

Mika Lavento¹

ANTHROPOMORPHIC ANALOGIES TO MATERIAL CULTURE

One of the most interesting characteristics of archaeology is the possibility to approach material culture and prehistory in innumerable different ways. Although one can hardly consider the archaeology of the 1990s to be an old-fashioned and monolithic discipline, one still gets the feeling – after making acquaintance with Michael Shanks' article "the Life of Artifact" – that there are approaches which have been neglected so far. Shanks sees artifacts as analogous to human beings and life. The analogy tries not to go very far. But it goes far enough to prefer *verstehen* for *erklären* in archaeological reasoning.

Shanks begins with the statement that archaeologists consider themselves scientists have a kind of monopoly to the truth of prehistory. They perceive the past as a chain of phenomena, phases in history, which can be reached only through scientific methodology, hard work and logical reasoning. For Shanks this idea is strange and too simple. He sees the past as much richer, problematic and full of open questions. Discussing the life span of an artifact and using metaphors which gives artifacts anthropomorphic qualities Shanks tries to show us what archaeologists have missed. They have not even happened to think that also artifacts have a history of their own involving an enormous amount of information, which can be understood.

There are two kinds of main criticisms which traditionally can be directed against Shanks' ideas. The first one is based on a scientific view on archaeology, a tradition whose extreme expression was Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and logical empiricism. According to this view, a researcher can pose only such questions which can be answered by accepted, scientific methods. In their moderate form these methods are those which

can be twisted into the form of hypothetic-deductive testing situation. If one cannot find answers by accepted methodology, one must reject one's questions. The second line of criticism is based on the idea of common sense. The questions Shanks has posed are senseless, because they are against common sense or, preferably, everyday reasoning. They constitute fruitless and empty philosophizing unconnected to the reality of either today or to past reality. Common sense, then, takes on the role of a warrior of generally acceptable truth.

There is some sense in both criticisms. But do archaeologists of different generations represent the same and unchanging common sense? Might it ever be the case that common sense is the tradition whose manifestations will change with a new "aesthetic" of seeing the world?

Shanks says, in a way, that archaeologists have themselves lost common sense with their "scientific" questions. He tries to inject some life into archaeology, because his questions in particular have much more to do with real life than those normally posed by archaeologists. Archaeologists may find these questions uncomfortable, because they are not ones which can have a scientific solution. Many aspects in the past are interesting. Many questions laymen ask are more interesting than the typology, chronology or reconstructions of palaeoenvironment which archaeologists regard as the most essential part of our discipline. But archaeology cannot be a discipline only for archaeologists.

This is by no way a new dilemma. Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and the creator of phenomenology, already accused the science of his own era of empty questions and pseudo-problems. Science had lost contact with normal, practical life. "*Blosse Tatsachenwissenschaften machen blosse Tatsachenmenschen*," says Husserl (1954:4). The problem is the scientific attitude which makes us imagine that it can solve all problems

¹ Mika Lavento, Department of Archaeology, P.O. Box 913, FIN-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland.

only through scientific methodology. Instead, with the help of sciences human beings cannot understand themselves and their position in the world any better than before (Waldenfels 1992:35-36).

Shanks gives us a loose analogy between the human being and an artifact. We trivially know that only a human being can grasp its own existence and influence it – an artifact cannot. In this way only human beings can influence their life history. An artifact's life history is dictated by the humans who made it, although we can to a certain extent discuss the life histories of them only as artistic metaphors. The problem is that Shanks' questions, although reasonable, are abstract and difficult to be solved with available material and methodology. Because answering these questions is often difficult and needs much interpretation they are easy to condemn as fruitless; they have only little to do with "real" archaeology.

It is interesting that the continental philosophy of the 1900s seems to have clearly influenced Shanks' thinking. For instance, we can mention Martin Heidegger's idea (1979:103-106) that it is not until an utilitarian object "makes a strike" that it becomes an object and we suddenly realize its unnoticeable existence. There is, however, an important difference between these two thinkers: Heidegger put a great deal of emphasis on the fact that it is the human being who gives the historicity and an aura to an object, it cannot exist without his/her consciousness of it.

