

HUNTER-GATHERERS, SAN, ARCHAEOLOGISTS, ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND HISTORIANS

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In a sense, it seems odd for a historian to be asked to describe the relationship between two fields of study, neither of which is his own. This is especially so as their approaches to the core of the historical consciousness - the passing of time - are outside the wave-band on which he is used to receiving signals, but at different ends. Stereotypically, anthropologists ignore the changes in the society they study and concentrate on its eternal essence, which in fact means its chance configuration at the time they went into the field. (I know this libellous prejudice cannot be substantiated, but neither can most prejudices.) On the other hand, archaeologists are only happy when dealing in terms of millennia, or at the very least centuries. But perhaps this is a case of the unity of oppositions. It is of course true that both archaeology and anthropology cannot analyse the stream of events, which is the very stuff with which a historian works, while the stretched time-scale with which archaeologists work, in particular, means that, when confronted with a cultural unit, their approach has to be synchronic, since the fine detail of the historical process is hidden from them.

This introduction was mainly for the purpose of demonstrating that there is more in common between archaeology and anthropology than the fact that they both study savages, in so far as they do concern themselves with "preliterate peoples" or whatever euphemism is currently fashionable. Nevertheless it is clear that some form of correspondence between the study subjects of some archaeologists and some anthropologists exists, in terms of the sort of society they are dealing with. (I am being deliberately vague.) Pleading both my profession and my nationality as an excuse, I will therefore retreat from these wooly speculations into the conceptual means of concrete empirical data.

Indeed, by doing so I will only be following the request of the editors of this journal that I should deal with an actual case of the interaction of the two disciplines. I will be concerned with the relation between the archaeological study of the late stone age hunter-gatherers of Southern Africa with the anthropological investigations of the "San" of the same area. In this there are certain advantages, as it is possible to avoid being trapped in the vicious circle in which anthropological models are used to flesh out archaeological data, and the archaeological report then used to substantiate the original anthropological model. In Southern Africa there is at least documentary evidence to show that the final inhabitants of the shelters whose rubbish-heaps are excavated by archaeologists belonged to the same cultural group as the San the anthropologist studies - although one should be very wary of assuming that all "bushmen" followed the same pattern of life (Barnard, 1978). I will concentrate more on the archaeological side of the balance, on the assumption that readers of this journal would have some knowledge of Southern Africa hunter-gatherer ethnography. In particular I will concentrate on a single research project, that directed by John Parkington of the University of Cape Town, since I have had considerable contact with him, have been into the field with him and thus know moderately well both the work that he does and the area in which his work is done.

Parkington's area of study lies on, and inland from, the west coast of Africa, about 200 kilometres north of Cape Town. It is known from various writings of the early Dutch settlers at the Cape of Good Hope to have been inhabited by "Bosjiemans" until the end of the seventeenth century (A.D.). It also contains a relatively large number of archaeological sites which date from roughly the same period, say from the beginning of our era. It is therefore the intention of the archaeologist to answer such questions as "What does this assemblage of artefacts with its associated non-artefactual

and grasses that had been brought in for use as bedding. Secondly, on the coast, close to the rocky promontories on which the shell-fish live, are vast middens of mussel and limpet shells, which also include a scattering of stone tools. Many of these have been destroyed over the last two hundred years, as they form one of the most readily available sources of lime, but others survive, to be destroyed in their turn by the investigating archaeologists. On the westcoast the middens are comparatively small, but on the southern coast of Africa they may have been vast, several metres thick and several kilometres long. Predation of shell-fish was obviously intense and of long duration. Thirdly, there are a number of sandy hollows in the veld which contain a very large number of stone tools, but as they are not conducive for the preservation of organic remains, they can neither be dated nor provide much information as to the economy of their inhabitants.

The question now arises, how can this information be used to answer the sorts of problems that Parkington posed as the goals of archaeology. What can they be made to say about the socio-economic and technological behaviour of the late stone age hunter-gatherers of the South West Cape and of their use of the particular environment in which they lived? Certain aspects of the social organization can indeed be induced from the archaeological record. For instance, in addition to the evidence of the rock art, the size of living groups can be at least guessed at by estimating the size of the sleeping area available within the various rock shelters, especially those where bedding-material survives. The two measures are in general remarkably consonant (somewhere in the region of ten adults) which, at least as an order of magnitude figure, seems reasonable and compares with what is known of at least some San populations. (But not all, there are historical records of voortrekkers coming up against bands of 200 Bosjiemans.)

Similarly, if the evidence of the rock art is to be believed, the sexual division of labour was the frequent hunter-gatherer pattern of the men hunting and the women gathering. On the other hand no reasonable estimate of population density or of population dynamics seems feasible.

