

## BOOK REVIEW

### A few thoughts on the 'two cultures' debate in archaeology

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Review of:

Ellen, R. & K. Fukui. 1996. *Redefining nature: ecology, culture and domestication*. Oxford: Berg.

Nicholas, G.P. (ed.). 1988. *Holocene human ecology in northeastern North America*. New York: Plenum Press.

Pollard, T. & A. Morrison (ed.). 1996. *The early prehistory of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the University of Glasgow.

Straus, L., B. Eriksen, J. Erlandson & D. Yesner. 1996. *Humans at the end of the Ice Age: the archaeology of the Pleistocene-Holocene transition*. New York: Plenum Press.

Whittle, A. 1996. *Europe in the Neolithic: the creation of new worlds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The 'two cultures' debate, like many others, is something that seems to have come late to archaeology as it is practised in the UK. In this case, the 'two cultures' are culture itself (and the realm of social and cultural archaeology) and 'the environment', long separated from the rest in the hotchpotch of sub-disciplines encompassed by 'environmental (and sometimes the broader 'science-based') archaeology'. The books briefly and selectively reviewed here all provide some contribution to the debate, interestingly, since they are merely a collection of recent (or recent to the library) books grabbed from the shelves in an ambitious attempt to select some relaxing (and perhaps stimulating) Christmas reading; plus one or two other publications picked up and glanced at since, thrown in for comparison.

The problems and potential of the 'integration' of environmental archaeology within the 'mainstream', and the forging of archaeology as a truly multidisciplinary (or should that be interdisciplinary?) field of study, have, of course, long been debated, particularly within the 'environmental' community - for example, nearly a decade ago, at the Tenth Anniversary Conference of the Association for Environmental Archaeology (AEA), held here at the Institute of Archaeology (Balaam & Rackham 1992) - but, as a review of another recent publication indicates (Nesbitt 1996) the ideal is as yet far from being attained. A more recent AEA conference (Brayshay 1996), and the 1996 Autumn meeting of the Neolithic Studies Group (reviewed elsewhere in this volume), show the call for integration being repeated. Now, perhaps, there is more reason for optimism regarding the possibility of change, as the calls are coming increasingly from outside, and not just from within, the realm of environmental archaeology.

*Holocene human ecology in northeastern North America* explicitly tackles human ecology, or, as it is defined in the preface, 'the relationship between human populations and their environment'. The preface also makes the contention 'that if we are to explore more fully the linkages between culture and environment, a

processual orientation is required'. For any who still adhere to the stereotypical view of such an approach, propounded largely by those who have little understanding of the way in which science and scientists really work, aspects of Nicholas' introductory and concluding chapters, which summarize and draw upon chapters throughout, would make worthwhile reading, though the effect might be that of waving a red flag at a charging bull. Nicholas emphasizes the 'nonsingularity of adaptations [to environmental change... during the Holocene], exhibited by humans and the various elements of their environment' (p. 4), and that 'an ecological approach ... must ... explore the dynamic nature of human lifeways... in terms of mobility, technological specialization, social differentiation, and other behavioural variables' (p. 2). Quoting a much earlier work by Dincauze he notes that 'human populations respond to such a wide variety of stimuli in so many remarkable ways that it is difficult to identify "what is purely cultural, or human, in human lifestyles"' (p. 2). In his concluding chapter, Nicholas' emphasis on the way interpretations are influenced by the viewpoint of the observer might strike post-processualists as oddly familiar - it should be a salutary reminder that theirs is not the only, or first, tradition to have taken this on board. The chapters in the book demonstrate a diversity of ways of integrating 'archaeological' and 'environmental' data, in a way that North Americans seem to find so easy, perhaps because 'environmental' archaeology has never been marginalized in the way that it has in this country.

*Humans at the end of the Ice Age: the archaeology of the Pleistocene-Holocene transition*, while having made an admirable attempt at worldwide geographical coverage, is again very North American in its authorship and approach. Also, perhaps not surprisingly in a volume which derives from the Working Group on the Archaeology of the Pleistocene-Holocene Transition, under the auspices of INQUA (the International Union for Quaternary Research), it comes very much from the 'environmental' - and more specifically the evolutionary ecology - side of the debate. The basic framework for each regional chapter is very much the changing nature of the local palaeoenvironment - as it must be in a volume which attempts to look at the 'diverse responses of human societies worldwide to the environmental changes of the Pleistocene-Holocene transition' (p. vii). Despite, or perhaps because of the necessary emphasis on the 'environmental setting', co-editor Straus is at pains (p. 6) to emphasize that the volume 'does not advocate unreconstructed environmental determinism', while suggesting that 'without a realistic, detailed understanding of the interfaces between humans and their environments... little progress can be made in terms of reconstructing the variety of social and ideological aspects of past human cultures...'. The volume's avowed intent (Straus' preface, p. vii) is to examine what it was about this particular glacial-interglacial transition that was different enough to cause the '[shift to food production] from a 5-million-year-old universal subsistence strategy of pure exploitation of wild food resources', a query which in juxtaposition to Straus' emphasis on the fact that it was only at this 'glacial-interglacial boundary that there were anatomically modern humans living on all continents and major islands' (p.vii) has echoes of Caldwell's 'primary forest efficiency' and Braidwood's 'settling in' hypotheses of the '50s and 60s. But just how universal such a shift actually was is immediately queried by the questions

