Discussion: Perspectives on Symbolism from the Northeast and Midwest

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Symbolic studies in the Northeast and Midwest have undergone various theoretical perspectives over the past several decades. Among archaeologists, Robert Hall's 1977 paper, published in *American Antiquity* "An Anthropocentric Perspective for Eastern United States Prehistory," should be recognized as a pioneering study of symbolic artifacts in North American archaeology (Hall 1977). I remember cheering to myself as I read Hall's paper in the early 1980s while preparing an exhibition of ancient Ontario art for the Art Gallery of Ontario. On the basis of Hall's inspiration I included a well-crafted lithic point as our earliest expression, just prior to a pebble with an incised human face, both far earlier in date than the Iroquoian pipes that followed in our 5000 B.C.–A.D. 1967 "historic" sequence (Reid and Vastokas 1984).

Hall's 1977 paper stood out so meaningfully in those years from most other North American studies that considered archaeological materials—lithics and ceramics especially—as items of primarily utilitarian function and meaning. His was a recognition, at last, that not only so-called "ceremonial objects" or items adorned with representational images or so-called "decorative motifs" could be counted as having symbolic value in any spiritual, ritual, or aesthetic sense.

Since the late 1970s, however, most archaeologists have come to recognize that almost all recovered remains—other than biological ones—have symbolic cultural value (and even some biological ones may have this value), whether these remains be tangible material objects or intangible spatial patterning of material remains. Even more recently, whole sites and landscapes have emerged as subjects for symbolic analysis. Thanks to the inspiration of archaeological theorists Ian Hodder (1972), Christopher Tilley (1994), Richard Bradley (1998), and Margaret Conkey (1997), archaeological interpretation theory has shifted from science, as the analytical model of choice, to social science. These post-modern archaeological theorists moved on to a social science perspective (or paradigm) under the influence of social anthropologists Pierre Bourdieu, Victor Turner, and Clifford Geertz, who dealt with such unquantifiable domains as religion, art, and symbolism in general. Add to this mix the impact of that pioneer of cognitive archaeology, Alexander Marshack (1972), and we have the recipe for the kind of symbolic studies appearing today.

Even more recently than all of these examples, I would argue that archaeological interpretation is shifting yet again to include the humanities as an interpretive model (Vastokas 2005). The humanities depend less upon testability and they forego absolute proofs. They are much more reliant upon the concept of validity, in which interpretation founded upon the best available information is subject, instead, to the tests of time and further investigation. Archaeologists venture increasingly into interpretive domains more characteristically classified as belonging to the humanities. That is, they are attempting to access not only the intellectual content of symbolic artifacts, not only what people in the past may have concretely thought and believed as *collective* social aggregates, but they now strive also to discover what people in the past may have experienced and felt emotionally as *individual* human beings. In other words, some archaeologists are asking whether it is possible to recover the emotional as well as the content meaning of symbolic artifacts and landscapes (e.g., Bradley 1998; Thomas 2001). What I may coin as an "archaeology of experience," which would involve a process of "re-experiencing," is inspired by the philosophical epistemology of phenomenology, so far best exemplified in archaeology by Christopher Tilley's *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (1994).

We can never truly "re-capture" or "re-experience" the archaeological past as past peoples did, for everyone is an individual, in the past as in the present. But we can at least begin to approach the full texture of past meanings with the new interpretive means at our disposal. Among them, archaeologists may draw upon the insights of philosopher Mark Johnson who, in agreement with phenomenologist Heidegger, writes in *The Body in the Mind* (1987) that meaning, imagination, and reason have a basis in our physical human bodies.

After this lengthy preamble, we should now ask where, on this evolving spectrum of symbolic interpretations, do these papers on the Northeast and Midwest stand?

In general, they all reject the view of symbols as isolated fragments or signs, a view that addresses symbols in isolation and devoid of context. All papers clearly contextualize their subject, whether it be a particular image (Pearce's Turtle, Hall's Sacred Tree, Wonderley's ceramic faces, or Hamell and Fox's Rattlesnake), a particular medium (Cooper's ground stone or Williamson and Veilleux's bone), a particular technique (Robertson's two-dimensional pipe imagery), or an entire landscape feature (Salzer's rockshelter). Moreover, all papers are contextualized not only within their immediate cultural contexts, but also within an historical framework. This historical perspective further positions these papers squarely within postmodernism, a key feature of which is the variability of meaning in the flow of symbols and artifacts through time. Robert Hall's paper, in particular, moves thoroughly away from the ethnographic present perspective of past interpretive methods and towards the more complex view of historical change, variability, and cross-cultural interaction as factors affecting meaning.

