropology, these are not theoretical propositions to be debated back
and forth, but rather basic starting points and principles of enquiry. They
are dinned into students in introductory courses, and form a baseline for
disciplinary identity. They have even been termed a "sacred bundle" by
Cohn and others (Cohn 1980, p. 202; Yanagisako, Seagal 2005).

First, *culture is/was something that everyone has*. Culture is/was not
unevenly distributed between literate and non-literate societies, or be-
tween literate and non-literate groups, with higher-status or more com-
plex societies having "more culture" or being "more cultured". Boas re-
jected the idea that anthropology was somehow confined to non-literate
groups and he explicitly defined anthropology as a discipline that looked
at modern, literate societies as well as "primitive" cultures.

Second, *culture is/was independent of "race"*, or other supposed bi-
ological factors; it was not biologically determined. Arguably Boas' most
important intellectual intervention in the early 20th century was to re-
ject racist explanations of variable behaviours. Modern anthropology
goes even further by insisting that there is no such thing as any biolog-
ical baseline to the conception of "race" itself. Spatial and geographical
variation in the biological makeup of different humans is quite clear, but
the reification into the concepts of distinct "races" is entirely unwar-
ranted, and indeed is an official position of the American Anthropological
Association (1998).

Third, *cultural ideas and practices vary/varied* between human group
and human group; and further, this cultural variability made generaliza-

tion or comparison of cultural practice difficult. For Boas, cultural context was of primary importance, and he rejected or was skeptical of cross-cultural comparison. It is important to note, however, that the next generation of anthropologists, many of whom were students of Boas, were more willing to engage in a broadly comparative approach, for example Kroeber, Kluckhohn, Benedict, and Mead. Later generations developed and used the Human Relations Area Files to develop more systematic cultural comparison and correlation (http://hraf.yale.edu/, accessed 2/13/2015).

Fourth, the principle of cultural relativism: *there was no moral valuation to be attached to culture*: this culture was not better or worse than that one. An important element of this cultural relativism was the rejection of 19th century ideas of progress or the moral evaluation of different stages of human evolution, and the placing of Victorian or modern Western culture on a higher moral plane that that of "savagery" or "barbarism", most obviously originating in the work of Spencer, Morgan, and Tylor but with very deep roots stretching back to Herodotus. A second important element was a methodological relativism – it being important to engage with and understand a culture on its own terms without applying an ethnocentric yardstick to particular practices.

Boas' conception of culture has been extraordinarily important because, right or wrong, it formed and continues to form the intellectual foundations of North American anthropology. It informed Kroeber and Kluckhohn's classic definition: "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action" (Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1963, p. 181). Of course, this conception can be, and has been critiqued on all sorts of levels, and in many ways the subsequent history of North American anthropology can be written in terms of the complex set of intellectual, practical and indeed moral problems and issues thrown up by it. For example, the relationship between culture and biology continues to be constantly debated (Baker 1998).

I want to nevertheless repeat that it is a mistake to regard the statements above as theoretical propositions to be debated back and forth. Rather, they should be placed at a much deeper level of the intellectual foundations of study, what Foucault might all its underlying geology. They might be characterized at pedagogical milestones rather than proposi-

tions as such, tenets that form the basis of any "Cultural Anthropology 101" course, ideas that students have to assimilate and internalize before they can move on to more complex and contentious issues.

Many have critiqued the four-field approach: Yanagisako *et al.* advocated "unwrapping the sacred bundle" (Yanagisako, Seagal 2005); others suggested more specifically that North American archaeology should go its own way (Wiseman 2002; see Gillespie 2003 for a response and reassertion of archaeology as part of a four-field approach). However, none of these proposals have entailed a rejection of the propositions outlined above. None of the contributors to Yanagisako and Seagal would argue against a conception of culture as something which everyone has, which is independent of "race", and so on.

They are also tenets that have a strong moral and political resonance. It is clearly ethnocentric or racist to assert that American Indians have "less culture" than white Americans, and/or that their culture is somehow inferior or less sophisticated. Cultural diversity is celebrated and affirmed in the contemporary world, and academics and intellectuals, in general, strongly resist attempts to ignore or downplay cultural difference or hold different groups to a single cultural yardstick. Boas' original conception was, in part, a reaction against 19th century notions of social evolution and "progress", ideas which in their 19th century form clearly had racist elements and lent ideological foundation to practices of colonialism and cultural domination.

