# note

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## Archaeology without -isms *Andrew Baines and Kenneth Brophy*

### Abstract
This paper examines the division that has grown up in contemporary archaeology between practical and theoretical branches of the discipline. It argues that the two sides of this schism are archaeological versions of objectivism and subjectivism, and that they really represent a single dualism. To break out of this, what is needed is an approach to thinking and doing archaeology that recognizes the embodied nature of archaeological engagements with material culture, together with an understanding of the emergent, relational character of archaeological data. In the light of this discussion, we attempt to redefine the building blocks of archaeology (material culture and the past), and to show with a case study how such an archaeology might generate new insights in practice.

### Keywords
Postprocessualism; material culture; time; positivism; stone rows; Bronze Age

> The practice of archaeology is not as objective as fieldworkers would like to believe; nor is it as subjective as theorists often suppose (Bradley 1998, 1).

### Introduction
Archaeology at the beginning of the 21st century appears to be divided between two paradigms. These might be crudely characterized as 'processualism' and 'postprocessualism', although the former may be more broadly defined as a strong positivist stance among traditionalist proponents of archaeology as well as characterizing the majority of archaeology undertaken in the field. Because of this apparent schism, the gulf between practice and theory refuses to close. While recent approaches by Hodder (1997; 1999) and Jones (2002) have gone some way to resolving this division, this has not percolated down to everyday archaeology. Reflexive excavation and post-excavation is still not commonplace. There is more to be done if we are to avoid a situation where neither side of the divide wants to talk to the other, for instance where 'fieldworkers' feel that they can do very well without theory (Bintliff 1996).

In this paper we will argue that the distinction between these two archaeological -isms (positivism and postprocessualism/interpretative archaeology) is divisive and unnecessary. Without decrying the respective values of either empirical or theoretical approaches to archaeology, we will argue that

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archaeology is underpinned by ideas that are explicit in neither processual nor postprocessual accounts. By bringing these ideas into the open, our hope is that we may take the first steps in constituting a discourse and a practice that are distinctively archaeological. In so doing we will outline both the grounds for a critique of contemporary archaeology and our basis for believing that the future of archaeology should be one in which archaeologists cannot hope to study the past without also acknowledging their own involvement in its creation.

It has become an accepted strategy, when writing about theory in archaeology, to suggest that the natural science models of new archaeology have been outflanked by the interpretative turn taken by 'postprocessual' archaeologies (cf. Patterson 1990; Tilley 1993; 1994; 2004; Thomas 1996; Shanks and Hodder 1998; Hodder 2001). The label 'postprocessualism' itself enshrines this assumption. In essence, the construction of general theories and a set of methodologies on the basis of the objective analysis of hard empirical data has been replaced by a multifaceted, polymorphic family of approaches through which 'soft' concepts such as subjectivity, experience, agency and empathy are presented as the preferred subjects of archaeological enquiry (see Shanks 1992; and more generally Johnson 1999, 98–115).

We are not convinced that the process of change has been anything like as smooth or as total as it is often presented. Many archaeologists, especially those involved in field archaeology, refuse to accept the new primacy of theory. Their attitudes range from misunderstanding through disinterest to outright denial (e.g. Binford 1987; Bintliff 1991; Renfrew and Zubow 1995; and see Patterson 1990, 190–91). For them, explicit theory is simply not needed to make sense of the material traces of past activity. What, they might argue, is the point of our theoretical soul-searching when the end result appears little different to that arrived at by traditional means? This attitude appears to be bolstered by the fact that believable accounts of the past were achieved before there was any thought of explicit theory as an issue central to archaeology. Looking at some of the earliest attempts to interpret prehistoric monuments, for instance, it is notable that they contain very similar ideas to those recently expressed in postprocessual accounts (Tilley 1999, chapter 3). Furthermore, there is a lack of confidence in many postprocessual approaches, manifest in a tendency to justify a particular theoretical slant by attacks on processual orthodoxy (e.g. Hodder 1986; Thomas 1990; 1996; Shanks 1992; Tilley 1994 and so on). Thus most postprocessual accounts are organized around an inherent tension (Patterson 1990, 196–97; Joffe 2003), whether it be empiricism vs. interpretation, rescue vs. research or practical vs. theoretical archaeology. The framing of the debate by these and other dualisms is not conducive to the generation of new ideas. Indeed, it seems to have led to a pervasive assumption that there is a necessary opposition between the theoretical and the empirical in archaeology. Ironically, it might be argued that the only way that postprocessualism could make an impact on field archaeology would be through the development of an empirical methodology.

Let us look a little more closely at the source of the processual/ postprocessual schism. To us, it is the archaeological form of a set of

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age-old dualisms in Western thought, such as the opposition between nature and culture, and the pre-existence of form in the mind or in the world, which boil down to an opposition between 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism'. It has become increasingly clear that neither of these extreme positions is able to deliver an adequate account of material culture, let alone any other social phenomenon (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). This is because both ignore the embodied nature of human experience; that is, the way in which perceptions of the world and the ideas and concepts that depend on and inform such perceptions emerge from interactions between humans and material things. Rather than considering, say, subjectivity, agency and emotion as emerging in particular material and cultural circumstances, they have become universals, of which postprocessual archaeology seeks reflections in material culture. This is filtered through appeals to philosophy (Thomas 1996; 2004), ethnography (Tilley 1994; 1996; Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998; Bradley 2000), and common human physicality (Jones 1999, 320). Similarly, processual archaeology seeks to uncover essential laws of human behaviour through the application of a body of general theory and techniques. What both have in common is an unstated belief in the pre-existence of form, whether internal to the person or external in the world, which need merely be realized and subsequently discovered. We are not the first to argue that processualism and postprocessualism form part of a related (and flawed) philosophical tradition (Karlsson 1998b; Holtorf and Karlsson 2000). As Karlsson (1998a; 1998c) has argued, both are rooted in anthropocentrism, manifestations of what Merleau-Ponty (1962) called objective thinking.

