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978-0-521-87397-0 - Material Cultures, Material Minds: The Impact of Things on Human Thought, Society, and Evolution

Nicole Boivin

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In Pursuit of Symbols in Western India

The origins of this book lie in a small rural village in the Indian state of Rajasthan. The village, called Balathal, sits next to an ancient mound bearing the archaeological remains of one of the earliest villages in western India. The ancient site is also known as Balathal, and it is to study this archaeological site, rather than the contemporary village, that I originally went to Rajasthan in 1997. I was a PhD student, and I went armed with a new technique, called soil micromorphology, and a, by then, relatively well-established archaeological theoretical framework, called post-processualism. I planned to combine the two to try to understand more about architecture and spatial use at the Chalcolithic period site. Soil micromorphology is a geoarchaeological technique that involves the microscopic examination of ancient buildings, particularly the materials used to construct them and the waste materials that build up on their floors, in order to understand how the structures were built, used, and transformed through time. It is a high-resolution technique that is aptly suited to creating the kind of rich ethnographic image of a site that post-processualist archaeologists, who are often interested in the social and symbolic aspects of everyday life and material culture use, aim to generate.

My interest in the present-day village of Balathal arose out of some relatively minor archaeological questions. I saw that the floors of the mud structures in the early levels of the neighbouring

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archaeological site were made up of a variety of materials, and I had no idea why. I initially visited the mud houses in the modern village next to the mound to learn more about why particular types of sediment or clay rather than other types might have been used to make the ancient floors. My early visits to the village demonstrated that there was so much to know about how people made floors and houses, and why they did so, that it would be difficult to use the still pioneer-phase method of soil micromorphology to analyse ancient spaces until more background research had been done. My interests therefore shifted to ethnoarchaeology, and to the study of the mud houses in modern-day Balathal village using ethnographic and soil micromorphological techniques. I was keen to try to see how the rich ethnographic detail of everyday domestic life related to the soils, sediments, and debris that archaeologists dig up and that archaeological soil micromorphologists look at under the microscope.

The approach I took is aptly illustrated by one particular link I noted in the early days of my fieldwork. One of the things I had observed in the village houses was that they inevitably contained a large red rectangular patch above the main hearth, as well as sometimes above other hearths (Figure 1.1). I had been asking about the red patches, but had generally received similar banal and unsatisfying answers in response to my questions about their meaning. "They are painted on to look nice" I was told repeatedly, and some people argued that the red covered up the black soot caused by cooking. I was deeply suspicious of these answers, especially since the red patches and the sooty black areas only ever partially overlapped. I therefore tried changing how I phrased my question, and instead of asking what the squares meant, I asked why red soil (called *pili mitti*) had been used to make the squares.

With this change in tack, things got more interesting because when I asked the question this way, I was repeatedly given a very different answer: that the red soil was used because it contained Laksmi. The deity Laksmi is the Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune. More specifically, I was often told that *pili mitti* was Laksmi. This was exciting not only because it helped me to understand the red patches, but more importantly because it was

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Figure 1.1: Red patch above the hearth in a Balathal house. Trying to determine the meaning of the patches posed a challenge. Photo Nicole Boivin.

the first indication of a pattern that would become increasingly clear to me: soils were often selected for use because they possessed some meaningful significance – and this was the case not just when it came to making decorative features, but even when much more mundane aspects of plastering and construction were undertaken. While the literature on traditional mud-build architecture inevitably described building and plastering out of mud as a kind of scientific enterprise involving the maximisation of efficiency, strength, and durability, Balathal villagers were often doing things that did not make much sense from such a perspective. They plastered floors using bright red soil even though it was not strong and rubbed off on everyone's clothes, because *pili mitti*

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was Laksmi, and using the soil made the house auspicious. They used pure white soil brought from far away by visiting relatives to plaster over the outside of the house not because it was the most resistant to weathering, which it was not, but because white soil was beautiful and symbolised purity (Figure 1.2).

The more I looked into the creation of mud houses and the choices made concerning when and how to construct, plaster, and replaster them, the more I saw that symbolic thought pervaded many seemingly mundane aspects of construction technology. The house was a world of symbols that shaped the habits and understanding of those who built it, used it, and grew up in it. This was of course not a new finding (Bourdieu (1973, 1977, 1990) in particular has emphasised it), but what I was able to contribute was an understanding that even the materials that make up the house are meaningful, and add to its power as a symbol. This of course has implications for geoarchaeologists, who tend, like the architects who study traditional mud-built architecture, to interpret architectural choices as rational and efficient in the modern Western sense. It was exciting to be able to show microscopic images of floors and sediments and describe how they had been built up as a result of complex social and symbolic practices that drew on the cosmological understandings and strategic manoeuvrings of social agents. It was also important to realise that floors and sediments could be used by archaeologists to help reconstruct not just the functional, but also the social and symbolic aspects, of ancient societies.