Developments in North American archaeology in the 20th century reinforced rather than questioned the basic elements of Boas' vision. This might seem a surprising statement to make: New Archaeology drew on the writings of Leslie White and Julian Steward, and White in particular engaged in strong denunciation of Boas. White's stress on cultural evolution looked back to many of the 19th century writings on cultural evolution that Boas rejected (White 1947). Boas was skeptical of different forms of environmental determinism, and Steward's cultural ecology was in part a reaction to this and a re-assertion of the importance of the environment in determining the characteristics of human culture. Drawing inspiration from White, New Archaeology advocated cross-cultural generalizations of the sort that Boas had expressed skepticism about. However, the common ground that lay behind these specific differences was a stress on culture as something which is separated from the physical or biological make-up of humans, and which all people have. If, for Binford, culture was "Man's [sic] extrasomatic means of adaptation" (1965), then it was, first, outside the biological make-up of the body (extra-soma) and second, an adaptive mechanism and as such not subject to moral judg-

ments of good and bad. Above all, New Archaeology subscribed to Willey and Phillips' famous dictum that "New World archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing" (Willey, Phillips 1955, pp. 246-247; see Earle 2003).

2. Culture in Britain: bicycle sheds and cathedrals

In much of British medieval and historical archaeology, ideas of culture were and remain very different, and stem in part from a different relationship to anthropology. For the discipline of archaeology as a whole, where "anthropology" does have a close relationship with archaeology, these are configured as partner disciplines whose relationship can then be debated, rather than archaeology being configured within the nest as a sub-field of the wider anthropological project (Gosden 1999).

The concept of culture developed by prehistoric archaeologists was articulated by Vere Gordon Childe. Childe was Australian, and influenced by Montelius and Kossinna in his conception of culture, but he was educated at Oxford and developed his synthesis of European prehistory in that context. In his landmark synthesis of European prehistory, Childe wrote:

> "We find certain types of remains — pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites, and house forms — constantly recurring together. Such a complex of associated traits we shall term a 'cultural group' or just a 'culture'. We assume that such a complex is the material expression of what today would be called a 'people'".
>
> (Childe 1929, pp. v-vi)

As Childe's work progressed through the 1930s to 1960s, he became more and more skeptical that archaeological cultures — complexes of associated traits — could in fact be linked in straightforward and unproblematic ways to human cultures. Further, his understanding of culture came to be more and more explicitly distanced from ideas of race. Most Anglophone prehistoric archaeologists followed his lead. This was in part a reaction to the explicitly racialized conceptions of culture formulated by Kossinna and propagated by Nazi Germany (Arnold 1990; Arnold, Hassmann 1996). At the same time, Childe became less and less certain that the observation of a complex of associated traits was necessarily the material expression of a people.

Childe's definition of an archaeological culture was built upon and systematized by David Clarke (1976). Clarke's archaeological culture had no

necessary relation to human "reality"; it was, like Childe's, a view of certain types of remains constantly recurring together. Clarke held in suspension the issue of what that archaeological pattern might mean in terms of human culture; Clarke's first principle was that "archaeology is archaeology is archaeology" (Clarke 1976, p. 11) and as such his primary aim was to delineate archaeological entities, only then moving to explain them within a systemic framework.

Childe and Clarke's views of culture shared elements of the North American view, particularly in the absence of value judgments about who had culture and how it should be valued. However, there was a radical disjuncture between prehistoric archaeology and Classical/medieval studies (to the extent that they still belong in different institutional homes in many contexts, particularly in continental Europe), and a radical disjuncture also between the idea of culture being developed by prehistorians and anthropologists on the one hand, and wider currents in British intellectual life on the other.

Post-World War II British intellectual life rested on a number of very strong ideas about culture, ideas that in turn rested on the post-1945 social and political settlement of the 1950s (Sinfield 1989). Following the social reforms of the 1945-51 Labour Government, much of intellectual discourse was characterised by a strong ethic of social justice and support for equality of opportunity, a strong consciousness of the inequities of the British class system, and opposition to the debilitating effects of class snobbery. The post-war settlement can be characterized as something very profound, a set of values or cultural discourse and horizon that framed cultural and intellectual life over the next half century. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Johnson 2007), this discourse and horizon had three flaws. First, it was weak on issues of race, ethnicity and cultural identity — leading to the development of the multicultural critique. Second, it was weak on issues of gender — leading to a feminist critique.