Archaeology occupies a unique place in the contemporary discourse of the humanities and social sciences in that it considers how past social lives can be reached through the study of material culture, and how material culture participates in the constitution of the social being (Shanks and Tilley 1987, 108). It therefore makes little sense to conceive of social agency and materiality as separate domains of subject and object respectively. Rather, the link between material culture and social agency is rooted in the realization that both are aspects of embodied human experience. Clearly, this applies as much to our experiences as archaeologists as it does to the past lives we are trying to reconstruct. This is an understanding lacking in much of postprocessualism, which, relying heavily on universal concepts of mind and self, often misses the embodied nature of the human experience of material culture. It has been pointed out in recent years that the archaeologist participates in the creation of the past that he or she studies, rather than merely stumbling across it buried in the ground (e.g. Bender 1998, 13–23; Tilley 2004; Holtorf 2005, 30–33).

We have been inspired by recent archaeological theory and would argue that it has broadened our horizons immensely – archaeologists can no longer ignore society – but we now need to excavate the foundations of contemporary archaeology, which the theoretical revolution has left intact. What is needed is a radical problematization of the basic concepts with which we operate as archaeologists, the basic concepts that are untheorized. In the remainder of this paper we will present our own attempt to begin this process of problematization. Our point of departure is that archaeology is constituted within a discourse that is itself an aspect of social life, so we must consider

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how archaeological concepts and data emerge from our own engagements with the material world.

**Archaeology, data and agency**

Archaeological data are not merely found, rather they emerge from encounters between archaeologist and world (Hodder 1999, 49–50; Lucas 2001, 16). Archaeological discourse, to a large extent, prefigures the kinds of narrative within which our data will be set, and data are themselves constituted so as to slip easily into existing forms of narrative. This interdependence of archaeologist, data and narrative has long been recognized within the postprocessual tradition. There has been a tendency among theoretically minded archaeologists to see this relationship as stemming from an opposition between subject and object. If there is no archaeological record composed of pre-existing, observable, clearly divisible data, then the opposite must be true: data, in this view, are subjective impressions of the material world. Both sides of the divide see the issue of subjectivity as a call to arms, and both tend to deal with it in similar ways.

As a result of the polarized nature of the debate, adherents of processual and postprocessual archaeology have tended to gravitate towards rather extreme positions. Very few proponents of either -ism would adhere to a position of absolute subjectivism (relativism) or objectivism. Nevertheless, both the practice and the theoretical discourse of archaeology seem to be predicated on just such a stark distinction. Both propagate a distinction between the immaterial, experiencing subject and the material, objective world. For processualists, the perspective is a 'view from nowhere', which postulates a disembodied, disinterested observer entirely separate from what is observed. Postprocessualists, in emphasizing the primacy of the subject, risk assuming a disembodied human self, unchanging across time and space. The most explicit attempts to elucidate the human subject in the past draw on ideas of agency and empathy – it has often been assumed that these concepts can be equated with the ways in which they are exercised in contemporary Western society. This amounts to the assumption that all humans share a range of emotional states given specific material or social situations (Mithen 1991; 1996; 2000; Meskell 1996; Jones and Bradley 1999; Jones and MacGregor 2002), or conceive of themselves as acting as discrete social agents (e.g. Bell 1992; Dobres and Robb 2000; Gardner 2004).

The past is a mirror of the way in which we like to view ourselves. There is no reason to assume a commonality of emotional reaction; archaeology has recovered ample evidence for material conditions, apparently commonplace in the past, which would result in extreme emotions in 21st-century Westerners. Indeed, it is interesting to note that early archaeological interpretations of prehistoric peoples tended to attribute them certain characteristics that differentiated them from modern Western humans, such as notions of 'pit-dwellings', cannibalism and people living in their own filth ('occupations deposits'). The use of agency as a way of understanding past social lives suffers from similar drawbacks. In order to exercise agency, and indeed to hold beliefs about the world, it is necessary to belong to a community of language-users. Beliefs about, and descriptions of, the world are both made

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possible by one's immersion in the 'communicative interactions constituted by complex patterns of causal interaction with others in a shared world' (Ramberg 2000, 362). If agency is exercised against the background of a shared social and linguistic universe, it cannot be considered an immutable property of human individuals.

As we have already argued, in prioritizing one over the other, both processual and postprocessual archaeologies assume the independence of human minds and the material world. It is on the basis of a distinction between the world of ideas and information and the world of things that archaeological data are usually constituted. However, recent work in the human sciences questions the validity of maintaining such internal/external distinctions (see Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991; Karlsson 1998c; Gosden 1999; Oyama 2000; Damasio 2003). The material world neither possesses a form that is discoverable without our interacting with it, nor is it merely the product of our concepts and ideas. Rather, our understanding of the world emerges as we establish relations and interactions with it. Thus our experiences of objects are embodied and have a temporal, historical dimension. We are not arguing for a 'halfway house' on a continuum between objectivity and subjectivity, a compromise 'third way', but for another way of doing archaeology that recognizes its relational, emergent character. Clearly, this presents a challenge. How are we are to make sense of the unfamiliar material culture formations that we confront as archaeologists, given that our descriptions and interpretations are formulated within a discursive community other than that in which these material cultures originate?