Bob Pearce, too, examines the many material manifestations of Turtle across space and over time, from Turtle's earliest appearance in the Archaic period to her appearance in the postcontact era. In seeking to *understand* and not simply to "interpret" or "read" Turtle imagery in the Iroquoian context, Pearce approaches the hermeneutic model, which aims at an "horizon" of understanding between the symbolic artifact or image (the "work") and its interpreter, so different from the linguistic model, which simply equates a standardized form with a standardized, stable meaning.

Turtle is clearly an important cultural phenomenon in eastern North America and elsewhere. It should be noted that Turtle, while appearing in many parts of the world, is particularly distinctive and important east of the Mississippi. This fact could be examined more deeply. The question remains, however, as to the more specific meaning(s) of Turtle in the various contexts in which she appears, beyond that of her vital place in the Iroquoian story of genesis. We should not forget that meaning and the understanding of that meaning reside in particular contexts of use. Also, it is interesting and likely of importance that Turtle does not appear to play a role in the ideology of shamanism. My quick scan of specialists on shamanism—Mircea Eliade and Ake Hultkranz, for example—yielded no references to Turtle.

Ron Williamson and Annie Veilleux focused on human cranial bone as the embodiment of crucial symbolic meaning for the Ontario Iroquoians. In examining a range of bone artifacts, some intriguing hints as to the meaning of bone as a symbolic medium were made. As always, access to deeper meanings are possible only when the artifacts are examined in their specific contexts of use, whether these be sweat lodges, burials, or specific rituals.

David Robertson examines a most intriguing set of pipes, about which I have also wondered for some time, suspecting as well that they were related somehow to Ojibwa/Anishinaabe pictography.

Tony Wonderley's paper, finally, makes sense for us as to the meaning of the little faces on Iroquoian ceramic vessels. The association he draws between the modelled faces, figures, and corn-cob motifs and the context of use for these pots—that is, pots made by women and used by women to cook the Iroquoian staple of life—all add up to a most convincing paper. It exemplifies the best a postmodernist perspective has to offer for archaeological interpretation: an historical

perspective; the crucial importance of the socio-cultural context; and specifics as to the context of actual use. It cannot be emphasized enough that the specific context of use in time and space is everything for the valid interpretation of symbolic meaning. Wonderley reaffirms this fact when he cites Ian Hodder's statement that access to meaning "requires looking at how the objects were situated in social practice."

Robert Hall's examination of Tree and Pole symbolism is an admirable handling of the complexities involved in any interpretation of symbols in historical perspective. I say this as one who has also grappled with the Sacred Tree and Pole in the history of the Northwest Coast (see Vastokas 1973/1974). Trees and poles are one of the most ubiquitous symbolic devices in human history, going back, I believe, to an early shamanic context in the Upper Palaeolithic, where it appears as a bird-on-a-pole in Lascaux Cave. The study of Trees and poles can take a global perspective, the perspective of long-term history, or a local perspective. Hall has taken the local perspective, examining changes and variability in meaning from both within and without the immediate cultural system. The important point of his paper is an entirely postmodern one, and that is that symbolic images or objects are undergoing constant change and transformation, adapting and re-adapting continually in response to changing socio-cultural conditions and to cross-cultural interactions.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that core meanings may be retained throughout historical and cultural processes of change. Meaning can be shown to "build" upon pre-existing meanings to a greater or lesser degree. Religious symbolic images, in particular, tend to accumulate rather than displace meanings. This argument has been made by historian of religions Mircea Eliade for religious beliefs and practices in general. It is for this reason, for example, that some core elements of shamanism seem to persist even in the beliefs and practices of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, including the concept and symbol of a Sacred Tree.

Robert Salzer's account of the Gottschall rock-shelter site in Wisconsin represents the growing recognition that symbolic analysis should also address landscape features as places of spiritual meaning and ritual activity.

George Hamell and William Fox explore the symbolic significance of yet another prevalent image and creature in eastern North America—the rattlesnake. The paper manifests, in particular, Hamell's characteristic methodology for the symbolic interpretation of myth and material culture, that of metaphoric association. Rattlesnakes are examined contextually, in myth, material culture, ritual practice, and as reptilian creatures with distinctive physical and behavioral traits. And from these examinations, rattlesnakes are shown to be associated meaningfully with lightning, thunder, and rainfall in the first instance; with the power of shamans and warriors in the second; with diamond-patterned quillwork designs; with other long-tailed, potent creatures such as mountain lions; and, finally, by further extension, with rattles and bottle-gourds.

Hamell's metaphoric association method may provide a key to understanding *semiosis*, the term used in semiotics to refer to the processes involved in the communication of meaning (see Noth 1990 for an introduction to semiotics). Metaphor, as recognized by Mark Johnson (1987), is a fundamental symbolic process, grounded in the body's experience of being and acting in the real world, a process, moreover, akin to phenomenology (e.g., "The method I employ might be called a form of descriptive or empirical phenomenology, in that I will be attempting a kind of 'geography of human experience'." Johnson 1987:xxxvii).

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