Every material object has a history – manufacture, use, discard, existence and life in the systemic context and finally in the archaeological context. Although Shanks' analogy functions to some extent as metaphor, it does not function as well on the level of consciousness. It does not separate clearly enough the concepts of *essence* and *existence*. Shanks rejects this difference very lightly. But without human beings there is nothing left in artifacts that could be seen *as* something.

Objects and artifacts are not active without active human beings giving life to them. Although it is tempting to pose an analogy between them their similarity should not be overestimated. An aura is a concept relative to intentionality, involving a special quality of human consciousness. An aura is not found in things themselves, but in the minds and intentions of human beings. There is thus a radical difference between the respective existences of artifacts and human beings.

If one wishes to give up this distinction without hesitation it will cause new problems. All rational thinking is interested in concepts. Inventing, departing from and defining concepts aim at a better understanding of

entities and their relationship with each other. These concepts reflect only some characteristics of the entities and only some characteristics can be revealed by archaeologists. They generalise from archaeological observations; the results are only very rarely law-like statements, but instead trends or probabilities. They may also be descriptions of (pre)historic phenomena in some particular culture. Also particular artifacts play an important role in these kind of studies. They reflect phenomena archaeologists believe are important for understanding the past. The primary purpose is not to make archaeology about particular artifacts, but understand the past through them.

One of the problems which Shanks raises concerning the dead nature of artifacts, things which do not change or go wrong. These things – the ideal objects in the archaeologist's mind – are like dreams or metaphors of real things. He seems to say that these dream things which archaeologists use are not interesting. The only things of interest are the ones which really have a life history and therefore have also generated some meaning for their makers and users. Although it may intuitively seem right to think in this way, it does not happen in real archaeology. Why? Because archaeologists seldom have any adequate means to study these questions. If archaeologists had adequate methods at their disposal, why should not also these questions be discussed? It is not the case that litter, for instance, has been forgotten. The excavations of medieval towns have uncovered latrines with a great deal of important information about the practical life of the period.

My point is that archeology as a science or part of the humanities is not so rigid and unchanging a discipline that these questions could be willingly omitted if there were possibilities to find means for their adequate study and for the verification of ideas postulated from observations or intuitive assumptions. If understanding the life history of an artifact cannot find verification it is of no great value for most archaeologists. Why don't we leave the field then for fiction and artists? Isn't it clear that novelists or writers can make inject more life into the past than archaeologists?

The second point is that archaeologists are seldom interested in the life histories of artifacts. Surely they should be, but at present the majority of them want to deal with large-scale questions: continuity or discontinuity of technology and culture, early phases of agriculture etc. Choosing just these problems is not just aesthetics or an old-fashioned manner of studies. These problems interest archaeologists today, but often not the great public. They still have value: they will always

have value for all such scientists, archaeologists, artists or makers of fiction who are interested in knowledge that is a bit more than opinion. This is necessary because just these problems have to be solved in a satisfactory way before many other questions can be answered. To achieve results researchers usually concentrate only on those sides of the artifacts which have features in common with others, making it possible to regard them as classes or types. It is precisely therefore that artifacts are given passive role. Shanks' dream about "living, active, artifacts may be relevant in some cases, but as a general rule for all archaeological research it is often not very recommendable.

Shanks has written his article against the idea "objective reality" or "the mystery and awe" which have often been linked with scientific archaeology (Shanks 1998). His arguments give the impression that no discussion, historicity or contextuality has been taken into consideration in normal archaeology. The practice of things is not that simple. Archaeologists try to solve questions which they believe can be answered in such a way that a certain kind of general acceptance can be

attained. They are not willing to ask questions which cannot stand up to criticism or cope with different opinions, tales or uncritical assumptions. Although one should not leave Shanks' ideas without notice, one should be careful with them. Ignoring the difference between social and object worlds will lead to achieved, more or less relative truths. As a hermeneutist I am not wholly against this. This is the direction of postprocessual archaeology in our days. But although it will solve many problems, it will also introduce twice as many new ones.

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