Third, and most pertinently for this article, it tended to assume a single norm and measure of "culture". Anger was directed at cultural elitism in the sense of denial of opportunity to the masses — all were now to have access to culture, but the nature of culture itself was left unquestioned. As John Carey has noted at length in a searing indictment of the 20th century Left, the culture of the masses was something that left-wing intellectuals often viewed with profound distaste (Carey 1992). Such a structure was inscribed into the educational system by the post-war reform of the grammar school system. As a consequence of these reforms, talented working-class boys who worked hard could do well,

make it into the selective, elitist but meritocratic grammar schools, and from there make it to University — and thus be assimilated into a pre-existing, unquestioned body of assumptions about culture.

To take a series of examples: first, the architectural critic and historian Nikolaus Pevsner, whose radio talks and popular books made him the most influential of his generation. Like many who came to frame and define qualities of essential Englishness (the film director Emeric Pressburger being the most notable), Pevsner was an outsider — an émigré from Germany, of Jewish ancestry. Pevsner made a strong distinction between high and low culture, polite and vernacular in the field of historic architecture. Famously, he distinguished between Lincoln Cathedral and a bicycle shed:

> "A Bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal".
>
> (Pevsner 1943, p. xix)

(I have always found this well-known quote to be a pair of examples worth further exposition. Many traditional art-historical accounts of Lincoln Cathedral present it as detached from the economic realities of the medieval world. Such approaches tend to obscure the cultural practices and realities that formed the context for the building and use of the monument. In particular, the source of much of the income used to rebuild Lincoln was from the shrine of Little St Hugh, the boy who, it was alleged, was ritually murdered by Jews; in other words, the resources that were brought together to create this beautiful monument were raised through the propagation of a vile blood libel. Conversely, a bicycle shed is so much more than a bicycle shed; an ethnographer of later 20th century British culture might talk at some length about its many meanings, for example as a screen behind which adolescent sexual initiation took place; see also Guillery 2014).

The distinction became inscribed into the study of vernacular architecture by the insistence, in the manner of a photo-negative, that vernacular building was functional or utilitarian as opposed to aesthetic:

> "Till [the 18th century farmhouses and cottages] remained in essence functional building, in which purpose determined plan and form, and ornament was subordinated to them. That the builder often achieved what an architect now consciously strives for — a

satisfactory relation of forms, a harmony of structure and environ-
ment, a pleasing variety of finish and ornament — was incidental to
his purpose of making a machine for living in. The archaeological ap-
proach, as distinct from the aesthetic, makes it easier to relate
the form of an artefact, whether it is a flint implement, a pot or a
house, to the culture which evolved it and the purpose for which it
was made".

(Barley 1961, p. xix)

For the architectural critic Alec Clifton-Taylor, vernacular buildings
had "a closeness to the soil on which they stand, a down-to-earth hon-
esty and lack of pretension, and often a true countryman's strength" and
that this gave such buildings the quality of "sheer lovability", rather than
formal aesthetic intent (Clifton-Taylor 1972, pp. 24 and 326).

For the post-war literary critic F.R. Leavis, following Eliot (1948),
what was at stake is what it was to be cultured, which for Leavis, as for
generations of English Romantics before him, was an arduous process
needing considerable mental acuity and involving rigorous intellectual
training, and therefore restricted to only a very few. For Leavis and his
generation, "culture" was not the preserve of the ruling classes — far
from it; their entire project was to make culture accessible to those of
the masses able to benefit from it — but culture remained something of
intrinsic value, something that some people had through dint of ability
and training and others did not. Culture, then was accessible, but its ne-
gotiation and moral evaluation was left unquestioned. For one of the
characters in A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession*, Leavis "did to [one of the
novel's protagonists] what he did to serious students: he showed him the
terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature
and simultaneously deprived him of any confidence in his own capacity to
contribute to or change it" (Byatt 1990, p. 32).

It is a testament to the power and endurance of these ideas about cul-
ture that the Marxist critic and theorist Raymond Williams spent most of
his career attempting to deconstruct them, with only partial success.
Over and over again William tried to insist that "culture is ordinary":

"Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has
its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human
society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning.
The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and di-
rections, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under
pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing them-

selves into the land…When I now read a book such as Clive Bell's Civilisation, I experience not so much disagreement as stupor. What kind of life can it be, I wonder, to produce this extraordinary fussiness, this extraordinary decision to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work?"

