

The Conceptual Boundaries of Symbolism.

31 January – 1 February 2014
Senate Room, Durham Castle



An Archaeological and Inter-disciplinary discussion.

Institute of
Advanced
Study



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The Conceptual Boundaries of Symbolism

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31 January – 1 February 2014

Senate Room, Durham Castle

Friday 31 January 2014

Archaeological-Anthropological workshop

9.30 Registration of participants/ Morning coffee

10.00 **Introduction by organizer Elena Soulioti (Durham University, Department of Archaeology)**

Summary of previous investigation on symbolism

10.30 **Keynote lecture by Dr. Andy Jones (Southampton University, Department of Archaeology)**

11.30 Discussion

12.00 Session 1 - The Peircean semiotics approach

- Antonios Iliopoulos (Oxford University, Department of Archaeology, PhD candidate)
Applying Peirce's semiotic theory on early ornamental shell beads
- Agni Prijatelj (Durham University, Department of Archaeology, PhD candidate)
Thinking through Neolithic stamps in the Balkans: Mediation of meaning and Peircean Semiotic

12.40 Discussion

1.30 Lunch

2.30 Session 2 - Anthropological approaches

- Prof. Seth Kunin (Durham University, Department of Theology and Religion)
Symbolism and meanings among the crypto Jews: a multi-horizontal, structuralist approach
- Dr. Jonathan Miles-Watson (Durham University, Department of Theology and Religion)
Scandal Point: a tale of when and how a sign can become a symbol

3.15 Discussion/Coffee break

4.00 Session 3

- Prof. John Chapman (Durham University, Department of Archaeology)
Synecdoche and mimesis – The question of material symbolism in stone tools and figurines

4.20 Discussion

4.40-5.00 **Final discussion**

Saturday 1 February 2014

Inter-disciplinary workshop

9.00 Summary of previous day's discussion

9.10 Session 1 - Philosophy

- Dr. Ian Kidd (Durham University, Department of Philosophy)
Sages as symbols
- Dr. Andreas Pantazatos (Durham University, Department of Philosophy)
Trusting objects beyond the glass

10.00 Discussion/Coffee break

10.30 Session 2 - Arts

- John Goodenough (Durham University, Department of Music, PhD Candidate)
A composers' conception of symbolism: frontiers - approaches to the illumination of music.
- Artist - live creation (exact time and theme pending)

11.00 Discussion

11.30 Session 3 - Cognition

- Dr. Anthony Atkinson (Durham University, Department of Psychology)
On the nature of emotions and the symbolic nature of emotional expressions
- Alex Malt (Durham University, Department of Philosophy, PhD Candidate)
Symbols and Cognitive Extension

12.15 Discussion

1.00 Lunch

2.00 Session 4 - Cognitive Development and Marketing

- Dr. Emma Flynn (Durham University, Department of Education)
The development of children's understanding of symbolism
- Dr. Gretchen Larsen (Durham University, Department of Marketing)
'Symbols for Sale': A Marketing Perspective on Symbolism in Contemporary Consumer Societies

2.40 Discussion

3.00 Coffee break

3.30 Guided tour to the symbols of Durham Castle by Seif El Rashidi, Durham's World Heritage Site Co-ordinator

4.00-5.00 Final discussion – Conclusions of workshop

Abstracts

31 January

Archaeological-Anthropological workshop

Dr. Andrew Meirion Jones (University of Southampton)

Archaeology after Interpretation: from material symbols to vibrant materials

How meaningful are materials? Since the 1980s, archaeologists have been concerned with examining archaeological artefacts as a means of determining their symbolic significance. Recently these epistemological concerns have been called into question, with a greater emphasis placed on investigating the ontological character of past worlds (Alberti et. al. 2009; Conneller 2011; Edgeworth 2012; Henare et.al. 2007; Hodder 2012; Olsen 2010; Olsen et.al. 2012; Jones 2012; Lucas 2012). Alongside this, the exceptional status of humans as interpreting subjects has been questioned (Alberti et.al. 2013; Anderson and Harrison 2010; Brown and Walker 2008; Braidotti 2012; Fowler 2013; Olsen et.al. 2012; Latour 1993; 2005; Watts 2013; Whatmore 2008), and archaeologists are beginning to appreciate that humans (both past and present) inhabit worlds alongside a multitude of other forces and agencies; materials might be less considered as being made meaningful by humans, and more as possessing dynamism, force and vibrancy in themselves. The question then hinges on the two-way intersection between materials and humans.