On economic matters, information is much surer, both because it is the sort of information which can easily be gained from excavations and because Parkington's interests lie in this direction. A large amount of his research has gone towards demonstrating that the hunter-gatherers followed a definite pattern of transhumance and to elucidating the details of this pattern of seasonal mobility. In particular, he has been concerned to show that the coastal sites were only occupied for a short period in winter, while their inhabitants spent the summer inland, in the sandveld or in the highland zones around the Oliphants river. This argument derived from the a priori assumption that a strategy of transhumance would best exploit the relatively scarce resources of the region, for, to be fair, such an argument was adduced once the pattern became moderately clear, but is backed by some firm empirical evidence. On the one hand, various of the major staple resources are only available at one time of the year. The shell-fish of the coast are liable to become poisonous in the summer, when the mussels in particular are frequently infested by an algal growth known as 'red tide'. Against this the various bulbs whose remains are found in large numbers in the inland sites can only be located during their flowering period, roughly speaking in the summer. On the other hand, there are various indicators which allow the time of the year at which a particular food was consumed to be determined. For instance, sophisticated isotopic analysis of the shells (which seems like magic to the uninitiated)

can determine the relative temperature of the sea-water at the time at which shell-fish are harvested. As the hypothesis would predict, they were mainly eaten during the winter. Similarly, the state of the teeth of the dassies (rock hyrax) found in large numbers in all deposits shows how old the animal was when it was killed (and since young are born at one time of year, when the animal died). Once again, individual sites seem to have been occupied at the seasons which would be expected, given the general argument. These are only two of the most conclusive indicators which Parkington has used - there are several others - which all go to build a fairly conclusive argument for transhumance, especially when it is known that those living in the mountains did have contact with the sea. Marine shells were found in a rock shelter in the highlands, and there are various ships among the paintings there.

It should also be stressed that this description is still provisional. There are indications that a similar pattern of transhumance existed away from the mountains into the semi-desert karoo of the interior. In the early twentieth century stockfarmers took their herds that way, to take benefit of the flush of grass brought on by winter rains, and it is probable that they were continuing a pattern established millennia before by herds of game, which the San would have followed. But this has still to be confirmed.

In addition, it should also be clear that the differential chances that particular foodstuffs have of surviving in the archaeological record mean that it would be foolhardy in the extreme to attempt to draw up dietsheets for the hunter-gatherers who existed in prehistoric times. There will always be much more evidence for the consumption of organisms with hard parts - shell-fish or animals - as these will not disappear in the same way as, for instance, soft fruits or water lilies.

But what has this got to do with the relationship of anthropology to archaeology? At the most basic level, anthropological data can provide ideas by which the archaeological data can be explained. The so-called "ethnographic models" from which the archaeologist works can give hypotheses which can then be tested against the inchoate mass of stones and bones which come out of the ground. They provide a sort of short cut in the thinking process and allow research designs to be produced which have a greater chance of success. But this is only a preliminary stage. It is notable that Parkington's citations of studies of surviving Southern African hunter-gatherer populations are mainly to be found in his earlier works. As the research progresses beyond a certain stage it acquires an impetus of its own. There is no longer any need to buttress the argument with modern parallels. Further questions develop out of the research itself and the evidence itself becomes hard enough for special pleading of ethnographic analogy no longer to be necessary. The case study in itself can be used for comparison with others, whether reconstructed from archaeological or historical sources or observed by anthropologists.

But not quite. There are certain aspects of human behaviour that simply are beyond the ken of archaeologists. It may very well be that some sort of annual gathering of large number of hunter-gatherer bands is necessary, to allow for the interchange of personnel between them, both by marriage and by simple transference, and to build up social bonds. If this was so in the southwest Cape, then the archaeologists have as yet discovered no evidence bearing on the matter, and it is difficult to imagine what sort of data at their disposal could do so. Ethnographic analogy would remain the only evidence for this practice, or, for instance, for the sort of kinship system that pertained among them.

On the other hand, as yet there seems to be little use made by anthropologists of the work of archaeologists working on related populations. For instance, the recent symposium on the hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari does not seem to have made use of archaeological data, at least in so far as they do not relate to the Kalahari itself, although it should be added that John Yellen, the archaeologist who is attached to the team, refers to various of the classic works of the "new archaeology" (Yellen, 1976). In a sense this is understandable. So much of the data that can relatively easily be used by anthropologists is simply not available to archaeological reconstructions. But it is also a pity. Hunter-gatherers have only survived in a few, relatively abnormal ecological settings. Any synthetic account of the San of Southern Africa, let alone of the hunter-gatherers of the world as a whole must also include consideration of the sort of work done by Parkinson or by various of his archaeological colleagues in Southern Africa. After all, in evolutionary, or even in historical perspective, the people they study did not live so very long.

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Note. It will have been apparent that I have not attempted to key where all the references to Parkington's oeuvre are to be found.