

‘what is archaeology?’. Smith’s own definition is archaeology as ‘the study of human behaviour, past and present, through the analysis of material culture, both real and virtual, as situated within cultural landscapes’ (Smith 2017, 1). This builds on current reformulations of archaeology as ‘the study of the ancient and recent human past through material remains’ (Harrison and Schofield 2010; SAA 2022) and includes the possibility of artefacts being virtual as well as real (cf. Graves-Brown 2014). Barrett’s article informs this ongoing reassessment of the purpose of archaeology. We look forward to seeing how this is enacted through archaeological performance.

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Reply

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I am very grateful to all who have provided comments on this paper and for the problems that they have raised. These problems arise from my attempt to employ a Peircean ‘semeiotic’ in pursuit of a social archaeology (Preucel 2006; Crossland and Bauer 2017), for while Saussure provides us with the idea that things can stand for something else, and can thus operate semiotically, Peirce proposed that things (signs) must determine their meanings to an ‘interpretant’. If we were to treat archaeological things as material expressions, which could be variously interpreted as concepts, and if the meanings of those things were clear to some, then they will have been clear (have been recognized) by a community of interpretants (Peirce 1878; Preucel 2006, 50–66). It was the various communities who lived amongst those things, and it was these communities that I take to have comprised a social community. To have been social at any time was to have been recognized by others, which was to have been seen, and to have behaved appropriately, within those material conditions, the residues of which the archaeologist records today. Our problem is, of course, that the social community is now extinct. Thus, while things may once have been ‘meaningfully constituted’, they may also have been variously and differently interpreted by those who lived amongst them, and this would have implications for the kind of social existences that things could have sustained. I therefore doubt the adequacy of simply assuming that the pattern of things records a single social structure, simply because the structuring of social life (i.e. the historical process) arises from the ways that different communities have related to each other. I have argued that social communities recognized others within those same communities by the ways that they behaved amongst things, and I wonder the extent to which things might have enabled the differentiation between communities within a single social structure. As examples of this, the orientation of roundhouses that were backed away from the roadways through certain hillforts might reflect an Iron Age concern with the privacy of the domestic space from the gaze of others (Barrett et al., 2000, 320), and the routines of agricultural production and the preparation and consumption of foods may have increasingly differentiated between engendered social statuses (cf., Goody 1976).

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