We must commence the process of getting to grips with the material we study by recognizing that we exercise agency as members of a community of archaeologists, and that we conduct a distinctively archaeological discourse. Processual archaeology has it that description gives rise to objective data. However, the act of description is, in itself, an exercise of agency from within the discursive universe of archaeology. There can be no description without interpretation. For this reason mere morphological description can never be considered an entirely objective way of accounting for archaeological material. The material formations on which archaeological discourse is articulated have their origins in some other discourse, some other social world. However, they owe their existence as data to the exercise of social agency embodied in archaeological practice. If we are to conceive of archaeological data as other than simply the products of our own practices, then a process of translation is required (Shanks 1992, 79–80) – not decoding the inherent meaning and form of a pre-existent material 'text' but giving rise to a new set of relations between archaeologist and material. As we will argue later, it is through these relations that we maintain a sense of the past in our work. Through translation we might conceive of other embodied practices giving rise to these formations, and of what agents, subjectivities and persons may have been constituted therein, without losing sight of the specifically archaeological discourse within which we express them. We will return to the importance of relations of difference and similarity in the following section.

Although we approach material culture with an existing body of concepts and categories, the specificities of our data are emergent in archaeological

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practice itself. We should not be content to limit ourselves to those instances where material formations appear familiar because they merely conform to our preconceived categories and concepts. On the contrary, we should attend to those aspects that are difficult to explain, where our reactions jar or mystify, when our categories and metaphors fail us. The effort of translation should be focused where there is a failure of understanding or emotional incoherence on our part. So our encounters with material formations should be holistic, should take account of the axes that exist between the familiar and the unfamiliar. We may be justified in recognizing some aspects of other material worlds as existing in ours also, and indeed the process of translation must involve expressing them in our own language, but there will also be unfamiliar juxtapositions and entirely foreign objects that cause us to stretch and distort our language and concepts. It is vital that we understand that the process of translation relies on our consideration of the relations between things – we cannot bring into being new categories of things without thinking from within our own body of concepts. 'Other' categories can only be conceived of by recontextualizing already categorizable things within novel networks of relations. This is the essence of the kind of relational archaeology for which we are arguing. Our intention is not to suggest that the meaning of individual objects may be drawn out against a specific context. On the contrary, we think that object and context are inseparable. So we are arguing for an archaeology that views material formations as composed of networks of relations as much as of distinct objects.

So far the argument has been rather an abstract one, and perhaps there is little about it that is distinctively archaeological. One of our criticisms of postprocessual archaeology has been that it makes too little difference in practice. To move on, we must show how we can come to a new understanding of archaeological practice itself. We will begin here by exploring what might be considered two basic elements of archaeology, elements that at the same time are taken for granted: the past and material culture.

## The past

As archaeologists we situate our narratives about the relationship between material culture and social life in the past. This is generally seen both as the *raison d'être* of archaeology (as opposed to ethnography, for instance), and its great strength (archaeology can study the long and short term). Yet the question of what we mean by 'the past' in archaeology has seldom been asked. We use the term as a convenient label without unpacking its content. Dictionaries usually define 'past' as *the time before the present*. This is relatively straightforward in terms of linear time, in which the 'pasts' we are interested in as archaeologists involve material culture formations originating from the relevant point on, or segment of, a temporal continuum (Gell 1992, chapter 17). However, the particular epistemological problems encountered in archaeology mean that this simple definition of the past is not sufficient; that is, we cannot directly experience the segments of time that interest us – they are unobservable. All that we have are material fragments and ruins (Shanks and Hodder 1998, 75; Brophy 2004).

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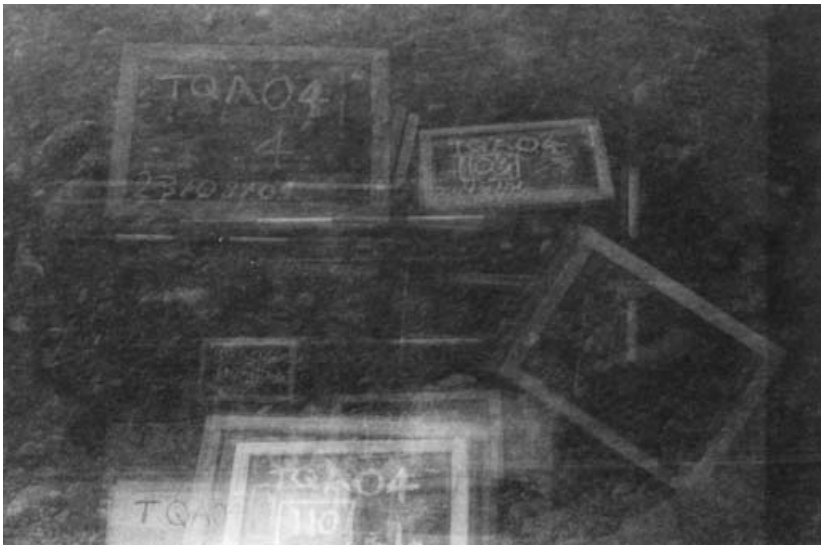

**Figure 1** The past.

In fact, many of the objects studied by archaeologists do not self-evidently belong to the past, and were not recognized as doing so prior to the birth of archaeology as a discipline. Because the objects in which we are interested have no temporality that we can experience outside of archaeological practice, we have a dual problem of interpretation: what was the temporal dimension of the social lives we are trying to reconstruct, and in what sense is this past open to us as archaeologists? Despite the advent of absolute dating, all the material cultures we study as archaeologists exist simultaneously. Archaeological practice therefore entails attributing a property of 'pastness' to material remains, in order to distinguish them from things that belong to the present. From this it follows that the pastness of things emerges in archaeological practice; it is not an inherent property of objects themselves. Lucas (2005, 126–28) has recently argued that merely by rendering such fragments the objects of our archaeological gaze, so we make them prehistoric; this observation captures the contradiction inherent in archaeological objects, that of difference (the pastness and physical form of the object) and familiarity (the application of language to that object).

