our general theory" (p. 29). Binford’s prescriptions are fairly hardline (and he does not invariably practise what he preaches), but without dogmatism, because we do not like their implications. On the contrary, his basic logic seems impeccable if archaeologists are prepared to make social science rather than creative writing, and it is interesting to note that his views on the use of the past have essentially been echoed by Hodder (1982).

Binford points out that recent general theory about early hominin behaviour is heavily dependent on the ‘evidence’ of faunal remains and so the middle-range problem addressed in Bones is that of distinguishing between hominin and non-hominid (particularly carnivore) modification of bone. This problem is especially critical in the Lower Pleistocene when many ‘assemblages’ are represented by scarcely human earthen monuments of later prehistory meaningless associations of hominids’ tools and carnivores’ left-overs in an essentially geological matrix (chapter 1). The assumption that faunal remains associated with either hominid bones or tools can serve as models for diagnostically hominid patterns of bone modification has had bizarre consequences which Binford cites in eloquent support for his demand that middle-range research be grounded in the present. Hominid behaviour in the Lower Pleistocene is likely to have differed radically from anything known today; thus Binford accepts the need for argument by elimination in identifying the traces of early hominids while recognising that this process must be informed by rigorous middle-range research on the traces of possible non-hominid agents (chapter 3).

The process of elimination begins with Binford’s own observations in North America on skeletal disarticulation and bone modification by wolves and domestic dogs, supplemented by the work of Brain, Klein and Hill on the effects of dogs. This has been extended to the potential disarticulation in Africa (chapters 3-5). The resulting 'control collections' are not ideal. Rarely was there a single footprint, and other depositional, retrieval and analytical effects on the data are unspecified, though in part this is the price to be paid for large samples of comparative material. In any case, Binford does not use the control collections to identify carnivore activity per se, but rather to eliminate patterning in bones which need not be referred to as hominin behaviour. The reliability and uniformitarian applicability of Binford's pattern recognition work on these control collections is hard to assess, but he is surely right in his claim that animal jaws are predisposed to the progressive disarticulation and progressive destruction of bones (working from the outside inwards), while hominid tools offer the possibility of a more direct and direct application of the desired end. It seems inherently likely that this basic contrast of animals as bone destroyers and meat 'tearers', with men as bone breakers and meat cutters" (p. 79) should leave distinctive traces.

Binford was able to observe the Nunamiut under more controlled conditions (chapter 4). Their skinning, butchering and filleting of earcases leaves cut marks on bones which could hardly be mistaken for those from growing by animals, but more interesting is the contrast between the marks derived from the skinning those from filleting. Unfortunately Binford admits that he did not fully appreciate the importance of marrow utilisation until after fieldwork among the Nunamiut, a distinctive pattern of bone breakage results from marrow-cracking, but this is of limited applicability to the archaeological record because no causal relationship has been identified. Nunamiut marrow-cracking also leaves clear impact scars on bones, but the possibility of achieving a similar effect with other potential agents of (post-) depositional mechanical fracture has not been ruled out. Binford's detailed account of the social and economic contexts of different skinning, butchering, filleting and marrow-cracking tactics, however, is fascinating and suggests fruitful avenues for further research.

The climax of the book (chapter 6) is Binford's new look at Olduvai Gorge and at Isaac's idea that animal bones found on living floors are evidence for food-sharing at the home bases of early hominids. In fact there is little information yet as to how many of these bones bear the tell-tale cut marks of stone tools, and Binford argues powerfully, from Mary Leakey's own description, that most of the Olduvai 'living floors' are of low resolution (they were deposited under variable conditions) and/or integrity (their contents derive from a variety of agents). In other words, the association of tools and bones probably means little, and home bases and food-sharing are just modern myths. In view of his own cautionary remarks, Binford might have been expected to close on this negative note. Instead he valiantly reconstructs the anatomical composition of the Olduvai faunal assemblages and contrasts them with models derived from his control collections, for destruction and transport by carnivores. Only part of the variability in the Olduvai assemblages can immediately be explained in terms of these models and so can be eliminated. Binford argues that some of the remaining variability can be referred to hominin behaviour - specifically to marrow extraction from carcasses already scavenged and abandoned by carnivores. This attractive story fits with the importance of hammerstones in early levels at Olduvai (p. 281), but marrow-cracking was probably the weakest part of Binford's middle-range research, and in his lengthy analysis of anatomical composition, the fit between data and expectations is frequently poor. Moreover, Binford fails to demonstrate that the remaining variability in these assemblages of low integrity and resolution could not be explained by some combination of several separate episodes of carnivore destruction and transport. Post-depositional sorting of the material, poor recovery and several transformations of the raw data are powerful alternative sources of variability. But, if Binford's Lower Pleistocene marrow-crackers eventually become just another modern myth because of the rigorous application of middle-range research to the archaeological record, then Bones will have done its job.

