The Archaeology of Identity
Approaches to gender, age, status, ethnicity and religion

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Introduction

From its very start, archaeology has had as one of its central projects the identification of ‘peoples’ (now often termed ‘ethnic groups’) in the past. Such identification has traditionally been made through the study of distributions of material culture, with the geographical spread of characteristic artefacts being seen as marking the territory of a particular group. For many years there was also a widely held assumption that such groups were ‘racially’ linked, sharing a language and a whole suite of cultural practices. In this way, the past was envisaged as occupied by bounded, homogeneous groupings, whose histories, expansions and movements could be traced through looking at their material remains. Indeed, it meant that when changes were seen in the distributions of that material culture, this could only be explained through expansion or movement of that group.

In recent years, however, these long-held views about the nature, composition and behaviour of ethnic groups have been challenged, as have ideas about what ‘ethnicity’ (the quality these groups are assumed to share) actually is. Characteristic artefacts, languages and ‘cultures’ have frequently been noted not to coincide.

Contemporary observations made by sociologists and anthropologists have suggested that ethnic groups are more of an idea than a thing; if they are characterised by anything, it is that their members choose to do (some) things in similar ways to each other, and in different ways from other people. These similarities and differences are then articulated as ‘ethnic’ ones (often framed in terms of members of the group having shared ‘origins’ or descent). Similarly, rather than view ‘ethnicity’ as something with which people are born, as some inherent characteristic, researchers are now starting to see it as an aspect of social relationships, again, more as a way of behaving than a thing, as an identity that can work on a number of different levels, and which cuts across other aspects of social identity such as gender, religion and age. It is something that has to be learnt, and it may well be fluid, both over an individual’s lifetime, and depending on the contexts in which people interact.

These emerging ideas have some serious consequences for the way that archaeologists deal with their material. They mean that there is no longer a clear and direct link between the artefacts that people use, the way they dress, the houses they live in, and their ‘ethnic identity’; such an identity is a much more complex phenomenon, and has to be studied with greater subtlety and a greater regard for issues of action, interaction and practice. In order to study aspects of ethnicity, which we choose to define, after Levine (1999: 168) as ‘that method of classifying people (both self and other) that uses origin (socially constructed) as its primary reference’, and other forms of communal cultural identity (such as local identity, territoriality or much wider groupings), archaeologists need to pay more attention to the contexts in which things are used, and the ways in which people use them. It is these differences in practice that may serve as the focus for emphasising ethnic or communal distinctions, and it is these differences (fortunately) that are accessible to archaeologists.

These developments in how ethnicity is thought about also have implications for the ways in which the wider world makes use of archaeology. In popular understandings of the past, national and regional groups are often ‘traced back’ in time, through such distributions of archaeological material, and these created histories are often used to justify political or nationalistic claims. The presence of a ‘people’ in a certain area in the past is used as justification for the control of that land by the present-day ‘people’ of the same name. These manipulations of archaeology are obviously abuses of the past, but countering such attitudes depends greatly on the ability of archaeologists to challenge dubious methodologies. In order to start to do this, we must first examine how such methodologies came to be developed and used.

Previous understandings of ethnicity and culture in archaeology

By the late nineteenth century there were classifications developing of archaeology, linguistics and physical anthropology, and the ‘culture concept’ was being developed by German anthropologists and archaeologists (Mirza and Dungworth 1995: 350). In 1895, Kossinna propounded the idea that archaeology was capable of isolating cultural areas (Kulturprovinzen or Kulturkreise), which could be identified with specific ethnic or national units and traced back into prehistory (Malina and Vásárhelyi 1990: 62; cf. Meinander 1981: 101; see our fig. 5.1). The correlation of these three kinds of classification, and the combination of them with the method of Kulturkreislehre soon led to a paradigm that saw a direct relationship between language, material culture and people (Kossinna 1911: 3; Meinander 1981: 107; Jones 1997: 16; Olsen and Kobylinski 1991: 9 cited in Diaz-Andreu 2001b; Veit 1989: 37). Kossinna thus believed that ‘sharply delineated archaeological culture areas coincide with clearly recognizable peoples or tribes’, and it was assumed that cultural continuity indicated ethnic continuity (Jones 1997: 16). This, then, is the start of the ‘billiard ball’ school of history (Wolf 1982: 6): the notion that the
past was populated by distinct bounded entities, characterised by anthropology, language and culture; the true subjects of history, whose destinies could be traced through millennia, spinning off each other in a global pool hall.

Kossinna's work had an impact on the archaeologist V. Gordon Childe (Díaz-Andreu 1996: 48), although Childe rejected Kossinna's Indo-Germanic interpretation of European prehistory (with European innovations deriving from the activities and expansions of a superior 'Aryan' race), and to a large extent its racist assumptions (Hides 1996: 26; Jones 1997: 16). Childe (1929: vi-vi) stated that a culture was 'certain types of remains - pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites, house forms - constantly recurring together' and he assumed that such a complex was the material expression of a 'people' (ibid.). This observation was based on fieldwork: 'specific types of tools, weapons, and ornaments repeatedly associated together in graves and settlements' (Childe 1935: 2). In later years, however, these observations were qualified, when he stated that not all traits of an archaeological assemblage were likely to be found together, and that the archaeological picture of a culture was built up out of many fragments, seen at various times in different places, but always associated with one or more of 'the symbolic traits found to be distinctive of that assemblage' (Childe 1951: 30-31). At no time, however, did Childe ever suggest that cultures corresponded to 'races'. Cultures defined peoples, but there were no grounds for assuming that a people as a whole spoke a single language, acted as a political unit, or that its members were related physiologically or belonged to one zoological race (Childe 1951: 40, see also 1929: vi; 1933: 197-200; 1935: 3-4).