'Time' can also be defined as the *dimension of change*. This seems to be the concept of time that actually operates when we recognize things as belonging to the past in archaeology. The pasts we are concerned with appear to be linked to processes of change, as observed in material culture, that are prior to the temporal frameworks we assign to them. Of course, the same objection can be offered to the recognition of change in archaeology as to that of a concept of linear time, since we cannot observe change in material cultures that are present to us simultaneously, rather we conceive of change as a relationship between otherwise separate objects, or between properties of

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those objects. What we conceptualize as *change* in material culture is actually present to us as *difference*.

The pastness of things is materialized in the differences between them, because this is how we recognize the dimension of change in material culture. The past is instantiated in the act of discovery; we recognize things as being of the past because the contexts in which we find them are different to those we encounter in our everyday lives (buried in the ground, stratified on top of one another, combined in odd or unfamiliar assemblages). The past should therefore be seen not as a pre-existent property of things, but as a network of relations between us and the material culture with which we engage as archaeologists. Pastness is part of what renders worlds of material culture incomprehensible to us (the process of 'alienation' (Lucas 2005, 127)), and what simultaneously demands that we account for the difference between our own materiality and that with which we are presented as archaeologists. Thus the past is a matrix of differences within which we study material culture as archaeologists. This difference, which constitutes the dimension of pastness, is not a latent property that we can read off from material culture, rather it emerges from the translational character of our engagements with material culture.

**Material culture**

Although much effort has been expended in explaining the role of material culture, there have been fewer enquiries into what material culture actually is, and how we can recognize it when we find it. There seems to be a general acceptance that the nature of material culture is self-evident: the product of human culture, as opposed to the natural aspects of the world studied by environmental specialists, for example. However, if we abandon the idea of a fundamental distinction between the natural and the cultural (as distinct from a relational one), as we have argued we should, there seems little essential difference between humanity, and human activity, and the rest of the physical world. Indeed, ethnography provides numerous examples of societies that make no such distinction, and others who situate the dividing line between nature and culture very differently to us (Tilley 1994, 35–67; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Bradley 2000; Ingold 2000). There is no reason why we should presume to divide natural from cultural aspects of material formations from the outset (Bender 1992). We suggest that it is legitimate to consider everything within a particular material world as material culture, in that it all plays a part in the constitution of human social life. Material culture would then include landscape, environment, foodstuffs, human and animal bodies – things often called 'natural' – as well as the more obviously artificial products of human action. For this reason archaeology should not rely on a-priori theorizing alone, but should engage with and account for results generated both by archaeological fieldwork and the various empirical strategies of the other human sciences.

We return here to the concepts of empathy and agency. We have already argued that, usually, they are presented as largely internal processes, exercised independently of external material conditions. However, if, as we argue, mind and body are indivisible, if people are as much physical as mental beings, then different kinds of people must be constituted within different

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**Figure 2** Material culture.

material conditions. This is why the study of material culture is important – we cannot fully conceive what it is to live a different social life without also exploring the possibilities of different material lives. Social worlds and material worlds are inextricably related, and therefore the constitution of social agents is intimately related to the material worlds in which they find themselves (Fowler 2004; Jones 2005). One implication of this argument is that there is a difference between the material worlds that play a part in the development of the individual, and the more limited domain of things that such individuals themselves would recognize as cultural. These material worlds may be partly coextensive, but they are not identical. We therefore think it is incumbent on us to investigate material culture at scales that are social as well as personal, intersubjective as well as subjective, regional and global as well as local, for these different scales go to make up the webs of relations in which human lives are suspended.

Of course, this argument applies as much to the practice of archaeology as it does to what we term the past. As archaeologists we study material culture formations as objects, but we are ourselves constituted through our relationship with worlds of material culture. We should not assume that our experiences of material culture afford us direct access to the material world of the past. We should problematize such experience, as it is here again that the vital relations of difference and similarity arise, here that the experiential relationship between archaeologist and archaeology becomes central to the interpretative process. We would argue that the unfamiliarity of past material cultures is crucial, for it draws attention to the problem of our engagement with it, of the dialectic between the present of archaeology and the traces of the past. We have already argued that a process akin to translation is needed, a translation of material formations rather than written or spoken languages.

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In order to situate the differences of other material worlds within our own discourse, we require something like a 'key', some recognizable element within an unfamiliar material formation. This is why we cannot abandon words like 'pot', 'cairn', 'house', 'pit' and 'hearth' in favour of neologisms or morphological types. Nevertheless, cultural difference should be articulated between archaeologist and material, not within and between preconstituted typological structures that render past material cultures intelligible but drive out difference. We should be open to the unfamiliarity of the relations between material things, and so allow radical difference to emerge through our narratives.