In the late 1990s, my ideas were new ones in the sub-disciplinary field of geoarchaeology, as was my relatively novel attempt to examine the links between archaeological science and archaeological theory (though see also Evans 2003; Jones 2002). But in terms of its emphasis on symbolism, the social aspects of technology, and agency, my thesis research (Boivin 2000, 2001, 2004b) was very much part of a wider post-processual or interpretive turn within archaeology. Symbolism and meaning, drawn upon by agents during the production and reproduction of social practices as well as the negotiation of social change, was very much the order of the day in archaeology, and I was relatively content to serve them up. The only tensions emerged when, encouraged by an archaeological science perspective that continually prevented the physical world

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Figure 1.2: Valuable pure white soil is often formed into cakes and carefully stored for future use in Balathal village. Its value is aesthetic and symbolic rather than strictly functional. Photo Nicole Boivin.

from being completely swallowed up by the abstractions of social and symbolic theory, I began to consider the implications of the physicality of soil for its role in society. I recognised that soil has particular properties of malleability and plasticity that permitted it to be used in specific ways in Balathal village homes. Those homes, and the way that they were constantly transformed in concert with the temporal rhythms of the year, the individual lifecycle, and the domestic group cycle, were very different from my own, much more solid house of concrete, steel, wood, and drywall.

They were also different from the much more temporary types of structures that were generally built in the period preceding

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sedentism. I therefore also began to consider how building with soil, as people started to do in a major way in the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean at the start of the Neolithic period, may have helped the Neolithic sedentarisation process along in particular ways because of the specific physical properties of soil (discussed in Chapter 4 and Boivin 2001, 2004d). The enormous Neolithic and Chalcolithic period tells of these regions attest to a major experiment with soil that was likely implicated in these first conversions to sedentary living (Figure 1.3). The shift to using soil is of course very unlikely to have caused sedentism, but it almost certainly encouraged it because soil is so untransportable and breakable when converted into houses and pots. It cannot be attributed with having caused radical changes in social organisation, communication, material representation, and cooking and building technologies, but its physical properties can be said to have enabled and perhaps even encouraged these changes by virtue of soil's ability to be divided up into houses, rooms, walls, and courtyards and shaped into furnishings, decorations, jewellery, pots, and symbols. As humans shaped soil, so it likely shaped them and their world. Thus, the material world impacts on the social world in a real way, not just because of its ability to act as a carrier of ideas and concepts, but also because its very materiality exerts a force that in human hands becomes a social force.

It was this recognition that material culture is in some ways distinctive from other aspects of the cultural world that led me to begin to question the focus on symbolism and meaning that had become the orthodoxy within British archaeological theory. At the same time, I also began to see problems with the symbolic account that I had constructed in my thesis. I had seen symbols everywhere, but what proof did I really have that they existed? My account was attractive, in that it made sense of a wide variety of facts, and brought order to a complex assortment of statements, observations, practices, and material patterns, but it also seemed in some ways far from the reality of everyday living that I had been part of while staying in Balathal. I attributed even colours and textures with meanings, so that the women who plastered and transformed houses became the creators of complex, abstract, coded messages that they were nonetheless insufficiently aware of

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Figure 1.3: Prehistoric to historic period tell in Jordan in the Near East. Tells are composed primarily of the clay brought to make mud-built houses. Photo Steve Mithen.

to describe to me. The following passage from my PhD thesis is symptomatic:

It is only with such a nuanced understanding of the colour red that we can begin to understand the use of *pili mitti* as a plastering material. For while the application of *pili mitti* is strongly associated with weddings and festivals (and particularly first fruits festivals), it is also, as we have seen, associated with spatial boundaries, cooking and death. These associations cannot be fully explained through the discursive argument that *pili mitti* symbolises auspiciousness and protection. They can, however, be understood when we recognise that all these divergent uses of *pili mitti* have in common an association with liminality, and, in particular, transformations. It is the transition between states then – the transition from married to unmarried, from virgin to mother, from alive to dead, from raw to cooked, from out to

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in, and from production to consumption – that is actually symbolised by *pili mitti*. Like the colour red then, *pili mitti* seems, at least at one level, to be about the processes that are necessary for life to carry forward. (Boivin 2001: 92)

Such abstract constructions were never described to me by informants of course, but were rather pieced together out of a myriad of separate observations and statements. These days, going back to rural India as I regularly do for archaeological fieldwork, it is abundantly clear to me that this ordered, sterile world of structural oppositions, no matter how much I claimed that it was used by knowing agents, has little if anything to do with the real world of smells, crying babies, joy, hardship, animals, dirt, money, conflict, and passion that is living in a rural Indian village, or indeed any place on Earth.