The question of symbolism appears anachronistic in this post-human archaeological landscape. Should we still be analyzing artefacts symbolically, or are 'material symbols' now *passé*? Assuming that archaeological theory is not simply faddish and fashionable, but actually engages with critically important questions relating to the archaeological understanding of the past, this paper will consider how we might now engage symbolism in a world of vibrant materials.

Antonios Iliopoulos (University of Oxford, PhD Candidate)

Applying Peirce's semiotic theory to early ornamental shell beads

Recent discoveries, such as the *Nassarius kraussianus* shell beads unearthed at Blombos Cave, South Africa, which date at c. 75 kya, have led many archaeologists to see in them an unambiguous marker of symbolism. However, the precise inferential step that led to such a conclusion remains elusive, as it appears to have been merely grounded upon the notion that collectively agreed-upon meaning was imbued onto the ornaments. Such an emergence of communicative meaning is reminiscent of the way wordsmiths generate linguistic units. It is erroneous, however, to conflate the two ontological domains (i.e., language and material culture), for they signify in radically different ways. In this paper, I therefore turn to the theory of signs developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, due to its applicability to material culture. Most importantly, his semiotic theory acknowledges that conventional material signs need not be arbitrary, but can also be iconic or indexical. I thus delve into his writings, in order to illuminate the denary framework that I adopt for the evaluation of ornamental shell beads. As they signify via an existential spatio-temporal connection to their wearer, the interpretation of which is guided by a rule, ornamental shell beads are identified to have functioned as dicentric indexical legisigns. Hence, the widely held disposition, according to which personal ornamentation is inherently symbolic, is deemed unwarranted. It is therefore concluded that Peirce's theory of signs, which has thus far been surprisingly underexploited by archaeologists, is invaluable for the purpose of illuminating the significative nature of discovered artefacts.

Agni Prijatelj (Durham University, PhD Candidate)

Thinking Through Neolithic Stamps in the Balkans: Mediation of Meaning and Peircean Semiotics

Semiotic approaches in archaeology may be thriving, but their theoretical tools arguably need to be reconsidered. On the one hand, the application of the principles of linguistic analysis in the study of meanings of material culture persists, even though the established practice of Saussurian and Lévi-Straussian structuralism has been called into question by numerous post-processual critiques. On the other hand, network modelling has further exposed the inability of Saussurian dichotomies to encapsulate all the nuances of the mediation of meaning, as created through various connections between human and non-human nodes within observed networks. It is, therefore, scarcely surprising that an alternative approach, in the form of Peircean semiotics, has recently been introduced into the field by several writers, including Bauer (2002), Knappett (2005), Coben (2006), Preucel (2006) and A.M. Jones (2007).

Building upon the work of these authors, this paper presents the case study of Neolithic stamps from the Balkans. In doing so, it demonstrates how Peircean semiotics can help archaeologists

to grasp the referential properties of things arising from their materiality. More specifically, it illustrates the valuable role of Peircean trichotomies in illuminating the material agency of signs and their constantly negotiated meaning; the process of building up elaborate referential forms through less complex ones; and lastly the dynamic nature of sign-meanings in relation to different interpretants.

Prof. Seth Kunin (Durham University, Department of Theology)

Symbolism and meanings among the crypto Jews: a multi-horizontal, structuralist approach

Symbols within ethnographic contexts can be a highly contested field. This is particularly true among modern crypto-Jewish communities. For these communities, symbols are a key aspect of identity and their interpretation provides evidence for arguments about authenticity. Underlying these arguments is a range of different theories about the nature of symbolism – some of which emphasise an essentialist interpretation of meaning. Utilizing this ethnographic data, this paper explores the relationship between signifiers and signification. Although it argues that this relationship as suggested by Structuralist theory is arbitrary, nonetheless meaning as well as structure is fundamental to the way that the various communities examined appropriate and interpret their symbols. The ethnography suggests that while structure, albeit complex, is relatively stable, on the level of meaning the different horizons through which the symbols are interpreted add in both fluidity and complexity – providing neither a stable foundation for arguments for or against historical authenticity.