**Excavation – a point of engagement**

Excavation is where archaeologists engage most directly with the material world. As such it is a key arena in which material cultures emerge, and other fields of archaeological practice tend to rely on the basic categories of material generated by excavation. Critics of traditional established excavation methods have cited the primacy of description over interpretation, the anonymity of excavation reports, the inflexibility of methods and the need for more ambiguous and polysemous results (e.g. Tilley 1989; Hodder 1992; 1997; 1999; Bender, Hamilton and Tilley 1997; Lucas 2001; Bradley 2003). Less attention has been paid to the relationship between archaeologist and archaeology (but see Holtorf 2005, chapter 2), a relationship that is central to our argument here. The emphasis has mostly been on the form in which the practices involved in fieldwork are reported, rather than on the process itself. We think that what is needed is a way of preserving a sense of the relations of difference generated by our engagements with material culture – if we lose this, any sense of understanding the past also becomes lost. Regardless of what methods we use, how we organize the excavation team, and in what format and style the final report is written, this point of engagement is critical. However, this is perhaps one of the most standardized, prescribed and censored aspects of archaeology as a discipline.

As archaeologists we have set methodologies that have been developed to manage our engagements with material remains. Some of these are detached and attempt to tackle archaeological problems at a descriptive level, such as field survey, fieldwalking, geophysical survey and aerial photography. In such methodologies a limited number of specialized participants generate data that are often left to be interpreted and/or excavated by other archaeologists. Other areas of practice, especially excavation, allow a more intensive relationship to develop between archaeologist and object. Excavation is a process that is mostly prescriptive, based on manuals (e.g. Barker 1993; Collis 2001) and legal restrictions (e.g. PPG16 in the UK). The process of excavation is stage-managed in such a way that it is difficult to quantify the role of the archaeologist in planning the excavation, what actually happens on-site, and what happens after as the target of excavation is brought to publication. At all stages of excavation, actions and thoughts are governed by archaeological discourse, professional standards and recording strategies, and yet anyone who has participated in the process knows that this is not the reality at the trowel's edge.

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**Figure 3** View of the excavation trench at Battle Moss from the north. The stones move from one archaeological category (standing stones) to another (contexts).

We want here to use our own recent experience in excavating a prehistoric site in northern Scotland as a case study, both to explore in a more concrete way some of the issues we have sketched out, and also to suggest ways in which this crucial field of archaeological practice might be changed. The site, Battle Moss in Caithness, Highland, consists of a set of multiple parallel stone rows, apparently aligned on a Bronze Age cairn, the existence of which was established by the excavations (figure 3; Baines, Brophy and Pannett in prep.). There are at least 25 similar sites in the counties of Caithness and Sutherland, although no other has been subject to formal excavation (Myatt 1988). The processes of planning and carrying out the excavation, and subsequent post-excavation analyses, have conformed to traditional, established methods. The archaeological process is bounded by certain modes of behaviour and rules that are difficult to subvert in a meaningful manner in the present climate. However, the issues and ideas presented in this paper were in our minds throughout the project, and eventually influenced the way in which we interacted with and interpreted the site. Ultimately, reflection on our own attitudes to the site, and our behaviour on-site, facilitated a kind of archaeology of self over the course of the project. Nevertheless, behaviour on-site can only be analysed after the event; such reflection can inform future fieldwork (see below).

At Battle Moss we had a number of preconceptions about the site that inevitably affected the ways that we excavated, from the location of trenches to the interpretation of what we found. Excavation techniques tend to confirm preconceptions, and it was only when the evidence started to veer away from

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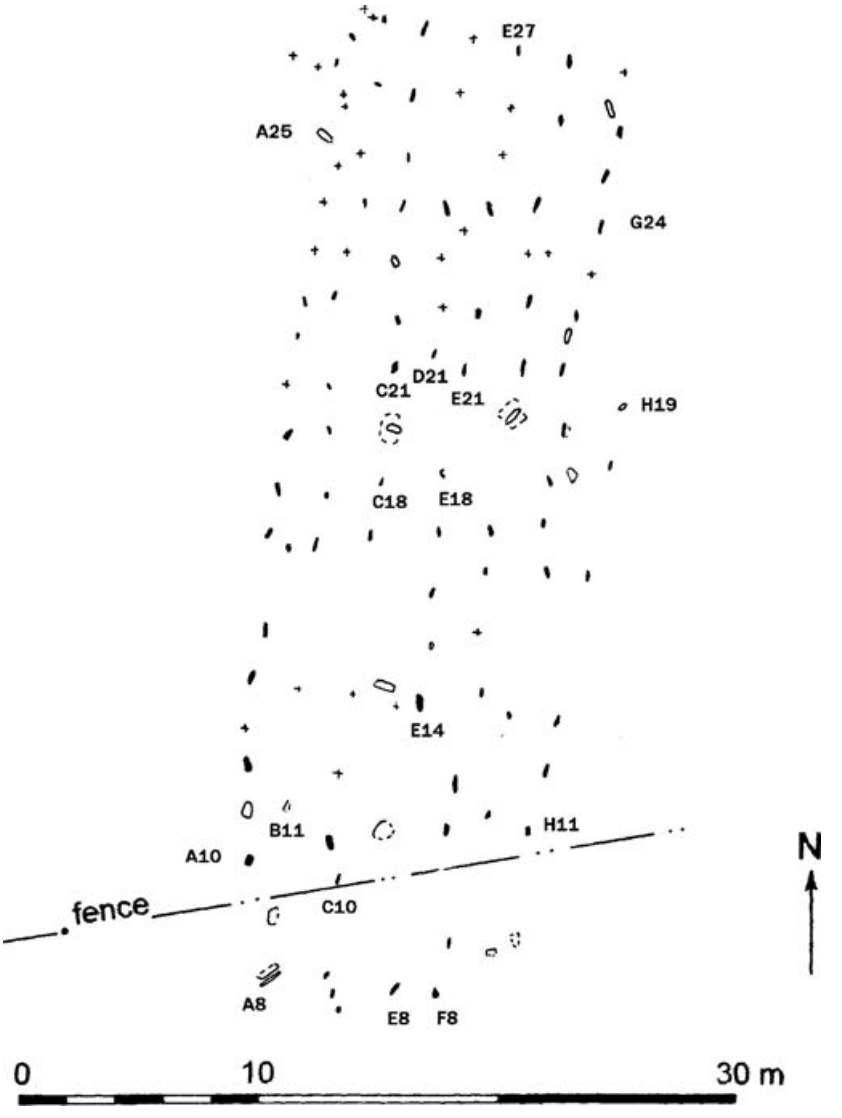