Looking back now, I question this focus on order and many other aspects of my understanding of material culture in Balathal village. I question, for example, my interpretation of *pili mitti* as a symbol of Laksmi. In my notes, I clearly record many people stating that *pili mitti* was considered *to be* Laksmi, and yet I proceeded with my analysis as though *pili mitti represented* Laksmi. In doing so, I betrayed my inclination to interpret everything in the material world as a symbol, as something that represents something else. I have also returned to those original answers to my queries about the red patches, which was that they looked nice. I received what I felt were similarly banal answers when I asked ordinary women and men about the meaning of particular domestic rituals (Figure 1.4). The response was inevitably a list of the food and other material items that were used in conducting the ritual, as well as a description of the practices that were carried out, rather than any attempt at presenting an insight into the reasons *why* such items and practices were used. These kinds of answers suggest that, for the people living in the houses and conducting the rituals, there is no abstract meaning behind specific practices, or at the very least, there is not abstract meaning behind every aspect of practice. It is highly likely that the material world – the red patches of *pili mitti* and the myriad of items used in domestic rituals – evoke experiences that lie beyond the verbal, beyond the conceptual, and

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Figure 1.4: A domestic ritual underway in Balathal village. Questions about the meaning of particular rituals were frequently met with a description of the objects and foods employed in them. Photo Nicole Boivin.

beyond even the conscious. These items of the material world do not necessarily symbolise anything else: their very power may lie in the fact that they are part of the realm of the sensual, of experience, and of emotion, rather than a world of concepts, codes, and meaning.

This very brief summary of the evolution of my thoughts concerning Balathal village and its material culture tracks what was not only a major shift in my own thinking, but also a crucial transformation in the social sciences and humanities. This transformation concerns the way that we understand society, culture, and our own minds. It also, specifically, concerns the way that we understand the material world, and its relationship to the mind, to culture, and to society. This book is about that transformation, and its implications. In critiquing here a focus on representation, I am not only critiquing my own work, or even the work of British archaeologists, but also important aspects of the history of Western thought since the Enlightenment.

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The Model of the Text

“Material culture is like a text.” A radical and, to some at least, counterintuitive statement, this became the banner for a new and highly influential movement that arose within British archaeology in the early 1980s. This new approach, which was first promulgated in a series of articles and books starting in 1982 (Hodder 1982a, 1982b, 1985; Miller & Tilley 1984; Shanks & Tilley 1987), was highly critical of the then dominant archaeological models for understanding material culture, which it derided as ‘functionalist’, ‘adaptive’, and ‘scientific’. It argued instead that material culture needed to be understood as ‘meaningful’ and ‘symbolic’. The new movement even critiqued previous attempts to link material culture to social aspects of society, asserting that they portrayed material culture as passive and simply *reflective* of social realities. Material culture, the proponents of the new movement asserted, needed rather to be recognised as *active* in constituting those very realities (Hodder 1982b, 1991, 1992; Shanks & Tilley 1987; Tilley 1989). Material culture was argued to be a symbolic medium for social practice that was used at times habitually to reproduce social and symbolic structures, and at other times strategically to challenge them. The archaeologist Ian Hodder, for example, studied the domestic material culture of the Ilchamus tribe of Kenya, and argued that women decorated calabashes (Figure 1.5) in order to draw attention to their own important roles in child-rearing and looking after milk (a symbolically important resource) and to challenge their status within a patriarchal society (Hodder 1991). Material culture was strategically used by the Ilchamus during the course of social practice and did not simply and passively reflect social realities.

These and other critiques by a group of young British archaeologists were aimed at what was known as the ‘processual’ school in archaeology, an influential movement that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and that argued that archaeology needed to be more rigorous, scientific, and systems oriented. The radical new critique against this school therefore became known as post-processualism (Hodder 1985). Its tenor was decidedly social,