

Seminar SAW
Rethinking Practices and Cultures in the History of Science
May 4th, 2016

Marc Vander Linden (Institute of archaeology, University College London)

Archaeological culture, material culture or culture? Material and anthropological dimensions of a debated concept

Abstract - Archaeologists stand alone in the field of humanities and social sciences in the sense that, at least in prehistory, material remains constitute their sole source of information regarding the human past. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century AD, pioneers of the discipline developed the concept of 'archaeological culture' to classify the growing amount of data available to them. Its definition remains Gordon Childe's iconic formulation of "certain types of remains – pots, implements, ornaments, burial sites, house forms, constantly recurring together". Following the wider intellectual spirit of the time, these typological constructs were interpreted as the material productions of past tribes of which birth, movement and fate could be traced back. From the 1960s onwards, archaeological cultures were criticised, especially in Anglo-American archaeology, because of the naivety of such culture-historical readings and because the defining categories of data rarely overlap as implied in the original definition. Subsequent theoretical schools shifted the focus towards paradigms influenced firstly by natural sciences, and later by philosophy and anthropology. This gradual move was accompanied by a denial of archaeological culture, and a growing emphasis upon material culture as a factor shaped by and shaping human agency. Yet, archaeological cultures still remain a frequent feature of the literature and are routinely accepted in numerous traditions of research across the globe. The success of this longevity partly rests in the existence of material patterns in the archeological record and the lack of convincing theoretical and methodological alternatives to explain this empirical reality.

Through a review of the history of archaeological cultures and their underlying assumptions, this presentation will review their past, present and future role in archaeological reasoning. Their wider relevance will be discussed, especially the intimate, but far from straightforward, relationship between archaeological culture, material culture and culture (as viewed in other social sciences).

Suggested reading

Roberts B. & Vander Linden M. 2011. Introduction. In Roberts B. & Vander Linden M. (eds.) *Investigating archaeological cultures. Material culture variability and transmission*. New-York: Springer: 1-21.

Vander Linden M. & Roberts B. 2011. A tale of two countries: contrasting culture-history in British and French archaeology. In Roberts B. & Vander Linden M. (eds.) *Investigating archaeological cultures. Material culture variability and transmission*. New-York: Springer: 23-40.