**Figure 4** Plan of Battle Moss, produced by plane table in 2003 by Paul Humphreys. The coded numbering system is our working nomenclature for the standing stones. Crosses represent buried stones identified through probing.

what we expected that we were forced to confront our preconceptions, and to respond to the differences between our own concepts and ideas and the material evidence that was emerging. This in turn affected our methodology.

For instance, we had assumed throughout our preparations, and during the early stages of the excavation, that the monument followed an ordered pattern of eight parallel rows of regularly spaced, short standing stones (figure 4). We even allocated a unique code to each stone (e.g. A21, G17) on the assumption

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that they were part of a regular grid consisting of eight rows. This was the assumption of previous researchers, although previous surveys of the site (RCAHMS 1911; Thom 1971; Ruggles 1981; Mercer 1985) had struggled to depict it in this way and had generally disagreed on both the number of stones and the position of many of them. One of the eight rows, in particular the central row D, has always been difficult to find in the southern half of the monument. Various possible candidates for row D stones in this area were identified by different surveyors, including ourselves. Upon excavation we realized that this centrally placed row exists only in the northern half of the monument, and that it is roughly half the length of the other known rows. The expectation of regularity had allowed a few scattered stones lying on the surface in the southern half of the monument (probably field clearance) to be appropriated into the rows in various different configurations to maintain the assumed plan. In a sense, archaeologists were expanding the site even as they planned it. (Almost all published plans of this and similar sites in Caithness and Sutherland are depicted with a superimposed grid, setting out the azimuth and unit of measurement apparently used in their construction (e.g. Thom 1971, 98), reinforcing the perception of regularity.) Expectation inevitably shapes methodology; we located our trenches according to the expected layout of the monument, but later had to extend the excavated area to examine and confirm the existence of a row D that was shorter than expected. For over a century surveyors had forced a long eighth row into the middle of the monument, not because there was really any evidence for it, but because it fitted in with a preconceived idea of the site as a regular grid. It was not traditional excavation techniques that led us to test the validity of row D, but rather inhabiting the monument for several weeks, moving within it and being forced to think about it.

As the excavations progressed it became more and more apparent that the site was set out in anything but a regular grid. All of the stones were still in their original sockets, rather than having been moved by post-abandonment processes (such as solifluction) as has always been assumed (e.g. Thom 1971, 95). The stones are irregularly spaced but apparently haphazardly aligned (rather than straight along the rows as suggested by Thom 1967, 156), and the rows change direction erratically. However, the stones themselves were clearly erected with great care – most are still firm in their sockets after several millennia. Indeed, it appeared that the exact positioning of the stones was not random either; the socket for one had been dug, with great effort, through the bedrock, when moving it a few tens of centimetres or so to either side would have cleared the obstacle (figure 5).

Initially we were puzzled by the odd combination of firmly erected, deliberately placed stones and the haphazard appearance of the monument as a whole. In our darkest moments we suspected that we would never be able to 'understand' the site. This was probably because we were trying to explain the site within a framework based entirely on our own categories, concepts and metaphors, for instance symmetry, order, regularity, formal geometry, planning, efficiency and completion. This framework formed the basis of our initial embodied engagement with the site, and forced us, at first, to think in terms such as these. However, the stone rows steadfastly resisted explanation

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**Figure 5** Stone hole at Battle Moss cut through bedrock, suggesting the stone had to be in this exact location, to the point of inconvenience.

in terms such as these. It would, of course, have been possible to account for the monument in negative terms ('... the builders of the site were clearly not concerned with regularity or symmetry', etc.). However, this would not be an explanation but merely a reiteration of our own preconception-led confusion. Nevertheless, such confusion and failure of understanding carries within it the possibility of progress, as it is here that the crucial relations of difference and similarity are manifest.

Partly through the continued, embodied interaction with the monument that excavation allows and partly, it must be admitted, through a certain amount of good fortune, we began to see a way out of the impasse. One of the students working on the site drew our attention to the fact that the stone he was working on (E8) appeared to be aligned on a Bronze Age cairn visible on the far horizon (figure 6). Examining the other stones that were angled away from the main axis of the rows, we were astonished to find that many seemed to 'align' on various archaeological features in the surrounding landscape (Neolithic and Bronze Age cairns, and standing stones). At once the monument seemed to snap into focus, with the realization that it had been built to establish relations with its surroundings that would never have been predicted on the basis of a regular grid. Our engagement with the monument shifted from the insular micro-detail of the stones themselves to a wider perspective, drawing on a broader spatial and temporal canvas.