Dr. Jonathan Miles-Watson (Durham University, Department of Theology)

Scandal Point: a tale of when and how a sign can become a symbol

In this paper I draw upon my field research in Shimla, North India, to explore how Scandal Point operates as both a sign and a symbol. In doing so I intend to demonstrate how classical symbolic theories can be fruitfully combined with contemporary ethnographic research to provide insights into the competing realities of existence in the postcolonial city

Synecdoche and Mimesis – the question of material symbolism in stone tools and figurines

In studies of the deliberate fragmentation of objects, bodies and places, the term ‘synecdoche’ has been central to the discussion of relational logic. The reason for the strong focus on part-for-whole relations was summarized by the philosopher David Bohm, for whom there was not and could not be any escape from fragmentation, since, ironically, it is the one thing in our lives which is universal. Bohm identifies the roots of fragmentation in human consciousness as being very deep and pervasive.

One distinction critical to much Palaeolithic research is between modern humans with symbolic behaviour and pre-modern hominids without. In supporting this argument, Wadley admits that “artifacts are not automatically imbued with symbolism: that happens only when they are used to define or mediate social relations”. But our point is exactly this – that the creation of tools out of persons does indeed define and mediate symbolically meaningful social relations from the earliest times when objects are used – i.e., some 2.7 million years ago. In the first half of this paper, I shall explore the way that object fragmentation can help us to understand the earliest, and simplest, forms of symbolic practices from the Early Palaeolithic onwards.

But there is a second, equally significant term related to synecdoche – mimesis. Taussig regards mimesis as a fundamental social practice, including the facility “to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other.” It can be readily appreciated that the fragments of a once-complete object are, in one sense, partial copies ... imitations of the other fragments, providing the opportunity to contextualise difference. These insights can lead to a more dynamic story of symbolically-charged fragmentation practices, as exemplified by fired clay miniature anthropomorphs – many of which are remarkably similar abstractions of real bodies. Some prehistorians, such as Bailey, suggest that the missing parts are more interesting than those surviving parts of figurines, inviting attention and giving the freedom to complete the partial figure. Others, such as Orphanides, use a theory of repetition, based upon mimesis, to identify the ways in which Neolithic people understood who they were and how they fitted into their communities. Through the examples of stone tools and clay figurines, I shall attempt to relate the two terms ‘synecdoche’ and ‘mimesis’ to provide some fresh insights into both symbolism and fragmentation.

1 February

Interdisciplinary workshop

Dr. Ian Kidd (Durham University, Department of Philosophy)

Sages as symbols

It is well established that symbols can be physical objects - such as images or icons - but it is less often supposed that certain persons can be symbols. Such neglect is odd given that many ancient philosophical and religious traditions have maintained that certain morally and spiritually enlightened persons - sages, adepts, masters - can be properly regarded as symbols -- of beauty, of goodness, and of the harmony of the cosmos. Indeed, such sages were regarded as authoritative precisely because of their status as living symbols of the achievability of the aspiration of successful integration of human lives into the wider order of things. This talk offers an account of sages as symbols and suggests that this offers instructive ways to understand the role of symbols in human life.

Dr. Andreas Pantazatos (Durham University, Department of Philosophy)

Trusting objects beyond the glass

A key current debate in archaeology and museum studies addresses the relationship between communities and archaeological objects. This debate, among others, involves how communities assign meaning to objects, and how objects might acquire the status of being a symbol within different cultures and traditions. However, this account tends to overlook how the perception of objects as symbols contributes to the understanding of their stewardship. In this paper, I argue that if symbols assigned to an object shape our ethical obligations towards this object, this might provide useful insights into our understanding of symbols. To test my hypothesis, I explore how museum trustees can accommodate different symbols assigned to the same object.

John Goodenough (Durham University, Department of Music, PhD Candidate)

A composers' conception of symbolism: frontiers - approaches to the illumination of music.