(Williams 1989 [first published 1958], pp. 53-54)

Despite Williams' insistence on "the first fact", and its development into cultural studies (cf. Hebdige 1988) culture continues to be seen as something delimited, special, and demarcated from ordinary life and everyday experience. Such a conception is particularly powerful in traditional art and architectural history, in medieval studies, and in the museum world.

This very different conception of culture translates itself into a working reality for medieval and later historical archaeologists in Britain. First, many "professional" archaeologists work within a legal and administrative framework that gives a practical reality to ideas of what constitutes culture and cultural value. For example, the criteria by which this historic building is given statutory protection but not that one; decisions within museums on what and how to conserve objects; choices over what to display to the public, and the narratives that inform those displays; all these working realities impinge every single day on the working lives of archaeologists. And all are informed by and embedded in some very complex patterns and discourses, as the extensive literature on cultural resource management and "heritage" attests (Hewison 1987; Wright 1995; Samuel 1994).

How is this dominance of a particular conception of culture reflected in the literature of post-classical archaeology of the Middle Ages? First, in the close partnership of archaeology with traditional art history and with museum studies. Take for example the monograph *Gothic: Art for England 1400-1547* (Marks, Williamson 2003), accompanying the exhibition of that name, we have 21 chapters; peasants, who made up over 80% of the population at the time, get a single mention (pp. 35-36). The majority of chapters address exclusively elite topics, with a minority of chapters engaging with the urban bourgeoisie. In the essay on "daily living in the home", not a single peasant artefact is included, with only a few objects from the urban middle classes sprinkled among the otherwise elite material. *Gothic: Art for England* is, in itself, an excellent book; but it is in this respect a typical example of its genre.

Second, in the everyday deployment of openly subjective judgments of heritage value that are made, for example, in the practical decisions that

have to be made over the protection of "heritage assets". Take for example the assessment by Simon Jenkins of a small medieval church in Sussex: "The brick floor, box pews and wooden benches are a study in tranquillity . . . On a summer evening we can imagine ancient peasants climbing from the fields below to find comfort and hope of salvation in their place of holiness" (Jenkins 1999, p. 700). By what criteria are floors and benches "a study in tranquility"? How can sentiments like these be evaluated scientifically?

The most pervasive artefact of this top-down view of culture is the assumption of social diffusion and/or emulation. Where common patterning is observed between different social classes in the Middle Ages, the assumed interpretation is characteristically that of "emulation". In other words, the adoption by the lower classes of a particular artefact, mode of decoration or other feature must be in imitation or emulation of those further up the social scale. Medieval peasants are even characterized as "aping" those above them on the social scale. The term "aping" is especially problematic: the metaphor was used in the Middle Ages by the elite, and so its use by modern scholars is in one sense a direct quote from the sources (cf. Coulson 2003, p. 109; Hinton 1999). However consider for a moment how a comment on Indigenous peoples "aping" European culture might be interpreted, and whether the use of such a term by 19th century colonialists would be deemed justification for its continued use… perhaps the only difference between contemporary peoples and medieval peasants is that the latter have been dead for over 500 years and cannot answer back.

A third artefact of an attenuated notion of culture is the assumption of a common zeitgeist, world-view or mentality, articulated by the elite and (it is assumed) accepted uncritically by peasants, women, etc. When historians write "according to the standards of the time", they generally mean those of the literate elite. In the quote from Jenkins above, how can we know whether medieval peasant accepted in such an uncriticial manner the understandings of salvation and holiness propagated by the religious elite (cf. Jones 2010)?

Modern art and architectural history has embraced a suite of new approaches, but a bias towards the elite and towards elite-centred definitions of culture remains. For example, *New Approaches to Medieval Architecture* (Bork, Clark, McGhehee 2011) explores a suite of ideas that explicitly question traditional categories of architectural history, but only one paper deals with non-religious architecture and none deal with non-elite or vernacular building. Again, Murray places the word "culture" at centre stage of his review of Gothic architecture, endorsing Frankl's use of the term 50 years earlier (Murray 2008, p. 394).

A particularly important element of the intellectual make-up of British medieval archaeology has been the tradition of landscape archaeology and history. I have argued that the key inspiration for this strand of work was W.G. Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape*, itself a classic text reflecting the values and cultural consensus of the 1950s (Hoskins 1955; Johnson 2007). Hoskins wrote within a Romantic perspective, and his work engaged strongly with conservationist values. A direct consequence of a Romantic view, however, was that past human cultural relations were not foregrounded; an engagement with the archaeological record of the English landscape became an aesthetic celebration rather than an analytic or anthropological study of past cultures. So again, landscape archaeology and history conspired with an aesthetic view of culture at the expense of an anthropological one.