It is certainly not an original idea to suggest that such monuments incorporated alignments. Previous approaches had almost without exception suggested that the rows were aligned on some astronomical event, often the lunar cycle (Thom 1971; Myatt 1988), hence the grids, azimuths and so on. However, our observations suggested that individual stones, or small

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**Figure 6** Standing stone E8 referencing Warehouse West, a Bronze Age cairn on the horizon.

groups of stones, and not the rows, were 'pointing' outwards. By situating the site within the wider tradition of multiple stone rows, the idea of lunar observatories became even less likely; there are several groupings of rows (for instance at least five sets of rows) in the Warehouse/Garrywhin area a few kilometres from Battle Moss. Why build five lunar observatories in the same location? The clustering of sites suggests local concerns that were continually being revisited, but we have also to consider the possibility that Battle Moss, an isolated site, may represent the actions of a different community. However, the rows seem to be indicative of wider trends in the Bronze Age in northern and north-eastern Scotland where megalithic monuments seem to embody a

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**Figure 7** Packing stones visible on the surface at Garrywhin stone rows.

number of endlessly repeated motifs while at the same time retaining their individuality, suggesting local communities were aware of, and exploiting to their own ends, an ideology with wide appeal (Bradley 2005, 99–115). And so we see certain patterns repeated at the multiple stone rows, like the use of thin flags as packing stones, and the alignment of the stones along, not perpendicular to, the axis of the rows (figure 7). The maintenance of these building traditions may have played itself out differently in different locations, but they endured for generations in this small part of Scotland.

The observation that individual stones may draw attention to monuments in the nearby landscape was one of the moments of realization that are, in our experience, fairly common in archaeological field practice, akin to the joy of discovery (cf. Holtorf 2005, 25–30), and often follow on from disillusionment, confusion and interpretative dead-ends. Yet they are often dissipated as the familiar apparatus of recording and categorization kicks in, and appear in the final published report as a given, an inevitable conclusion. It would have been easy to view these alignments as the result of a preconceived relationship between monument and landscape, the realization of a planned project, readily understandable in our terms, through the application of a set of cosmological principles. But to interpret the site in such familiar terms would be to forget the differences that led to our confusion in the first place, and in doing so to lose sight of the opportunity to explore other ways in which landscapes and monuments might be related. We suggest that Battle Moss may be viewed as the materialization of embodied social practices that progressed according to spatial and temporal understandings that were radically different to our own (Baines, Brophy and Pannett in prep). That is,

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the site may be seen as preserving a kind of order, but not a kind that relied on a-priori ideas of geometry or even independently held cosmological beliefs. Rather the site may have emerged as the realization of an ongoing process whereby it was necessary not just to refer to monuments and practices situated elsewhere in the landscape (whether contemporary, remembered or mythical, we cannot yet tell), but to bodily establish a relationship with them through the placing and orientation of the stones. Rather than being understood in relation to a pre-existing body of lore, or as a coded representation of ritual meanings, we suggest that the site may have been the venue for performances during which the relations between the living and the dead were enacted in the placing of the stones themselves. Such periodic performances generated the concepts of order by which the ongoing relations between community and landscape were thought to be mediated, rather than merely drawing attention to pre-existing, encoded knowledge. We might therefore conceive of Bronze Age people who did not, as we do, consider themselves separate from and living in the natural world, but who viewed both themselves and the world around them as continually being remade through their relations with it.

Clearly it is very difficult to imagine and adequately comprehend other ways of understanding the world using our own language and concepts. Nevertheless, we believe that it is important not to give up the attempt, to ignore the differences that emerge through our embodied interactions with material culture as archaeologists. The twisted prose in this part of the paper has been our attempt to present a partial translation of one site in northern Scotland on the basis of an honest recounting of our own interactions with it. We cannot, and would not, claim that we approached the site entirely in such a way. There has been no other excavation of such multiple stone rows in the British Isles, and little interpretation of them other than in archaeo-astronomical terms, and this allowed us a freer hand than in the excavation of a small Bronze Age cairn adjacent to Battle Moss. Simultaneously, we drew on our previous excavation experiences and a body of disciplinary knowledge to define a methodology that turned out to be, at least initially, inadequate. Here we were also very much constrained by existing archaeological categories, both of monuments and ceramics (our most frequent finds). When sherds were found we immediately began categorizing them – cremation urn, food vessel, Beaker, perhaps even a strange early Neolithic pot style not yet known in Caithness. Small shaped and fired lumps of clay with pecked and impressed decoration in our hands moved from one category to another, never truly belonging (figure 8). Our discussions – maybe even arguments – about which abstract 'type' each sherd represented now seem ludicrous (for a similar perspective see Holtorf 2002). Like a ship tossing in the waves, the interpretation of the sherds allowed the cairn to lurch from Early Bronze Age, to Middle Neolithic, to Middle Bronze Age, in our attempts to come to terms with the unfamiliar and grubby objects we picked from the boulder clay. In doing so, perhaps we relied too much on abstractions, on the metaphorical relationship between artefact and context (Lucas 2001, 168–69) as separate entities. Perhaps we should have paid more attention to the combination of pottery, soil and stone as a thing in itself, treating it as a whole rather than a combination of preconceived elements.