Through his use of archaeological distributions Childe did, though, contribute to the picture of prehistory as occupied by distinct 'peoples', which could be mapped on the ground; those mappings were often based, not on a complete assemblage, but on a limited number of 'diagnostic' types (Jones 1997: 18). Thus, bronze cruciform brooches of the fifth and sixth centuries AD in Britain have been termed 'Anglo-Saxon' (fig. 5.2) and certain styles of Iron Age metalwork 'Celtic'. These names tend to be those (or versions of them) mentioned in early documentary sources, and it was assumed that archaeological material and such historical references could simply be equated. For the truly prehistoric period, however, there are no such records, and so from the turn of the twentieth century archaeologists have talked of 'cultures', such as the 'Beaker culture' of the Bronze Age in western Europe (named after a characteristic pottery style). Given the common equations often made between artefact distributions and group identity, these have tended to be reified as ethnic groups (or using the Greek term, as euhatos), such that 'the Beaker folk' became an acceptable archaeological label. This approach to the archaeological past has been termed 'culture-history', and has been the main archaeological paradigm this century, carrying with it a whole range of implicit assumptions and values about the nature of human groups in the past (Jones 1997: 12; see chapter 1 of this volume for more detail).

From the 1950s to the early 1980s, the study of ethnicity became

Figure 5.1 Map showing supposed 'Germanic' territorial expansion (pale grey = core Germanic area; black = area of expansion by 1600 BC; dark grey = area of expansion by 800 BC) during the Bronze Age, produced in 1945 by German archaeologist Hans Reinerth for the AMT Rosenberg. Source: Jones (1997: fig. 1.1).
increasingly unfashionable in most countries of Western Europe and the United States, with the rise of positivist and scientific approaches to the past. With their emphasis on socio-economics and systems theory, the cultural approach became of less importance, denoting a lack of interest in ethnic questions (Demoule 1999: 194–5). One notable exception to this was the so-called ‘style’ debate, which pondered the reasons for the typological and decorative differences between certain classes of artefacts. For example, the well-known debate on the Mousterian period between Binford (1973) and Bordes (1973) centred around this very issue. Bordes identified several Mousterian ‘facies’ (stylistic groups) and interpreted them as representative of different human groups, and then as different cultures or ethnic groups; Binford, however, saw them as representing functionally different occupations of the same group (cf. Demoule 1999: 196). Sackett (1977) thought that stylistic variation could be ‘read off’ as social variation, more specifically as representing ethnic differences between groups (see also Sackett 1990). Primarily though, the emphasis was more on socio-economic factors, such as subsistence strategies, than the more ‘idealistical systems’ involved in ethnicity.

Despite these developments, many processual and post-processual accounts still assume the existence of homogeneous bounded societies in the past, which can be categorised in terms of one-dimensional distributions of material culture (Diaz-Andreu 1996: 56; Jones 1997: 137). Although post-processual archaeology, in particular, has emphasised the active use of material culture, there has been little reconsideration of the nature of the communities within which people are being active (see Jones 1997 for a detailed treatment of the history of archaeological conceptions of ethnic groups).

Rethinking culture; rethinking ethnicity

Attempts to trace ethnic groups in prehistoric archaeology were based on the assumption that certain ethnic groups were characterised by a stable repertoire of cultural traits, such as language, typical artefacts and architectural forms, which could be objectively identified. This meant that any sudden emergence or disappearance of a distinct material culture could only be explained by migration, colonisation, conquest or assimilation (Olsen and Kobylinski 1991: 9). Recently, however, several archaeologists and ethno-archaeologists have challenged the idea that language, artefacts and culture coincide nearly to delimit an ethnic group.

First, correlations between material culture distributions and population groups have been questioned (Håland 1977; Zvelebil 1995: 40–42). DeCorse (1989) in studying the Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko groups of northeastern Sierra Leone concluded that material culture distributions provided only a limited indication of the divisions between them. Thus, different social groups may share a relatively homogeneous material culture, while still

Figure 5.2 Map showing E.T. Leeds’ interpretation of early medieval political and cultural divisions in Britain. Source: Leeds (1913: fig. 4).
maintaining 'ethnic' orientation or identity (DeCorse 1989: 125–40; cf. also Hill 1989: 24). Hodder (1982b) in his ethnoarchaeological studies around Lake Baringo in Kenya demonstrated that while some aspects of material culture related to ethnic (actually tribal) boundaries, others cross-cut them. The boundaries between these groups had, however, been maintained for several generations, despite a great deal of interaction between the groups, and even the movement of whole families from one tribe to another (ibid.: 24). This boundary maintenance had to be seen within the context of social strategies within and between the groups, for example in the negotiations between age and sex groups (ibid.: 75–86).

Similarly, the correlations between specific languages and groups of people have been called into doubt, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Robb (1993) and Moore (1994) have both criticised the 'cladistic' approach towards language history, which attributes similarities between contemporary languages to a hypothetical ancestor (cf. Sims-Williams 1998 for detailed argument on this). This results in scenarios of original unity leading to diversity, like a branching tree, but these are misleading in the extreme. The processes of language development have been shown to be extremely complex, and not well accounted for by this analogy (Pluciennik 1996a: 43): at any time populations speaking different languages can decrease or intensify their contact, the acceptable language can change, words can be borrowed or become obsolete, people can move. Language change can be a strategic choice in response to political, economic and cultural factors, and the possible role of specialist languages (trade, prestige, gender-associated) should be considered (Robb 1993: 748, 754–5). The tree analogy encourages seeing languages as things, whereas languages exist only insofar as people speak to each other (again, an alien thought in these days of national educational systems and dictionaries, which serve to codify and attempt to fossilise languages). In empirical terms, there are many anthropological case studies of ethnic groups that lack a common language (Elwert 1997: 266) and separate groups that share a language (Olsen and Kobyliński 1991: 15), while people living in border zones can exhibit incredible abilities to learn foreign languages (ibid.: 15). With regard to this last instance, Zvelebil (1995: 46) refers to Thomason and Kaufman's (1988) model for contact-induced language change, which sees the degree of change depending on the relative number of speakers from each community, the intensity of contact, the duration of contact and the social context of interactions. Indeed, Sims-Williams (1998: 517) argues that 70–80 per cent of the world's population can be said to be bilingual. Language distribution and language shift are therefore not easily explainable phenomena, and cannot be simply equated with specific groups, either in the present or in the past.