3. Gender, class and faction

I suggest that this disjuncture between different ideas of culture led to a profound misunderstanding of the nature of New Archaeology as it was developed by North American scholars, and as it might be applied to the archaeological record of the British and European Middle Ages.

The first misunderstanding surfaced in the assumption that New Archaeology was all about ethnographic analogy. Helen Clarke wrote that a "method which is beginning to insinuate its way into medieval archaeology is that of the 'New Archaeology'. This… has achieved some remarkable results through the comparative use of ethnographic and archaeological evidence. Its highly theoretical base has not so far been much favoured by medievalists largely, one suspects, because the written evidence for the period can be used in much the same way as ethnographic parallels are used to help in the interpretation of information about preliterate societies" (Clarke 1984, p. 12). Where North Americans used an anthropological definition of culture to emphasise that primitive peoples were no better and no worse, some British archaeologists took it to be an assertion that the Vikings were indistinguishable from Trobriand Islanders (Wilson 2014, p. 82). There were two underlying issues here: an entirely appropriate concern over the flattening of cultures and the obliteration of cultural difference and context, and a less appropriate concern over the implied cultural relativism. In some rhetorical rejections of New Archaeology, there was an unhealthy and semi-articulated whiff of an attitude that "we", or what were constructed as "our" Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon or Celtic ancestors, were not like primitive peoples and should not be compared to them. The second misunderstanding was to take New Ar-

chaeology as coterminous with the work of its most vocal and prominent advocate, Lewis Binford, and through Binford the influence of Leslie White and a strongly ecosystem approach. Binford's work was seen as objective and scientific, and thus (in this perception, taking for granted the 1950s view of culture outlined above) anti-humanist and sterile.

Consequently, early attempts to apply New Archaeology to British high medieval archaeology were partial at best (in contrast to more sustained applications, for example Hodges 1982 and Randsborg 1980, to engage with early medieval archaeology). E.M. Jope (1972) contributed to Clarke's classic edited volume *Models in Archaeology* with a discussion of ceramic distribution, but his wider argument remained within a framework of culture history. Philip Rahtz laid out a strident and provocative manifesto for a new medieval archaeology, but did not follow this up with sustained applications or case studies; his autobiography recounts how his attempts to reorient the Wharram research around processual principles were not a success, due in part to the intellectual conservatism of his colleagues (2001). Similarly Mick Aston's polemics advocating an ecosystem approach were followed by a culture history that was not qualitatively different to what went before (1983, 1985). More powerful and sustained attempts to reframe medieval agendas were opposed quite violently. Kathleen Biddick laid out an agenda for the reform of medieval peasant studies, her work was "frozen out", in her view due to her status as an American and as a woman (Biddick 1993 and 1998).

These misunderstandings became embedded into the constitution of British medieval archaeology at a critical point in its intellectual development. Before the 1980s, the majority (though not all) of prominent British medieval archaeologists had come to the discipline via some other disciplinary training. From the 1970s onwards, for the first time, cohorts of young scholars were taking Archaeology as their first degree and choosing to specialize in the high/late medieval period within those degrees. Consequently, the first ever generation of archaeologists specifically trained with a medieval specialism was growing up in the 1980s.

It was ironic, then, that the 1980s postprocessual critique of New Archaeology unfolded just at the moment when North American archaeology was pivoting away from some of the aspects of the ecosystem approach. The landmark paper by Brumfiel (1992), "Distinguished Lecture in Archaeology: Gender, Class and Faction Steal the Show" set the tone for the next generation of processual archaeology in North America. It retained a generalizing and comparative framework but insisted that gender, faction and class were a necessary part of the analysis. Brumfiel's position statement also contained a strong affirmation that archaeology was situated in the political present, without forsaking claims to scientific objectivity.

The emergence of a postprocessual archaeology of medieval Britain from the 1980s was largely ignorant of Brumfiel's and others' work (I have never seen a citation of the Brumfiel piece in any of the classic texts). Consequently, it rested on quite shaky intellectual foundations. As critics protested, it relied in part on a caricature of New Archaeology that was at the very least out of date by the late 1980s. But more fundamentally, in the view I am presenting here, it paid too little attention to the centrality of cultural relativism and an anthropological view of what culture was and is. For some, the postprocessual critique was misread as meaning we could just get on with an unreformed idealism, and also misread as a rejection of the Marxist tradition. This misreading was particularly prevalent in Italy as a consequence of the strong prior polarization in that country between idealist and Marxist approaches (Johnson *et al.* in Terrenato 2000).