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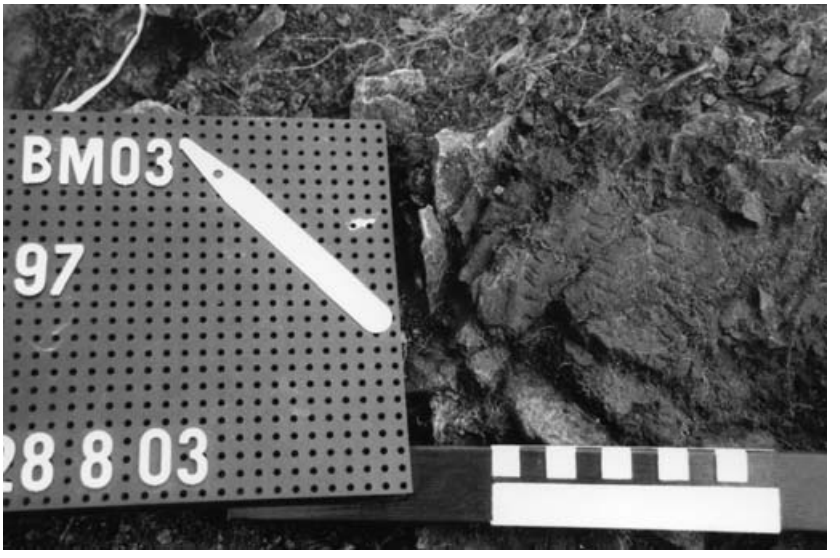


**Figure 8** Potsherds at the point of discovery, the moment at which they become characterized as Beaker sherds.

Reflecting on this experience, and what we know now about Battle Moss, we would have excavated the site differently, and are already developing a more appropriate and targeted methodology for any future excavation of such a site (and potentially related sites). Our excavation planning assumed that the rows conform to a regular grid pattern, and on this basis we began with a number of very conventional aims (defining the nature, size and extent of the site and so on). Although it soon became apparent that the site failed to accord with our prior assumptions, we did not change our initial approach greatly to take account of this. It soon became apparent, for instance, that the stones themselves were erected by a consistent technique, comprising a series of presumably prearranged actions, ritualized in the sense that they were repeated again and again. We also established that the irregularity of the rows and the varied angles of each stone's long axis reflected a deliberate act on the part of the builders rather than any site formation process. Yet our work in itself followed through the ritual of excavation and recording rather more of the stones than were needed to establish these facts. We approached the site using our experience of our own previous excavations, and in the process transformed it from one category (multiple stone rows) to another (excavation site). Our focus temporarily shifted from the Bronze Age remnants intruding into our world to the grammar of archaeological convention; we stopped looking for the meaning of the rows, and started managing the trench, digging features and gathering data. In a sense we had a more useful engagement with the monument when we spent time trying to make sense of the rows pre-excavation than when we cut into it.

This is not to say that we undertook an unnecessary invasive procedure on the monument. On the contrary, our excavation allowed us to understand

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some empirical and practical elements of the monument that we could only guess at on the surface. But once again traditional archaeological techniques became a way of rendering the site familiar to us by transforming it into a trench in some ways similar to many trenches we had both inhabited before. On reflection, we were too quick to fall back on this default position, the safety net of context sheets, measuring tapes and bits of string, and not nearly quick enough to meet face-on the unfamiliarity that surrounded us. There are a number of strategies that could be developed in future projects that could perhaps subvert the whole process at any earlier point. For instance, once we had answered the basic questions (How were the stones erected and supported? What were the extents of the monument? Are they still *in situ*?) we could have moved on to more challenging elements of the site. Trenches could have been located within large gaps in the monument or beyond the extents where there was no guarantee of immediate success, or more emphasis could have been placed on the source and arrangement of the stones and their packing than on the mechanics of their erection. In so doing we might have explored those areas that were unpredictable, and therefore also different, in relation to our normal ways of thinking. A future project would be more carefully to examine the monument in its wider landscape setting beyond the trench. The view from a stone is of course important, but what did it all look like from the surrounding landscape? The stone rows were not just experienced from within. This is not to say that we should be slaves to experience. Battle Moss may be unique in that the observations we made may not be readily applicable anywhere else. However, if we concentrate resources on trenches targeted more at understanding the rows, and widen our formal investigations beyond traditional archaeological concerns and spaces, perhaps we can offer more satisfactory accounts of monuments within a context of use, not just construction.

As archaeologists engaged in the situated, embodied practice of archaeology, we cannot separate ourselves from the things we study. Nevertheless, we must also recognize that there are differences between our embodied experiences and those of people in the past (cf. Meskell 1999; Fowler 2004; Jones 2005), differences in perspective, motivation and knowledge. In order to move forward, archaeological theory needs to start considering how social beings and material culture are mutually constituted within embodied experience in the past and the present, rather than merely being preformed subjects and objects respectively. Our experiences at Battle Moss suggest that this is a process that involves thinking beyond the mere mechanics of excavation, and of asking subtly different questions.

## Conclusion – towards an archaeology without -isms

In this paper we have tried to sketch out a view of how archaeology can take advantage of the insights of postprocessualism without losing sight of the processual emphasis on the material and the empirical. Of course, this is very far from a complete programme for the transformation of archaeology, but we would like at least to conclude by proposing some aspects of a post-schismatic archaeology, in the hope that these will be further developed into the differences that make a difference.

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Archaeology should be:

***Relational*** Archaeological objects should not be decontextualized and defined entirely in terms of abstract categories, but understood as suspended in and constituted by webs of relations.

***Embodied*** Prior to their being caught up in our classificatory schemes, our primary physical relations with past material cultures are mediated by our own embodied concepts and ideas, and it is here that the crucial relations of difference are generated.

***Emergent*** Material cultures are not 'encoded' with a pre-existent meaning; rather meaning emerges through our embodied engagements with them.

***Empirical*** It follows from the above that we cannot approach the archaeological past entirely by a-priori theorizing, but must strive to close the gap between theory and practice *in practice*. Reflexive practice should acknowledge the reality of the traces of the past we encounter as well as the intentionality of our relationship with them.

***Honest*** The crucial interaction between archaeologist and archaeology, the subjective elements of doing and thinking, and the hermeneutic process of conducting archaeological investigations, are all part of the process of creating versions of the past, and should form part of the recording and publication process.

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