Beginning with a reflection on what musical meaning and “affect” might be, I shall consider how Semiology may be used in the processes of music’s clarification, with particular reference to music analysis.

I shall envisage which symbols might be important for us as musicians, both in notated and aural terms. I move on to discuss which musical elements may help develop an analysis, as exemplified by a moment from my thesis. Consideration will be given to two specific problems that ensue when comparing music from different times and places; in particular, the chord and how time and culture have changed its use and meaning. The paper closes with my experience as a composer, my speculation on music’s structure, its relationship with “affect” and thereby the importance of an understanding of the mimetic in music.

Dr. Anthony Atkinson (Durham University, Department of Psychology)

On the nature of emotions and the symbolic nature of emotional expressions

What are emotions? In the first part of the talk, I will begin by outlining a contemporary and widely held view of emotions as biological phenomena. On this view, emotions are preparatory adaptive responses, that is, coordinated systems of response shaped by natural selection to enable animals to cope with threats and opportunities presented to them by their physical and social environments. I will then illustrate this view by summarising an influential neurobiological theory of emotions, namely, that of Antonio Damasio. What are emotional expressions? In the second part of the talk, I will précis some of the key (and often contentious) proposals to have addressed this question, beginning with Darwin’s work. In so doing I will highlight the distinction between expressions and signals of emotion, as well as the symbolic nature of some such signals.

Alex Malt (Durham University, Department of Philosophy, PhD Candidate)

Symbols and cognitive extension

The 'extended mind hypothesis' (Donald 1991) proposes that mind extends from the brain into body and world. Symbols, on this view, are proposed to be 'scaffolds' and/or 'technologies', allowing agents to achieve acts of cognition otherwise beyond their reach. 'Well-formed' technologies mesh with our biological systems smoothly. Here, I suggest the importance of our innate structures for the development and use of symbols (at least, a subclass of symbols). Whilst linguists have discussed such structures, there seem to be two barriers to integration with archaeology: first, the American structuralists' shift (upon being confronted with Native American languages) from analysis of writing to analysis of speech; secondly, the generative linguists' shift from language as a set of social conventions to language as psychological faculty. I argue that the psychological mechanisms underlying speech might serve as criteria for the 'well-formedness' of written linguistic symbols, and that different writing systems - i.e. different technologies - might thereby provide different scaffolds for thought.

Dr. Emma Flynn (Durham University, Department of Education)

The development of children's understanding of symbolism

In this talk, I shall present an overview of the development of children's understanding and use of symbolism. I shall discuss the development of children's use of symbolic systems such as pretend play and language, and reflect on the interrelations of the development of these abilities. I shall also discuss the role of affect in children's acquisition of symbolic behaviors, such as social norms. Finally, I shall provide an overview of children's acquisition of more sophisticated symbolism, including similes and metaphors. The overarching aim will be to present an overview of what we mean by the term 'symbolism' within developmental psychology, and how an understanding of symbolism develops within childhood.

Dr. Gretchen Larsen (Durham University, Department of Marketing)

'Symbols for sale': A marketing perspective on symbolism in contemporary consumer societies

In contemporary markets, we not only purchase and consume products and services for their functional utility, but also for their symbolic value. The primary marketing practice through which the symbolic value of objects is captured, produced, distributed and consumed, is that of 'branding'. Through the lens of the 'brand', this talk will explore the marketing perspective on

the questions of what a symbol is; how it comes into being; and how people use, or consume, symbols in contemporary consumer societies.

To this end, we shall deconstruct an iconic brand in order to examine how symbols work in markets, focusing particularly on (1) the role of advertising in creating and promoting symbolic meaning, and (2) the ways in which our own consumption practices create and communicate the shared social and cultural meanings that underpin brands.

We see that brands exist as symbolic and cultural (as well as functional, sociological, and ideological) objects. Therefore, an understanding of the practices, mechanisms and processes of branding - the ways in which brands are used by marketers and consumers as symbols, and the issues and tensions that arise from so doing - can make a significant contribution to our understanding of contemporary symbolism.

* Levy, S (1959) "Symbols for Sale" *Harvard Business Review*, No. July/August, pp. 117-124.