The increasing use of genetic data to identify population groups has also been subject to critique. There have been some recent attempts to map population distributions and movements using genetic data. Sokal et al. (1993), for example, aimed to test whether modern European allele frequencies reflect prehistoric and historic population movements of 'ethnic' units into and across Europe. They used their own 'European ethnohistory database', said to document the known locations and movements of 891 ethnic units in Europe over the last 4,000 years (!). In fact, each record in this database 'lists the name of a "gens" or tribe (or that of an archaeological horizon in the case of prehistoric records, or of a modern historical nation in the case of more recent ones' (ibid.: 57). There are obvious problems with such studies. First, they rely on an unfounded assumption of a link between 'ethnic' or 'racial' groups and genetic variation (Mirza and Dungworth 1995), and, second, they generally try to use modern data (i.e. the genome distributions of modern-day populations) as indicators of past populations (cf. Evison 2000). Such techniques, however, can have no time depth: if parallels are found between eastern England and Germany, we can have no way of knowing whether a group of people moved from Germany to Britain (or vice versa) 100, 1,000, or even 10,000 years ago, especially given that all are ultimately derived from the same parent population (Pluciennik 1996a; Sykes 2001; see also discussion in Hills 2003: 65–71). Palaeogenetic studies (using DNA derived from archaeological deposits such as burials) may give greater time resolution, but still cannot answer questions as to the (constructed and imagined) social or ethnic identities of those people (Hills 2003; Shennan 1991: 33; see also Tyrell 2000, who deals with issues of 'body idioms', whereby physical similarities – natural or created – can become identifiers of ethnic identity in certain situations, and who also provides a useful critique of the use of skeletal nonmetric traits in reconstructing ethnicity). One can also raise doubts as to the uses to which such research might be put. There are strongly voiced concerns that archaeological studies along these lines could be used to justify the exclusion of those whose 'ethnicity' is not 'European', that is whose DNA cannot be traced back to an arbitrary point in history (Mirza and Dungworth 1995: 352).

In addition, the nature of material culture distributions is being discussed more intensively. Although this discussion started over thirty years ago, with Clarke (1968) defining 'cultures' as polythetic entities, and pointing out that the distributions of archaeological types seen as representing a culture do not exactly coincide with each other (Shennan 1978: 113; see also Hodder 1978: 12–13; 1982: 6–8; and Childe 1951: 38, who also noted that the boundaries of the several fields of culture do not necessarily coincide), very little attention has been given to this issue until recently. Archaeological distributions, though, comprise an enormous variety of cross-cutting, patterns, produced by different factors (Shennan 1998b: 13), and this 'antidissipiness' should be recognised as the essence of the situation, rather than squeezed (as Childe and others tried to do) into convenient packages of 'culture' (ibid.; see our fig. 5.3). Thus, the historical basis for the identification of 'peoples' in the past, distinguished by language, culture and 'race', is gradually being dismantled and shown to be far more fragmentary and inconclusive than was thought to be the case; and a small number of archaeologists are questioning the very
also suggested that people choose ethnic markers that are relevant to them; one could not assume, for example, that linguistic or cultural differences would equate to ethnic differences. The publication of this work prompted interest in examination of the nature of the boundaries between groups and the social relations across them, and stressed that ethnic groups had to be maintained by continual expression and validation of those boundaries if the boundaries were no longer held to be significant, the ethnic groups would cease to exist in those forms (Barth 1969: 10, 15; Olsen and Koblinski 1991: 6). It was also significant in that it emphasised people’s actions as important, rather than seeing individuals as repositories of ethnicity, which they would involuntarily express (Jenkins 1994: 197).

While Barth focused attention on the importance of the boundary with others for the identity of the group, others were prompted to ask how ethnic identities are generated, and how they are transmitted to others and maintained over time (Epstein 1978: 96). These developments matched changes in the nature of anthropological enquiry itself, rather than seeing ‘societies’ or ‘cultures’ as static, isolated and homogeneous, interest was growing in showing the flux and development, ambiguity and complexity in analyses of social worlds (Eriksen 1993: 9). In recent years, following a lengthy debate about the role of ethnicity, and whether it should be seen as an inherent ‘primalordial’ quality, or as something designed to maximise self-interest (see Jones 1997: 56–79 for a detailed account) a partial consensus on the nature of ethnicity seems to have developed within sociology and anthropology. It is now seen primarily as a subjective phenomenon, with how you identify yourself being important, rather than how you are classified by supposedly ‘objective’ observers: the ethnic group is seen as a ‘self-defining system’, and ethnicity as a ‘situational construct’ (Barth 1969; Epstein 1978; Geary 1983; Jones 1997: 60). There are, however, some problems with this approach.

First, it runs the risk of reifying the ethnic group. Although we talk of an individual’s ethnicity, or of an ethnic group (i.e. seeing the ethnicity as the property of the person or group, as characterising them), ethnicity makes more sense when thought of as being an aspect of a relationship (Eriksen 1993: 12). It has long been recognised that ethnic identities are created in opposition to other ethnic identities, as part of an ongoing historical process. When groups of ‘us’ start to identify ‘them’ in terms of cultural differences (often based ultimately on socially constructed notions of ‘origins’), then ethnic relations are being established (Ramstad 1998: 355). Indeed, it is only when such cultural differences are perceived as important that social relationships can be said to have an ethnic element to them (Eriksen 1993: 12). These cannot be static identifications, however, as in defining oneself in relation to others, a stereotype of ‘them’ is being created that may well have an impact on how ‘they’ define themselves. If a person or group is categorised by others in the same way for long enough, they are likely to adjust their self-image in accordance (Jenkins 1994: 206). Alternatively, being categorised may serve to strengthen existing group identities through a process of resistance and
reaction (ibid.: 203). This process should be seen as a dialectic, a continuing communication, rather than a simple binary opposition between two 'ethnic groups'. Seeing ethnic groups as 'self-defining systems' fails to account for the complexity of the processes of definition. A detailed example of this can be seen in Linda Colley's book *Britons* (1992), in which she argues that Protestant British identity was forged in opposition to the qualities perceived in the Catholic French during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and vice versa (even today we still recognise the stereotypes of the British 'stiff upper lip' as opposed to the 'emotional' French).