which Straus suggests form the subtext of the book: 'Why was agriculture adopted quickly thereafter in some regions but not in others?' and 'Why did hunter-gatherers successfully adapt as such in many regions and in some cases survive into the twentieth century?' (p. vii). The answer, and the attempt to find a role for 'culture' in the adaptationist equation, is seen by Straus (and by Michael Jochim in a summing up chapter) to be the influence of historical constraints (or what Stephen J. Gould (probably following someone else) - from whom seems to come most of archaeology's borrowing from the biological sciences - calls contingency) in forming such a diverse range of 'cultural-historical trajectories'.

*Redefining nature: ecology, culture and domestication* - in UCL's Explorations in Anthropology series - is explicitly focused on tackling the nature-culture question, and in fact on demonstrating that the perceived dichotomy is a false one, with 'fuzzy boundaries'. It derives from a conference held in Japan, and almost half of the authors of individual papers are Japanese. Ellen, in his introduction, acknowledges the influence on this book of the viewpoint developed in a series of volumes from Japan's National Museum of Ethnology, called *Living on the Earth* (unfortunately for many of us published in Japanese); and in discussing the contrasts between Christian and Shinto or Buddhist worldviews, it is clear that the dichotomy is seen to be principally a viewpoint deriving from the Western scientific tradition (a point re-emphasised by the Institute's David Harris in his contribution), giving authors from Japanese cultures (among others) a head-start in overcoming the Western-perceived problems. The book is divided into three sections. The first, *Nature as a cultural concept*, consists largely of chapters written in anthro-speak which I'm afraid left me none-the-wiser. The second, dealing with the relationships between *Domesticates and human populations* contains many interesting chapters which appear to advance considerably the role of concepts of people-plant/animal interaction in relation to domestication, and would be well worth reading by archaeobotanists/zoologists and others interested in the subject. The third section, on *Nature, co-evolution and cultural adaptation* does much the same thing for broader people-environment interactions. Taken as a whole, the book demonstrates that interesting work is being undertaken by anthropologists in integrating 'social' and 'environmental' approaches, from which archaeology could learn much, while the semantic minefield of the culture-nature debate itself is perhaps best left well alone.

Moving now to a European perspective, *The early prehistory of Scotland* originates in a conference held in 1994 to mark the fortieth anniversary of Lacaille's *Stone Age in Scotland*. The editors point out in the preface that Lacaille had early recognised the importance to future investigations of collaboration between archaeologists and geologists, botanists and zoologists. To what extent current work of this nature is seen by the editors as truly collaborative is perhaps indicated by their reference to the inclusion in the volume of 'a number of specialist papers by palaeobotanists' (p.x), confined to the traditional preliminary *Environmental background* section of the book. A personally-biased selection of some of the papers in the volume reveals some aspects of the 'nature-culture' debate in present Scottish Mesolithic studies. Kevin Edwards and Richard Tipping present, in two separate papers, two sides of

the argument concerning the difficulties of detecting the environmental impact of Mesolithic populations against a background of changing climate and its 'natural' effects on vegetation. Jenny Moore's paper provides a novel and welcome input to the discussion about the role of fire in the Mesolithic - and by extension human impacts on the environment as a whole - by emphasizing the fact that not all burning episodes should necessarily be seen as major destructive events, and suggesting that, instead, what we might look for is evidence of the maintenance of a particular kind of landscape by careful and controlled use of low-impact fires. Anitt & Finlayson, who I guess fall on the 'cultural' side of the debate (and whose three-part paper is placed in the *Social change* section of the book), put forward another version of their very reasonable contention that the Neolithic should not be seen as a package to be necessarily adopted wholesale, but that indigenous Mesolithic peoples adopted a pick-and-mix approach to elements of Neolithic culture. The combination of this with the original diversity of Mesolithic Europe means that 'the transition to agriculture varied markedly both in its nature and its rate' (p.270). They also point out the importance in perpetuating the traditionally-perceived disjunction between the two cultures (Aha! - those words again - but we're talking prehistoric cultures here...) of the strong division between those who study the Mesolithic and those who study the Neolithic. As Bradley (1984: 11) has pointed out 'successful farmers have social relations with one another, while hunter-gatherers have ecological relations with hazelnuts', and it is probably true to say that this distinction reflects to a certain extent the interests of those who study the two periods - and who might also then be placed roughly on the 'nature' or 'culture' sides of the debate. And, as Armit's part of the paper indicates, the 'culture' side of things seems to be very much tied up with pots - he quite reasonably points out that there is no good reason why pots should be assumed to have purely Neolithic affiliations, thereby perhaps enabling 'culture' to become part of the Mesolithic equation.

Why I keep using the word 'reasonably' with regard to this paper is because, having placed it on the 'cultural' side of the debate, and being prejudiced, I expected to find more to take issue with. It also stands out in this respect from the work discussed in the remainder of this review, which I would also place in the 'cultural' camp.