References


Reviewed by Joan Gero

Symbols in Action argues that material items act as symbols to
actively justify the actions and intentions of human groups" (p. 36). Building on bodies of thought drawn from structuralism, Marxism and ethnography, Hodder marshals evidence and arguments to demonstrate that the material world is actively constituted and meaningful, a view contradicting the more traditional perspective that material culture passively reflects prehistoric behaviour. Consciousness, both individually and collectively, is the key to understanding how the material world in order to affect social outcomes, forge and collapse ethnic boundaries, permit and suppress social dominance, legitimate and expose power. The case is clearly argued and logically developed, starting with empirical examples of prehistoric social actions, manipulating material culture boundaries in different ways depending on the social context, the economic strategies chosen, the particular history of the social relations, and the particular history of the cultural traits" (p. 104).

Both of Hodder's messages will be attractive to archaeologists not unilaterally committed, historically or emotionally, to Flannery's 'law and order' archaeology, or to systemic theory. After all, where the New Archaeology made us think that everything counts, all Hodder is now encouraging the very parochial and particularistic study of geographic and temporal areas that the specialisation infra-structure of our discipline is best suited to. As well, his view changes the everyday archaeological artefact from a trace of life, investing it with meaning and function, and so with power and a new significance. But, despite this level of intellectual scintillation, we must ask: (1) Has Hodder adequately demonstrated the veracity of his views on material culture roles in society? and (2) Will it be significant, or even useful, for anthropological (and more specifically, for archaeological) study to frame our inquiries in these terms?

Hodder, Symbols in Action is seriously flawed on both these counts. While the depletion of an active material-social interdependence could be a major theoretical contribution, many aspects of Hodder's specific analyses are weak. For instance, it is never explained how the particular ethnographic observations from which Hodder and other specific material culture items were constituted: sample sizes and design are inconstant or absent. Under what circumstances was taken. In fact, we are offered no basis for observing how sample sets of items in preference to others: why catchbas designs and not earring motifs? Why hearth position and not hearth form or hearth size? Here, the anthropological approach, as well as claims to be dealing with 'meaning', are undermined, for here we would want to know what the informants themselves saw as the critical material parameters of their own ethnicity. If we are convinced that material culture is actively and meaningfully manipulated, it is more from Hodder's observations coupled with an intuitive recognition of these processes at work, than from a clear demonstration of the methodology in Hodder's studies.

More seriously, Hodder's repeated warnings in studying symbolic meanings raise several apparent contradictions. Ethnic boundaries interiority Hodder's book, vanishes of increased resource competition...but not always. Females demonstrate more conformity in material culture than males, but this is a fact obtained by a fine balance that Hodder must maintain as he convinces us, on one hand, that meaning is contextually and specifically determined, not to be generalised from one setting to another, while at the same time he convinces us, on the other, that search, which perforce must assume at least some analogical correspondences to hold through time. Why, after all, was all the research done in Africa? If meaning must be constituted case by case, the entire structure of Symbols in Action appears curious. Many illustrative examples clearly shedding light on something general, rather than a single in-depth ethnographic reconstruction of meanings within one context. What is the larger message, if meanings can't be generalised? Is it nothing but a long and elaborate cautionary tale, telling us only that life is indeed complex? Ultimately, we are left wondering whether these ideas could actually motivate prehistoric research. The slim, sparse treatment of the Orkney example convinces us neither that meanings are uniquely constituted (in fact, this interpretation leans in the other direction, suggesting highly general structural principles at work; oppositions, symmetries, etc.) nor that prehistoric research can expose any cultural meanings at all.

The many reviews that Symbols in Action has already received suggest that Hodder's book is all but formulated on this highly visible volume: here is a strikingly new paradigm, cleverly proposed and adequately determined, not inadequately supported. Again and again, we hear that it is provoking and certain to arouse much controversy, inviting us to speculate, then, why the controversial issues in the book are so ambivalently avoided, and the provocation dismissed. If Hodder's book, deserves lofty praise, and in some regards does, this is not because the book is flawlessly executed. Indeed, the fact that the book is fairly ridiculed with flaws and inconsistencies may even contribute to its attractiveness; here is the design for a significant and exciting departure from the systemic functionalism of the 1980s, but one which still invites our own sympathetic contributions to make it operational. Moreover, the consistent refusal of reviewers to voice highly critical or extreme opinions on its contents suggests that the book is somehow protected by an unspoken sanctimoniousness, as though it is more than what it simply appears to be. It does not seem far-fetched, then, that Hodder's book itself as a symbol in action, a boundary-marker of Hong Kong identity, will greatly contribute to defining the direction of archaeology in the 1980s.


Reviewed by Valerie Pinsky

The Present Past is an ambitious book whose main objectives should be considered from two different points of view. On one level, the book attempts to introduce the non-specialist reader to the controversial issues involved in the archaeological interpretation of material culture, by means of a critical review of the use of ethnographic and archaeological evidence, and of a variety of sources, including the author's own ethnographic fieldwork, are marshalled in order to assess the