Second, such a 'self-defining' perspective fails to take account of the limitations that can exist within those processes of definition. In present-day situations, ethnicity, while flexible, is not infinitely malleable. There are constraints, as well as choices, in terms of how ethnicity can be constructed (Eriksen 1993: 57). Present-day conceptions of ethnic identity, while often phrased in terms of whom one is descended, cannot be entirely arbitrary (Bentley 1987: 36), nor, in order for them to have any currency, they have to make genuine contact with people's actual experience (Eriksen 1993: 94). Ethnic names, cultural aspects, norms and many other features can be seen as an inventory on which a group may draw in order to designate its limits, but those symbols of 'identity' must be plausible to their intended audience (Elwert 1997: 256). There must also be mechanisms whereby new 'traditions' can be generated in response to changing circumstances (ibid.: 261–2; cf. Hobbsbaum 1983). In addition, given the role that external definition and categorisation may play in this process, attention has to be paid to structures of power and authority and how they impact on the social construction of ethnic (and other) identities (Jenkins 1997: 219). Jenkins, for example (ibid.: 207, 217–18), has looked at how the Mapuche, an indigenous Chilean people, were affected by their categorisation by first the Spanish and then the Chileans, and how this categorisation, in turn, influenced the construction of Chilean ethnicity. Through their monopolisation of violence and resources the white Chileans were able to make their categorisation of the Mapuche count far more in the social construction of Mapuche life than would have been the case otherwise (see also Vail 1989 and Comaroff and Comaroff 1992 for examples of the potential impact of colonialism and ethnography).

Within this view of ethnicity (and other communal-type identities) as an aspect of relationships, it is the idea of the group that has to be constantly maintained (in the same way as Barth's boundaries). In its maintenance over time, it will be subject to small changes, which will lead to its gradual transformation. The interest lies, then, in how that reproduction of ethnic feelings (and thus ethnic relationships) happens in a society. One of the most powerful ways to reproduce feelings of ethnic belonging is to make use of symbolic resources, especially material culture and everyday practices. The role of dress and bodily adornment is a good example. While rarely consciously articulated, the ways in which people dress are subject to a whole range of culturally informed ideas and expectations. Cultural differences in dress are one resource that can be seized on in the articulation of ethnic difference, as can be seen with national or regional costumes, or differences in military dress between countries. The symbolic resources drawn on in the construction of ethnicity are not arbitrary. The cultural practices and representations that become objectified as symbols of ethnicity have to resonate with people's usual practices and experiences (Jones 1997: 90). Again, it is pre-existing differences that are drawn upon in the creation of ethnic feelings; it is interaction with others of a different cultural tradition (as perceived from the outside, at least) that makes people think about the observed differences in a conscious way (Eriksen 1993: 34; Jenkins 1997: 76–7; Jones 1997: 95).

In addition, obvious cultural differences and similarities may not be the only ones chosen for the articulation of ethnicity. It has been recognised that humans are adept at subtle categorisation (although it may not always conform to Western norms of classification), including the categorisation of others, and the most mundane features can be seized upon as the locus of difference. The use of different methods of washing-up, for example, is one of the ways in which Danes have been said to distinguish themselves discernively from Swedes (Linde-Laursen 1993). This example highlights the role of everyday practices and habitual aspects of behaviour in the creation of identities, to which modern anthropologists and sociologists are now paying far more attention (Jenkins 1997: 76–7; McGuire 1982: 160–61). The Danish way of washing-up is not different in order to distinguish it from the Swedish — they are different due to historically generated attitudes to hygiene, and this fact is seized on as important. Similarly, the British do not drive on the left because they are British, but it is something that marks out their everyday practice as different: someone driving off a cross-channel ferry is immediately aware of being in another country, where things are done differently (see Graves-Brown 1996: 90).

Ethnic groups do not, then, constitute a 'natural' order. They are more an idea, which is dependent on constant reiteration through both everyday actions and discursive practice, rather than a solid thing. They are dependent on social relationships that have to be continually recreated, and the boundaries of those groups thereby redefined. People can leave ethnic groups and join others, and they can hold a range of different ethnic, local or other communal identities, without the idea of the ethnic group being challenged, if enough people believe in it. Hodder's (1982) studies in the Baringo area of Kenya showed how the different tribal groups were characterised by distinctive styles of dress, especially ear decoration. People moving to different areas could, however, change their ethnic affiliation by changing their appearance (ibid.: 21). A striking example of boundary redefinition comes from Nazi Germany, where the Volksdeutsche, the ethnic Germans, were taken to include the Austrian Sudetendeutsche and the Mennonites of Dutch origin in Russia and the Ukraine, but to exclude the Jewish population of eastern Europe, which had been the main organisers of German schools and institutions in those areas, and whose German ethnicity had been hailed by Germany's High
Command in the First World War (Elwert 1997: 252–3). In this light, ethnic groupings, as continually imagined (though not imaginary) groupings (Jenkins 1997: 77), can have no fixed boundaries. They are not things, in the sense of solid, bounded categorisations, but are rather ‘ideational beings’ (Olsen and Kobylińska 1991: 12), and are a reflection of the fluid and situational aspects of individual and group identities (Jones 1997: 75). Like a reflection in water, if one delves too deeply, the image of solidity disappears (cf. Sahlin 2000: 161).

Why, then, do humans often have strong ties to groups that can be termed ‘ethnic’? Ethnic attachments obviously do not have the same relevance and emotional force in all societies at all times (Jenkins 1997: 77), yet, in certain circumstances, they can be very real, and very important. Part of the explanation may be that ethnic classifications are convenient ways of ordering our world. Being able to group others through the use of stereotypes (in the sense of the application of standardised notions of the cultural distinctiveness of a group) helps to create order, and enables people to know how to behave towards those others (Eriksen 1993: 23, 60). This is in spite of the fact that actual inter-ethnic relations may well diverge dramatically from those stereotypes (ibid.: 24). Such categorisations may be especially useful in urban multi-ethnic settings (where, incidentally, most anthropological fieldwork on ethnicity takes place), where people tend to become more self-conscious with regard to their origins, and where ethnic identities acquire an everyday relevance (ibid.: 80–81).