Consequently, when postprocessual stress on historical particularity and difference, and on the importance of symbolism, was applied to the study of the Middle Ages, it rested on insecure theoretical foundations, and was too easily assimilated into culture-historical approaches. Scholars could identify meaning and symbolism in "designed landscapes"... which were then explained with reference to document-led work on gardens (Taylor 1983). Castles could be seen as symbolic as well as defensive... and were then understood with reference to dynastic and other conventional political history (Goodall 2010).

When it could not be shoehorned into culture-historical approaches, the "debate" between postprocessual and traditional views rapidly became vulgarized, and quickly became framed between a false and misleading choice: between what was presented as theory-free, objective, empirical work (which was actually an unreconstructed culture history or even culture description) versus a highly theoretical, politically embedded, and in the eyes of its critics empirically unwarranted attempt at social and symbolic reconstruction. This false choice has been asserted over and over again, in the study of "designed landscapes" (Liddiard, Williamson 2008), landscape history (Fleming 2007), castle studies (Platt 2007) and the framing of theory in medieval archaeology generally (as discussed by McClain 2012 and Johnson 2007). Somewhere in the polarizing, either-or language of this vulgarization, the central, undeniable dual message of New Archaeology — that archaeology needs to be more scientific (in the sense of being more rigorous and explicit in its interpretive frameworks, and its interpretations more open to evaluation against the data) and more anthropological (in the sense of placing human culture at the center of its analysis) — has been completely lost.

4. The future

In conclusion: for all these reasons and more, the project of building a theoretical responsible and rigorous archaeology of medieval England and beyond has only been partially successful.

What is to be done? Much of this paper has explained the different meaning and deployment of the term "culture" in relation to wider intellectual currents, and the institutional set-up of archaeology in different sides of the Atlantic. Consequently, its message may seem to be rather negative: institutional set-ups and wider intellectual currents are hard to change. I have argued elsewhere (Johnson 2010) that the enemy is no longer a specific theoretical school, but the continental shelf of vulgar empiricism (in other words, the belief that the data speak for themselves, without the benefit of intervening theory) which underlies the continuing practice of medieval archaeology, particularly in the Old World.

I can suggest a series of intellectual projects, all of which return to the basics of the definition of culture. First, what would a Brumfiel-inspired agenda look like for the European Middle Ages? Mapping Brumfiel's and others' categories of gender, class and faction on to the archaeology and history of the Middle Ages might be a deliberately coarse-grained exercise, and would certainly attract the ire of truffle-hunting historians. My prediction would be that such an exercise would be much criticized, but provide a baseline against which more particular, nuanced studies could take their cue — much as, for the early Middle Ages, Richard Hodges' *Dark Age Economics* was much criticized in its time but came to be a baseline against which later work set itself (for example Loveluck 2013). Second, an archaeology of the Atlantic World from its early medieval origins to the independence of the American colonies: turn Frederick Jackson Turner on his head, looking for the origins of the concept of materialization of the "frontier" in the Old World (Turner 1921). We could explore the medieval roots of European colonial expansion: from the Law of Breteuil to Wales, Scotland, Ireland, to the New World. Some of this project has been sketched out within historical geography (for example Graham 1987), but exploration of the archaeological and material parameters of such legal frameworks remains sketchy (the most sustained attempt to date being Horning 2013). Third, a political ecology of the European Middle Ages, which I would subtitle "keeping it simple". A political ecology would start with the basics of energy capture: subsistence agriculture, the resources and technologies that enable that capture. It would start with the basics of energy capture, crops, mills

etc., then move on to surplus, rent, and the basis of power and political authority — described in basic anthropological terms, stressing the flow of goods, people and power, at some distance from the legal and administrative jargon of documentary history.

These are all broad-brush suggestions: if there is a common denominator, it is about treating culture in a deliberately simple way, without getting entangled in questions of cultural value. The nuances and details of traditional art-historical and value-laden definitions of medieval culture have perhaps led us astray; it is time to go back to the basics of an anthropological definition of culture, and above all, to keep it simple.

Acknowledgements

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