

Material Culture and Social Practice: Archaeology and History in Understanding Europe's 'Celtic Fringe'

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a rapprochement between history and archaeology in Britain and Ireland. Two formerly quite distinct disciplines have learned to appreciate how documents and artefacts together can enrich our understanding of everyday life. Always important to understandings of classical, Dark Age, and medieval society, archaeology has opened up new horizons for appreciating domestic and industrial buildings, burial patterns, urban morphology, land use and environment, and the consumption of both food and objects in the early modern period too. I look at some recent research that has enhanced our knowledge of local, regional, national, and transnational identities in a sometimes poorly understood 'fringe' area of Europe.

History and archaeology seem to be very different. Historians and archaeologists have always had their own questions, driven by data, skill requirements, and methodologies. Archaeology is largely a descriptive discipline which attempts to evolve a coherent view of the human past by establishing relationships between observed phenomena. History is the discipline of context. Historians focus mainly on reading words in documents, archaeologists on seeking, retrieving, and studying artefacts. Archaeologists may even think differently from historians. For example, they work visually in three dimensions and conceive of chronologies as a movement from bottom to top, whereas historians illustrate the passage of time horizontally. Those who rely on excavation (or on geophysical technology) see history primarily as something on or under the ground, equating space with time, where historians see it in documents and have a flatter, more linear conception of the past. Archaeology is a metaphor for getting beneath the surface of things, which is how Michel Foucault meant it in *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969). In Greek, the word means 'discourse about ancient things'.

Foucault thought history and archaeology were alike because they encompassed so much and there are further similarities that recent trends in thought have brought out. Objects and texts are both actively created and manipulated by groups and individuals to negotiate power relations and identity. Consumers actively employ the goods they receive in the construction of both personal identity and social ideals. Documents are a form of material culture and studies of their physical forms are currently one of the most exciting branches of both literacy studies and book history. At the same time, both objects and texts are capable of being critically ‘read’ by archaeologists or historians. Both require critical analysis of the specific contexts and processes leading to their creation, survival, and significance. So it is that in recent years there has been a rapprochement between history and archaeology in Britain and Ireland. Formerly archaeology was seen as a tool rather than a discipline – a set of techniques for uncovering, preserving, and analysing evidence about the past – but now archaeology and history have joined together in appreciating how documents and artefacts combined can enrich our understanding of the past.

Foucault distinguished art history from archaeology and history because it was more aesthetic and purely academic, but it is another discipline of material culture that has become much more historical since the 1970s. Like art history, systematic and scientific archaeology materialised from its antiquarian origins in the mid-nineteenth century as a form of ‘culture-history’, along with the flowering of geography and the emergence of economic history as a separate field. History and archaeology first truly came together, in a British context, in the period after WWII, with the study of landscape, notably in collaborations between John Hurst and Maurice Beresford, using new Danish open-area excavation techniques. Cooperation between historians and archaeologists since the 1970s has been particularly fruitful for medieval studies, in recreating not just small-areas, but also ‘total landscapes’ and how they reflect ideology, power, memory, and belief: the components of identity.

Archaeological projects characteristically establish ethnographies of place. From many specific ethnographic studies we can develop a comparative ethnology. Landscape archaeology in particular relies on subdividing terrain into classified components and types. The nexus of tangible remains of the past and intangible associations resonate within a wider cultural and physical landscape to create identity. Adding history to archaeology allows material objects in a landscape to acquire agency, meaning, and depth, bringing out relationships and associations based on the age, sex, and social status of the people who used artefacts and inhabited space in ways that shaped their identity. And, in Scotland and Wales at least, issues of post-medieval land use are an important part of contemporary attitudes towards landscape and society, and thus to modern political identities. Archaeology and history together illuminate persistent tensions between continuity and change, in which individuals and communities were remembering their past and negotiating their present. Oral history can further illuminate this topic because traditions shape what people remember about their landscape, lifestyle, and themselves.

Always important to understandings of classical, Dark Age, and medieval society, archaeology has opened up new horizons for seeing domestic and industrial buildings, burial patterns, urban morphology, land use and environment, and the consumption of both food and objects in the early modern age too – which I study. In England a lot of the most productive cooperation has been on townscapes, but in the north and west of the British Isles a rural emphasis remains. I am going to look at some examples of recent research that have enhanced our knowledge of local, regional, national, and transnational identities in a sometimes poorly understood – or perhaps wilfully misunderstood – “fringe” of Europe.

Let me start with a recent area of growth: battlefield archaeology. This has been used to excellent effect on Culloden. Fought on 16 April 1746, Culloden was the last major battle on British soil when a poorly led Jacobite army was comprehensively defeated outside Inverness

by government forces. This sealed the fate of the House of Stewart's claim to the throne of Britain, then occupied by the Hanoverian George II. Shorn of centuries of accumulated romance and myth, we now understand the battle very well, helped by archaeologists and historians whose labours are displayed in fascinating detail at the splendid National Trust for Scotland visitor centre on its site. Among much else, they have shown that Scots fought against fellow Scots as well as against French and English troops, depending on their side. The legacy is a conflicted sense of being Scottish, let alone possessing a British identity.