Another partial explanation is that the roots of ethnic identity are often laid down during childhood, and this is how it can acquire its potent emotional charge (Epstein 1978: xiv). Ethnicity is something that often gets learnt from an early age, when through primary socialisation a child learns who they are and what this means in terms of behaviour and self-esteem (Jenkins 1994: 204). It is thus something that can be called upon in interactive situations to defend the individual or social group against outsiders, albeit in a symbolic way. Yet, we must beware of mistaking description for explanation. Seeing ethnic groups in the present does not mean that the existence of those ethnic groups is the cause of, or reason for, conflict or difference. Although previous conflicts in Bosnia or Somalia, for example, may look as if they were due to ‘natural’ hatred between groups, the violence is organised, requires logistics and planning, and would seem to have more to do with the role of warlords or political entrepreneurs than vague historical traditions (Elwert 1997: 251).

The role of history, and interpretation of the past does, however, seem fundamental to the creation and maintenance of ethnic feelings and identities, for a number of reasons. Notions of shared origins are usually very important for ethnic identities. This may be partly related to modern nationalist constructions of ethnicity, which stress the importance of blood relations. This means that interpretations of history become important to ideologies that are trying to justify, maintain and strengthen particular ethnic boundaries (Eriksen 1993: 59): ‘Mass-produced accounts of “our people” and “our culture” are important tools in the fashioning of an ethnic identity with a presumed cultural continuity in time’ (ibid.: 91).

Indeed, the writing or narrating of history has a particular importance for the creation of ethnic identities. By selectively stressing certain values, they enable people to identify positively with those they see as their forebears (Epstein 1978: xii–xiv). However, given the potential number of ancestors that any given person has, this is necessarily a very partial selection. Eriksen (1993: 71) has pointed out that while North Americans often trace their ancestry back to the European aristocracy, they make little mention of the manual workers, thieves or prostitutes who would also have inhabited their family trees. This, essentially, is ethnic history writ small: in writing the history of a ‘people’ a selection is made of innumerable historical facts or myths, and these are rearranged into a narrative structure in order to legitimate the current supposed existence of that ‘people’. Through literacy people can create ‘authorised’ versions of history (Eriksen 1993; cf. Collins and Blot 2003). As Smith (1984: 119) has noted: ‘since myths and memories are capable of infinite reinterpretation and multi-form dissemination, the educator-intellectuals, especially historians and linguists, help to “create” a sense of ethnicity out of the chronicles, traditions, memories and artefacts at their disposal’ (cf. Amory 1994; Geary 1983; Gutiérrez 1997: 170; James 1989: 47; Jones 1998; Lucy 2000a; Moreland 2000). This emphasis on blood ties and ancestry has sometimes been assumed to be an inherent facet of human nature (cf. Smith 1986), but the possibility must be entertained that it is something that first arose with literacy, and was elaborated through the nationalistic uses of the past in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Banks has noted, ‘the manifestations of ethnicity we study today contain within them the ghosts of previous academic formulations. In the modern world ethnicity is indissolubly linked to nationalism and race, to ideas about normative political situations and relations, and to ideas about descent and blood’ (Banks 1996: 189; see also Curta 2001; Díaz-Andreu 1999a; Geary 2002). For example, Rowlands (1998: 262), commenting on Hoolder’s work in the Baringo district, which showed that ethnic boundaries need not correspond to cultural similarities and differences, argues that this may be due to the ethnic/tribal divisions in East Africa mostly being colonial inventions. He thus suggests that there is no reason to suppose that these boundaries would correspond with more long-term cultural and linguistic continuities.

We also need to think about the scale at which identities are now created. Increasingly, global transport, media and maps have revolutionised ways that communities can be recognised. Similarly, uniform educational and administrative systems covering large areas serve to facilitate the development of abstract identification with people one will never meet (Eriksen 1993: 91, 106). These modern factors have also affected how both nationalism and ethnicity are constructed (a point that the NATO bombing of Serbian broadcasting centres in 1999 makes all too clearly). Thus, we may have to allow for
the possibility that ethnicity as we understand it today may be very different from how it may have operated in the past: the emphasis on ancestry and blood relations may be a new one. We should also be aware that such communal identities can operate on many different levels. Present-day ethnic groups can encompass many hundreds of thousands of people who, through education and communication, all feel themselves to be members, yet will always remain strangers. In the past, especially the prehistoric past, groups of such size seem highly unlikely, and we should probably be looking for groupings on a much smaller scale. The nature of contact between groups in the past would also seem to be important: we might well suspect different feelings of ‘belongingness’ expressed towards those one lives with, works with and sees everyday, as opposed to those one may only meet once a month or once a year. The definitions of those groups will also be important; the extended family will experience contact with other groups in a different way from those who define themselves by their occupation or exploitation of a limited territory. Perhaps we can start to explore different sorts of communal identities in the past: territorial aspects, based on where people lived, and social aspects, based on where they came from (or at least imagined they did).

Ethnicity, of course, cannot be teased out from the other strands that intersect to form social identities. Members of ‘ethnic’ groups, depending on age, sex, class etc., experience ethnicity differently, leading to a diverse range that casts doubt on any uniform ‘ethnicity’, and which thus cannot be studied in isolation from other aspects of identity or social belonging (Mirza and Dungworth 1995: 349). Eriksen (1991: 139) has shown in his studies on Mauritius and Trinidad how ‘one is never simply “male” or “middle-class”: one is Indian male or Coloured middle-class’. Larick (1986) has demonstrated how information about age is transmitted alongside ethnic traits in the spear style of the Lio kup of northern Kenya, and how such material culture is used in an active way: a young male may manipulate his position amongst his peers by owning a specific form of spear. New spear styles are often borrowed from neighbouring, more successful ethnic groups (ibid.: 276–8). This serves to make the point that ethnicity is often interwoven with questions of dominance, hierarchy and social stratification (Epstein 1978: 134; Jenkins 1997: 73; Jones 1997: 96), and that gender divisions are also enmeshed in the creation of ethnic groups (Jones 1997: 83). Similarly O’Brien (1994) has shown, through the study of a village in French Catalonia, how gender can influence ethnic identity, with male identities staying more or less constant, while females shift between French and Catalan identities (and languages) as they go through life, and how, through their raising of children and grandchildren, they help to perpetuate this difference.