When one looks at the final chapter in *The Early Prehistory of Scotland*, by Andrew Jones, the absurdity of some of the things said about pots (and, by extension about 'culture' as a whole) emerges. The chapter starts perfectly reasonably, with Jones pointing out, à la Bradley, that 'for the Mesolithic... [economics and food procurement practices]... are usually discussed merely in terms of adaptation, with the environment determining lifestyle, whereas in the Neolithic... the environment is perceived as controlled' (p.291). Jones then goes on in the next paragraph to suggest that the answer to this perceived dichotomy is to see that 'the environment is not passive, but is culturally and socially appropriated within systems of meaning, within which various elements of both plant and animal life metonymically signify and embody particular places' (p.291), by which point I was lost. So where do pots come in? After some discussion of cosmology, and an apparent perpetuation of what I thought was now the old-fashioned distinction between hunter-gatherers as

mobile and agriculturalists as sedentary, Jones tells us that 'the cultural and natural are not then mutually exclusive domains but, by the early Neolithic, are embedded in an understanding of temporal existence as punctuated by a series of pivotal events in the seasonal cycle of animal and crop husbandry.... Such notions of temporality are articulated on a daily basis through the use of ceramics in the consumption and preparation of foodstuffs' (p.295). During the Mesolithic 'foodstuffs were consumed on a pragmatic basis with little secondary processing.... [but].... The use of ceramics facilitates the recombination of foodstuffs which would hitherto have been separated both seasonally and temporally.... Meals... need not have involved the consumption of one form of food before the other since with the use of a ceramic container they could be combined and consumed simultaneously' (p.296). I might have gone away and considered this merely as the wanderings of a deranged mind, rather than leaping to dangerous generalized conclusions about pots, if, shortly after reading this I hadn't picked up the following book.

*Europe in the Neolithic: the creation of new worlds* is Alasdair Whittle's 'completely rewritten and revised' version of his 1985 *Neolithic Europe*. In the preface, presumably in part echoing his subtitle, Whittle rejects the idea that the 'past exists only in the present', but stresses that interpretation is unavoidable, and that this book is just one of many ways of telling the story of what happened in the Neolithic: 'Any book of this kind is really a prolonged conditional sentence, an extended hypothetical argument... I have tried to reduce the number of stated qualifications, but they should be taken as read throughout' (p.xv). The culture-nature, or two cultures, problem is largely one of difficulty of communication between disciplines coming from differing academic traditions - leading to necessarily stereotyped views of the other side of the argument. 'Environmental' archaeologists have a continuous fight with, e.g., dig directors, who often expect them to be able to provide a definitive answer to questions - and their best guesses are often presented as straight indisputable fact in site reports and papers. I had always assumed that this was due to (as well as helping to perpetuate) a misunderstanding of the nature of scientific investigation; however, Whittle's comments suggest an alternative reason - that within 'traditional' archaeological discourse all statements should be taken with a large pinch of salt. Whether this is true or not, I have no way of guessing, but I still find that it is not enough to make the two things which jumped out at me from the book acceptable. First, being interested in subsistence, in my trail through the indexed pages, I continuously came upon the word 'feasting' wherever assemblages with large concentrations of food remains were discussed - shell middens being a common example (see p.1, for example). Maybe what Whittle means by feasting is quite different from what I understand by it but such a leap of interpretation, with no apparent explanation - or definition of feasting that I could find - seems a leap too far.

And when it comes to pots, we are told that one of the characteristics of the Neolithic was 'novel ways of sharing and presenting food in clay containers' (p.2). Though Whittle admits that pottery 'has of course a potential range of practical uses, including storage, food preparation, cooking, and eating and drinking' (p.62), the constant references to their role as symbolisers of 'plenty', and as items

important in the 'presentation' and especially 'sharing' of food suggest that his interests in them lie in these latter perceived roles - which again, and notwithstanding Whittle's disclaimer in his preface, have to my taste far too much the ring of 'Just So' stories. Much of this book suggests that viewing the Neolithic not as something wholly distinct from the Mesolithic is, in fact, now the new orthodoxy, and in some ways I would suggest that this is a step forward in the integration of the 'cultural' and 'natural' - the book will undoubtedly be a major landmark in these respects. However, in some contradiction, taking Whittle's book and Jones' paper in *The early prehistory of Scotland* together, one is left with the distinct impression of non-pottery-using peoples shovelling raw and unprocessed food (when they can find it) into their mouths, from the ground, using their bare hands. Which brings us back to Richard Bradley's hazelnuts and leaves me feeling more pessimistic than I was at the beginning of the review. How do we get two such different sets of people - the 'environmental archaeologists' who (stereotyped view) are interested in a pragmatic understanding of the way humans interact with, are influenced by, and influence, their surroundings; and the other the 'social and cultural archaeologists' who (stereotype again) find such an approach utterly boring and meaningless, and prefer stories, narratives, or discourse about social interaction, the sacred and the symbolic - to have a meaningful dialogue with each other? Answers on a potsherd, please.

### References

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