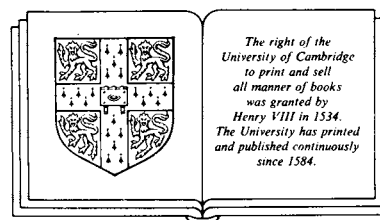


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CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS**

THE
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OF
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EDITED BY IAN HODDER



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PREFACE

Common reactions to *Symbols in Action* (Hodder 1982c), and *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (Hodder 1982d) were: 'But this makes archaeology impossible', 'The approach cannot be applied', 'You can do such studies in the present but not in the past', 'How can we get at meanings in the minds of people long dead?', 'Fine, but I prefer to stick to what can be done with rigour'.

Such comments did not reflect my own conclusions, which were determined and optimistic. Certainly there was much rethinking that needed to be done and archaeology might well end up more complex and difficult. It might even have to develop its own theory and methods of interpretation rather than borrow method and theory from elsewhere – a major trend in recent archaeology. But the potential fruits of engaging the problems and difficulties head on, seemed worth a try.

Another reason for the difference between the dominant and my own perceptions was that, in my view, archaeologists always have interpreted contextual, symbolic meanings. Generally, however, they have denied or masked the necessity of such dimensions of their work behind empiricism, positivism, or objectivism. Yet whenever one discusses ranking and prestige, for example, subjective meanings are implicitly inferred. Even when the economy of a site is inferred from bone residues, assumptions are necessarily, but rarely explicitly, made about attitudes to refuse. And to talk of the 'function' of an object or institution, must be to assume some 'end' against which the function can be assessed. Thus, the contextual approach involves in many respects not so

much a new departure, as a clarification of, and an attempt to make rigorous, existing procedures.

However, there are also new dimensions, including the notion of structure, within contextual archaeology. These new and re-introduced dimensions of research certainly pose problems which have to be faced in following the route begun in *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (cf. Miller and Tilley, *Ideology and Power in Prehistory*). The aim in this volume is to show that 'it can be done'. Detailed, applied examples are provided, all of which are 'archaeological' in the sense that they are concerned with inference from material culture, whether in a present, historic or prehistoric context. In this way the nature and potential of the approach(es) are discovered. In addition, theories, methods and terms begin to be developed and defined and these are collated in chapter 1.

This volume is concerned with providing examples of the interpretation of contextual meanings. Its companion, *Archaeology as Long-Term History* (Hodder 1986b), examines one aspect of contextual study – the long term historical context, and the relationships between archaeology and history.

In thinking about the issues discussed in these two volumes I have learnt much from interactions with the contributors and their colleagues in Cambridge, in the Van Giffen Institute of Pre- and Protohistory in Amsterdam, and in the State University of New York in Binghamton. My debt to Colin Renfrew, Sander van der Leeuw and Meg Conkey for providing an encouraging environment for teaching and research in these three institutions is enormous.