To summarise, ethnicity should not be seen either as a primordial and inherent aspect of humanity, or as instrumental and infinitely malleable. It is an aspect of social relationships, whereby cultural differences can be identified (and therefore propagated) at a discursive level as indications of ethnic divisions. Ethnic feelings are always generated in opposition to others, and the

use of stereotypes plays a strong role in this. The idea that people belong to an ethnic group is thus something that must be constantly maintained through the articulation of both difference and similarity. Present-day constructions of ethnicity have also been strongly affected by the role that nationalism has played in the construction of national and sub-national communities, with the expectation that everyone has an ethnicity, that a person’s ethnicity corresponds largely to the nation-state in which they were raised, and that it should be objectively identifiable, through appearance, language, habits, etc. This will not have been true for the majority of human history. Rather, when we think about ethnicity (or more likely, communal identities) in the past, we should envisage a range of different identities, from kin-based ties to large communal groupings, from weakly felt identities to those that people are willing to kill or die for. We can expect that individuals would have had a range of such identities, and that these would have been emphasised differently depending on the situation. As an aspect of social identity, ethnicity would have been expressed through social interactions, and articulated through such things as behaviour, everyday practice, use of space, architecture and landscape, and personal appearance. However, before such interactions can start to be investigated by archaeologists, an adequate consideration of material culture, which sees it as both actively used by people and capable of taking on diverse meanings and significances, needs to be in place.

Ethnicity as cultural identity: archaeology and material culture

Ethnicity (feelings of social belonging based on culturally constructed notions of shared origins) and other types of communal identities (those based on territory, for example) are aspects of social practice, which have to be continually constructed and generated, and are most effective when this is done through the use of shared ways of doing things. Studying those identities, therefore, involves paying attention to the uses of material culture in social interactions. Anthropological examples can suggest how material culture may become influential in the articulation of modern-day ethnicities. This has been demonstrated by work in Papua New Guinea by Mackenzie (1991: 136–41) who has studied the ways in which bilum, the ubiquitous string bags, are used in structuring social relations. The Telefomin women acknowledge their cultural affinity with other Mountain Ok women, by saying they all make ‘one kind of bilum. However, the different groups elaborate their bags with distinctive stylistic features, thereby exaggerating the uniqueness of the product, and confirming the sense of belonging to one’s own group. These identifications are not static, however. The opening up of the region with the building of airstrips has led to an accelerated diffusion of bilum styles, and increased blurring in the indication of tribal distinctions. This, in turn, is reflecting in part wider political processes that are pressing
for the recognition of a united Min identity. It should be remembered, though, that as well as expressing ethnic relations, the *hilum* also has the potential to evoke culturally and contextually appropriate aspects of womanness (ibid.: 145).

Archaeologists too have started to investigate the role of material culture in these interactional spheres. This approach has its origins in the aforementioned 'style debate', in which several (mainly North American) archaeologists argued over the communicative role of material culture. One of the main participants in this debate was Sackett, who in 1977 (and still in 1990), argued that style (i.e. the form and decorative aspects of material culture) was a passive aspect of artefacts, intended to communicate group identity or relations to others (see also Wobst 1977). The idea lying behind this view obviously relates to the 'material culture as text' perspective, as if it were a language just needing decoding, which can directly reflect various social or cultural phenomena, such as the 'ethnic group' (Conkey 1990: 9). The main problem with this argument was that it saw style first as an end-product — there was little attention paid to the processes of production or manufacture of material culture — but also that style came to be seen as possessed by the object itself; there was little consideration of the role of living human beings in the interactions made possible by those artefacts (Boast 1997: 181–2). As Conkey (1990: 10) has said, 'we too easily overlooked the contexts within which the variation arose, how the artifacts in question were used, and that they were a part of the production of meaning to prehistoric peoples just as much as being a part of the way we produce meanings about the past'.

We see more potential in approaches that take account of all the stages of production (sometimes termed 'chaîne opératoire'), including usage, rather than just looking at static aspects of, for example, decoration (cf. Edmonds 1990, drawing on Conkey 1990: 12–13; Dietler and Herbich 1998; Lemonnier 1993: 2–3; Mauss 1979 [1950]). Within this perspective, the knowledge drawn on in the creation and use of artefacts (and ways of doing things, such as food preparation) is constituted in social and historical worlds, and this knowledge is generally context specific, and not necessarily explicitly discussed (Edmonds 1990). These ideas have major implications for discussions of ethnicity in archaeology. Previously, it was thought that ethnicity could be inferred from artefacts by looking at those very static, decorative features (those features that, for example, distinguish a Beaker from an early medieval cremation urn). Within this perspective however: 'not only decorative patterns or secondary aspects of shape are used to define one's status or ethnic identity, but also the use of given artefacts or entire processes of production' (Lemonnier 1995: 20). Material culture is thus actively involved in social practice (and, indeed, social practice cannot exist without material culture). Social practice involving material culture is how the idea of the group (whether that be social, familial, ethnic or other) becomes articulated: it is not something that can be 'read off' from the artefactual evidence, without regard for its contexts of use and production.

From this perspective, it is thus important to employ subtle analyses of material culture. Díez-Andreu (1998a), for example, argues against the use of Lírica pottery as a diagnostic type for defining Iron Age Edetanian territory and ethnicity (inferred mainly from classical sources) in eastern Iberia (fig. 5.4). She points out that when the context of use of this pottery is examined, it appears to have a largely aristocratic character, a highly limited span of use, and is associated particularly with male spheres. She also notes a double standard in its interpretation: when found within the supposed Edetanian territory it is used as a diagnostic type for ethnic definition, but when found outside, it is explained as the result of elite exchange. This pottery type should, instead, be viewed as a resource that is drawn on in the daily recreation of identities, rather than a simplistic 'ethnic' indicator. Conversely, Frankel (2000) demonstrates different social practices (reflecting distinct *habitus*) employed in Bronze Age, as opposed to Chalcolithic, societies in Cyprus, and argues that, given the chronological overlap in evidence, they represent different ethnicities, contact between which eventually resulted in acculturation of the indigenous community, without any obvious conflict.