The success of this exhibition is a reminder that material artefacts are important to representing the living past to the general public, because they help to evoke an imaginative understanding of experience – even an empathetic one. Computer generated imagery (CGI) and other modern technologies allow more lifelike presentation of possible scenarios. The more personal and mundane the better: so bones are best, but also beds, food preparation items, tools and weapons, and garments. Scientific advances have made it easier to move away from a concentration on technology (and the assumption that pottery equals people) to studies of bones (both DNA and their forensic signature), seeds, and other apparently unpromising objects. Both archaeology and history have moved away from elites or, for archaeology, 'trophy' finds, to the more mundane; this is part of a growing interest in ordinary people and their lives that began in the 1960s. The search for the 'common man' has also brought a more nuanced, relativistic approach to meaning: a move away from a simplistic, heroic view of the past encapsulated in the phrase 'ritual significance' (though this still pollutes public history, especially on television) to an appreciation of the intelligence of those long dead and their complex ways of understanding their surroundings.

Shifting time period, but staying with a military theme on the Roman frontier in Britain, I can illustrate this trend with the most iconic object found at the fort of Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall to the east of Carlisle. It is a toilet seat. Archaeological cultures represent societies, but it

is much easier to infuse them with economic and social significance by adding in a documentary record. One of the triumphs of excavations at this site has been the recovery of thousands of papyrus documents which bring soldiers and civilians alike vividly to life. Among the more famous are a lady's invitation to a birthday party and a request for warm woollen socks from home. Vindolanda is also a shining example of how archaeologists have been more successful in involving amateurs in their work than have historians, and in converting some into professionals. Among warring tribes on what they called a barbaric frontier, Romans tried to keep to the material comforts and civilised sensibilities which they saw as vital to their identity as part of an empire.

The Romans were the first to describe a group of peoples as the Celts. Appeals to an ancient Celtic past have played, and continue to play, a number of important and often paradoxical roles in the ideological naturalization of modern political communities at several levels, including: pan-European unity in the context of the evolving European Community; nationalism in member states of that community; and regional resistance to nationalist hegemony. Archaeology may be appropriated by invented traditions like "Celticism", but it also has a role to play in the deconstruction of competing claims.

It has, for example, taught us that it is best to think of ancient Celtic speakers in terms of a fluid network of autonomous societies speaking a set of related languages, linked by exchange, and differentially sharing certain cultural elements, but exhibiting considerable variation in political organization and other sociocultural structures and practices resulting from local trajectories of historical development. It is doubtful that the peoples of these diverse societies ever had a cohesive collective identity or ethnonym, and they clearly never constituted a unified political community.

We can see this by looking at one powerful modern symbol of Scottish identity, tartan. Certain kinds of Highland dress were banned in the eighteenth century, but were still worn in a

way which implies not the negativity of outright resistance, but a sort of resistant adaptation to both explicit and implicit hegemonic claims by Lowlanders. But it is important not to see tartan as a home-grown symbol of Highland regional identity. Most fabrics, archaeological evidence from bog bodies has shown, were local in their pattern and colour, the variations determined by the type of wool and dyes available. Most were quite simple and drab. Only with widespread commercial production in the Lowlands, from about 1800 onwards, was there access to more standardised and vibrant patterns and colours. Textile history, by the way, is one branch of material culture where interdisciplinary collaborations have produced some exciting findings about consumption and meaning.

Against local identities we also need to set international ones, which are not Celtic. The isotope results from Viking Age cemeteries in the northern and western islands of Scotland confirm the connection between Scandinavian activities in Scotland, Ireland, and England attested in other archaeological evidence and also in the written record. Place name evidence too places the Scandinavians in areas of north-west Scotland. Thus it is a small step to use documentary records from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century to show something which archaeological evidence cannot: the similarity in marriage rituals and the importance of community values to both Scots and Scandinavians. These transnational cultural patterns were precipitates of longstanding migrations and settlement patterns.

I mentioned battlefield archaeology as a growth area at present. I want to conclude by looking at another new and exciting development: marine archaeology, made possible by changes in diving technology and medicine. Sadly, it also illustrates two potentially less desirable aspects of archaeology's current status when compared with history. First, much of the work is now done by commercial firms, of which the most notorious is Odyssey. Until recently, it employed my onetime colleague Neil Cunningham Dobson as its archaeologist. Neil got a job with them when my University shut down the very successful Maritime Archaeology

unit within the School of History. Archaeology is popular but politically weak in a world of research excellence frameworks and teaching quality assurance. The emergence of commercial archaeology has been associated with planning and environmental legislation.

This has, unfortunately, weakened the opportunity for cooperation between historians and archaeologists, especially for the post-medieval period. Ironically, it has done so because historians in such contexts are only the handmaidens to archaeology. Relations between the disciplines have changed a great deal in the half a century since Ivor Noel Hume coined the phrase “Archaeology : Handmaiden to History” as the title of a lecture designed, and I quote, to “show how historians and archaeologists should and can work together to the advantage of both” (Hume 1964 : 214). Exact parity may never be achievable, but I see abundant evidence of the fruits of collaboration, most notably in both unravelling and problematizing questions of local, regional, national, and transnational identity.

References

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About the Author

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