Re-examinations of late Iron Age and Roman material in Britain have come to similar conclusions regarding the active use of material culture in the creation of cultural identities. Willis (1994) argues against the assumptions often made about the significance of Roman imports found on native Iron Age sites, urging that the contexts in which such re-use have to be examined in a subtle manner before conclusions can be drawn about the social impact of this material. Hill (1995) highlights that the traditional picture of Iron Age 'tribes' in Britain in fact masks a range of regional variations, with some areas such as Dorset, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire developing and then maintaining strong 'regional identities' for many generations. This should not be perceived as 'backwardness' in the context of adoption of Roman or Gallic material culture in other areas, but rather as a deliberate creation of strong local identities because of, and through, regular inter-regional contacts (cf. Collis 2003 and James 1999 for critiques of the identities traditionally termed 'Celtic' in these British Iron Age societies).

Lucy (2000a) demonstrated that the material culture previously identified as 'Anglian', 'Saxon' and 'Jutish' in fifth- and sixth-century eastern England did not correspond in its geographical distribution to the later kingdoms of those names; it is argued that these 'Anglo-Saxon' identities were in fact a later creation (see also Hills 2003). Moreland (2000), arguing along similar lines, demonstrates how this created ethnicity was in fact one that was restricted to an elite: it was a status distinction, allied to an ethnic (but not a racial) one. Yorke (2000) also argued for the importance of political allegiance in the creation of ethnic identities at this time. Similar arguments are now being advanced regarding the 'Viking' settlement of England (cf. papers in Hadley 1999 and for supposed Irish migrations into northern and western Britain, Campbell 2001). Even the cultural construction of the 'British' is
now being studied from a more critical archaeological perspective (cf. papers in Lawrence 2003).

Another aspect to the analyses of the contexts of use and production of material culture is the way in which art and artefacts can be combined to produce costumes. For example, the early Bronze Age burials of the north German plain give evidence for great similarities in regional traditions, dress and appearance. By the middle Bronze Age, however, despite evidence of increased contact between groups and of a growth in trade and movement between areas, costume shows much clearer distinctions and the development of regional divergence (Rowlands 1998: 263), suggesting perhaps that these regional identities are the product of contact, rather than isolation.

Local and regional variations of mortuary ritual also suggest the active use that can be made both of artefacts and of 'ways of doing'. Lucy (1998) demonstrated that what had previously been assumed to be a fairly homogeneous cultural distribution, the use of the 'Anglian' burial rite in East Yorkshire in the fifth to seventh centuries AD, was in fact much more complex. Variations were evident, even between neighbouring cemeteries, in the ways that people were treated in death. Age and sex were demonstrated to play a strong role in the structuring of the burial rite, and it was argued that a deliberate selection was being made from available material culture in order to facilitate the marking out of differences between social groups within communities. The suggestion was made that this evidence represented not an 'invasion' from the continent (as previously assumed on the basis of the introduction of new material culture types), but a continuing recreation and rearticulation of identities through the burial rite that fed back into the structuring of those societies.

Consumption of various foods, and different ways of preparing them can be one of the factors that emphasise communal similarity and difference. Haseloff (1998a) cites ethnographic evidence that in Peru, specific varieties of peppers are associated with certain female lineages (cf. Shipek 1989: 163 who cites evidence that some tree species can be used to identify the territory of indigenous south Californian residents). Haseloff (1998b: 779–80) has intriguingly suggested a major role for plants in the early development of notions of territoriosity. By nurturing plants in a specific locale, that area could become associated with certain people and groups, thereby creating some of the conditions for the development of named territories. Food and its associated activities (processing, consumption) could thus become social markers used in group affiliation. She uses the example of the Inka state's use of maize and its preparations as the 'symbolic food of the empire', with those products being used at every political and religious gathering. Others have also explored the potential of food preparation and consumption in the creation and maintenance of political and ethnic (as well as other) identities (cf. Hamilakis 1999). This area would seem ripe for further study, particularly in combination with new scientific techniques, such as trace element and stable isotope analyses of human bone, which can reveal dietary patterns, and thus contribute to this detailed, contextual approach.
The bone-chemistry analysis of African-American adults from a slave cemetery at the former Remley Plantation near Charleston, South Carolina by Crist (Crist 1995), for example, suggested significant differences in the nature of the diet of slaves on this plantation than suggested by contemporary documentary evidence. Documents of the period suggest that slaves would have eaten a homogeneous diet, provided by a centralised kitchen. The bone-analysis, however, suggested that diet differed between age and sex groups, suggesting variation in the diet, with some exploitation of vegetable and marine resources. In another study Schurr (1992) analysed a sample of burials from a Middle Mississippian civic-ceremonial centre in southwestern Indiana (c. AD 1200–1450), both in terms of bone chemistry, and in terms of mortuary ritual. Several individuals were found not to exhibit traces of the usual maize diet at the Angel site, and it was noted that they were all found to have differential treatment in death. Interestingly, they were all female, and the author suggests that the Angel population was augmented by females from another population (i.e. non-maize agriculturalists) who, in turn, had their foreign origins recognised in their mortuary treatment. Such rich analyses can only serve to better inform our interpretations of the intersection of ethnic and communal identities with age, gender and status. More recently, Barrett et al. (2001) have demonstrated how a more maritime-oriented subsistence strategy was introduced to Viking Age northern Scotland, presumably by Norse colonists.

A key recent development in these scientific approaches is the ability to identify place of childhood residence through the analysis of oxygen and strontium stable isotope ratios. Price et al. (2001) and Bentley et al. (2003) have used strontium isotopes to demonstrate a complex interrelationship between migration and acculturation in the spread of Lmanhvercheremik farming in Neolithic central Europe; similar debates are now dominating discussions of the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in northern Europe (cf. Milner et al. 2004; Richards et al. 2003) and are even creeping into the earlier Mesolithic and Palaeolithic (cf. Bergsvik 2003). This technique would seem to be of particular value in those areas of archaeology where the material culture can be dated closely enough to allow potential identification of those who would traditionally be thought of as first-generation immigrants into a new area. Initial explorations of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in this light (cf. Budd et al. 2004) are already suggesting that although this period appears to see a high degree of population mobility, those who can be identified skeletally as immigrants from across the English Channel are not those who are being interred with stereotypical 'Anglo-Saxon' assemblages (fig. 5.5).

Architecture, and the structuring of space can also be used to emphasise communal similarity and difference, at both conscious and unconscious levels. Blake (1999) focuses on the nuraghi (conical or sub-rectangular stone towers) of the Sardinian Bronze Age as meaningful spaces that would have helped affirm a 'Nuragic' way of life. In the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, divergence in the constructional styles of the nuraghi are argued to be evidence for social hierarchies, while a more diverse ceramic repertoire is interpreted as signifying that internal social identities had become more influential than cultural identity in determining action; in other words, that as that cultural identity had become more secure it had slipped into the background of social interactions (see also Bukach 2003 on passage-graves in the British Channel Islands and Robb 2001 on Malta's Neolithic 'temples').

In a similar vein, Donley-Reid (1990) looked at the origins of Swahili settlements in East Africa, arguing that there can be no simplistic correlation between ethnic identity and architectural styles, but that the contexts of the building and its uses must be taken into account. She argues that Swahili settlements were originally founded in the eighth and ninth centuries AD by foreign traders, who drew on aspects of Islamic culture in a deliberate attempt to create power for themselves. Over time, inter-marriage created a new ethnic identity, based on a combination (or recreation) of Arab, Persian, Indian and African elements. While the study is rooted in the debate over the 'African' versus the 'Arab' origins for the houses and settlements, the answers are not so simple or clear-cut.

Garman (1998) hypothesises about the architectural proximity of slaves and their owners in southern New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries. He shows how specific social relations and the owners' dependence on slaves for certain forms of economic production would have affected their interactions, and he argues that neither the concepts of 'acculturation' nor 'domination/resistance' are adequate to explain these. Rather he uses the term 'resistant accommodation', showing through the use of probate inventories how semi-private space was ceded to African-American slaves as part of this interaction.

Several archaeologists have focused on 'social boundaries' in their attempts to understand the role of material culture in both creating and transforming social relations. For example, Wells (1992) in a study of relations across the Roman-Germanic border during the Roman Empire stresses the importance of examining how those Roman goods that crossed the border were used by the native communities (whereas previous studies had assumed that Rome was the dominant power in the relations, and that therefore the native communities would wish to emulate them). Using four small case studies, he demonstrates how Roman objects can become appropriated into different social practices; some of them of an everyday nature, and some of them involved in overt demonstrations of status. He argues that these native elites were not trying to 'become Roman', as previously has been argued, but that they were using those imports to assert their status (perhaps contested) and express new identities connected with Rome, for their own advantage in their local communities. Along similar lines, Hunter (2001) re-examined Roman material found on native settlement sites in Scotland, and demonstrated how its use was incorporated into local practices, rather than it representing cultural domination, as previously assumed. Wells (2001) has since developed this argument for continental Europe, showing how the 'German' created the 'Roman', as much as vice versa.

Indeed, sophisticated understandings of Romanisation, and of the creation of new late Roman and antique cultural identities, are now emerging, both for Britain and the Continent (cf. Hill 2001; Woolf 1998; papers in Gardner 1999; Laurence and Berry 1998; Pohl 1998; Wells 1999; and Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002 for a broad range of case studies), and we can expect to see further developments of these arguments as the results from the sophisticated studies of material culture and skeletal analysis described above become more widely disseminated.

Conclusions

The studies briefly mentioned above serve to emphasise the point that archaeology needs to start approaching ethnicity from a different direction. In the past we have assumed we knew how it worked; because we have ideas about how our present ethnic identities are constituted, these have been projected into the past. Instead, archaeology needs to start by identifying people who chose to act or look the same. It can then start to explore the contexts in which they did so, and whether these changed through time. It also needs to explore similarities and differences in more depth: are all cultural practices the same, or just some? We need to start exploring the construction of communal identities in the past, rather than just observing cultural differences and assuming we know what they represent. New scientific approaches offer the possibility of identifying migrants through analysis of their skeletal remains; these results can be employed in contextual analyses that can examine the contribution of incoming people and ideas to the transformation of current identities.

The solution must lie in revising the scales at which archaeologists work. Given that from a 'bird's eye view' the construction of ethnicity is likely to be manifested as multiple overlapping boundaries made up by various representations of cultural difference (Jones 1996: 70–71), it is little use having such an elevated viewpoint that none of the patterning can be observed at all (i.e. by trying to trace distributions of artefacts over whole continents). By working at a local level, employing detailed analyses of data in order to tease out the complex interrelationships of artefacts and the minutiae of spatial patterning, archaeologists can at least start to identify the contexts in which social identities would have been recreated through everyday practices. Thus we would agree with Pluciennik (1996: 43): 'we do not have to subsume variability of material culture, regional histories, languages and economies into one grand narrative... I would find complexity more convincing than simplicity'. So would we. Perhaps when we start to examine the detailed local contexts of use and deposition of artefacts that previously would have been interpreted as evidence for 'migration' or 'invasion' we will start to identify the subtle local variations pointing to the appropriation of items of material culture for particular purposes (Niles 1997). It is at that scale that we may be able to identify different patterns of use that point to the deliberate articulation of cultural differences, but it cannot be achieved at a coarser level of resolution. It is also in the historical depth that archaeology provides that we may be able to trace the formation of new types of identities, through the use of material culture. We must always remember, however, as Maceachern (1998) has reminded us, that ethnicity may not have been as relevant to people in the past as it seems to be in the present, and that any patterning at this detailed level that we do discern may be due to other types of communal identities, such as familial lineages or territorial groupings, rather than to anything we, from our modern perspective, might recognise as ethnically based.