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The evolution burial practice among the Ertebølle; an attempt to apply the concepts of agency and structure to the study of cultural change in the past.

Coralie Acheson

Archaeology has traditionally failed to identify the ability of individuals in the past to make conscious decisions and act creatively. Individuals with the power to act are referred to as agents, with the ability and creativity to make decisions and act independently. They are however constantly influenced by structural norms: deeply ingrained ideas about how to live their lives properly. This tension can be observed archaeologically in the cemeteries of the Ertebølle of Denmark. While there are clear norms in the burial practice, such as the style of inhumation and the type of grave goods, there are also variations. One grave has the body of a young woman and a baby boy, the child laid on the wing of a swan; another burial has full male grave goods, but the body of a dog. It is suggested here that these variations are evidence of individuals reacting to unusual situations and personalities. When people act in ways which do not fit into the usual structure there is the potential for both the structure and, as a result society, to change.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of agency and structure, based primarily on the work of the sociologists Giddens and Bourdieu, are frequently discussed within post-processual archaeology. It has been seen as a way of reaching the individual in the past, one of the key stones of interpretive archaeology. This article explores

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these concepts, in particular looking at the way they relate to each other. They will be discussed in turn, before the relationships between them are explored. These theoretical ideas will be explored through a case study of mortuary ritual within the Ertebølle culture of the Southern Scandinavian Mesolithic. This will focus on seeking evidence for decision making, and the role that conscious, self aware thought played in comparison to the ideological structures shared by the people and the relationship this has with change in that structure.

AGENCY AND ACTORS

The concept of agency, while widely discussed in post-processual archaeology, is a rather ambiguous one. Barrett describes agency as the “means by which things are achieved”, clearly linking agency with action¹. Berggren claims that “agency is understood as the ability of a conscious subject”, which relates more directly to the ability of an individual to act². Finally Gardner asserts that it “concerns the nature of individual freedom, the role of socialisation in forming persons, and the role of particular ways of doing things in the reproduction of cultures” which links both action and actor albeit in a rather vague way³. The lack of a clear definition is problematic. The problem is that agency itself is a rather vague concept. For the purposes of discussion agents, or actors, are those who have agency, and they are considered to be self-aware, knowledgeable individuals. Agents act, and these actions are very important for archaeologists, particularly in studying how cultures change. Agency is the quality of the individual which gives them the potential to act. Archaeology has been plagued traditionally with a tendency to ignore the potential of individuals to act

¹ J.C. Barrett, ‘Agency, the Duality of Structure and the Problem of the Archaeological Record’ in I. Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological Theory Today* (Cambridge, 2001), 141.

² K. Berggren, ‘The Knowledge-Able Agent?: On the paradoxes of power’ in C.Holtorf and H.Karlsson (eds.), *Philosophy and Archaeological Practice: Perspectives for the 21st Century* (Göteborg, 2000), 39.

³ A. Gardner, ‘Introduction: Social Agency, Power and Being Human’ in A.Gardner (ed.), *Agency Uncovered: Archaeological Perspectives on Social Agency, power and Being Human* (London, 2004), 1.

intelligently and purposefully, resulting in a vision of the past peopled by pawns. By drawing the study of agency into archaeological dialogue the way is opened for a new awareness of people in the past.

There is much debate over the universality of agency. As action requires power, it can be argued that many members of a society do not have agency⁴. Bourdieu's work encompasses the study of what he calls 'capital', the amount of which a person has affecting the power they have to act. This is affected by things such as gender and social status⁵. There are two important ways in which an individual's power can be considered; 'power to' and 'power over'. 'Power over' is the ability for one individual to impose his or her will on another. It may indeed be true that only certain members of society can act in this way. However, 'power to', simply the ability to act, is shared by most, if not all, individuals⁶. The question, therefore, is whether or not the actions resulting from agency are brought about by 'power to' or 'power over'.

The anthropologist Maurice Bloch has argued that in order to truly understand a society the most basic of actions and choices must be studied. These are rarely vocalised and appear too obvious to even consider by those embedded within the society: they 'go without saying'⁷. While there is a difference between individual potential for action, the agency behind the most minor and everyday activities is shared by almost every person. The results of even small actions can

⁴ K. Berggren, 'The Knowledge-Able Agent?: On the paradoxes of power' in C.Holtorf and H.Karlsson (eds.), *Philosophy and Archaeological Practice: Perspectives for the 21st Century* (Göteborg, 2000), 42.

⁵ A. Gardner, 'Introduction: Social Agency, Power and Being Human' in A.Gardner (ed.), *Agency Uncovered: Archaeological Perspectives on Social Agency, power and Being Human* (London, 2004), 7.

⁶ A. Gardner, 'Introduction: Social Agency, Power and Being Human' in A.Gardner (ed.), *Agency Uncovered: Archaeological Perspectives on Social Agency, power and Being Human* (London, 2004), 5.

⁷ M. Bloch, 'What goes without saying: the conceptualisation of Zafimaniry society' in A.Kuper (ed.) *Conceptualising society* (London, 1992) 143.

have far-reaching implications, and Giddens identifies this inadvertent agency as an important source of change, as individuals are forced to reflect on the unexpected consequences of their actions⁸. It is important that we do not exclude these actions from our consideration of agency and individuals in the past, as the result is likely to be a past peopled by knowledgeable, self aware, powerful individuals, who will be mostly middle aged and predominantly male⁹. Eleanor Scott has illustrated this potential by using the example of a game of Happy Families, where the mundane occupations are removed and the cards representing Mrs, Miss and Master characters are excluded as their presence is implied by the adult male in each family. This leaves cards representing, for example, Mr Ritual Shaman, Mr Paramount-Chief, and Mr Specialised Craftsman, rather than the whole family of Bunns the Bakers. As this would not present a particularly accurate view of society, likewise the exclusion of individuals with mundane roles or a more dependent position would leave a very empty view of any community¹⁰. Agency at every level of society needs to be considered.

If agency is fundamental to the study of a society then archaeologists must move away from considering the study of it as an optional extra, if meaningful conclusions are to be drawn. The challenge for archaeologists is their removal from the people they are studying. This removal is made particularly apparent when archaeologists face their subjects in the grave. This study attempts to take buried remains as a starting point for approaching the agent. The Ertebølle were complex hunter-gatherer-fishers of the Late Mesolithic in Denmark. They were semi-sedentary and at least some communities buried their dead in

⁸ M.A. Dobres and J. Robb, 'Agency in archaeology: paradigm or platitude?' in M.-A. Dobres and J. Robb (eds.), *Agency in archaeology* (London, 2000), 5.

⁹ M.A. Dobres and J. Robb, 'Agency in archaeology: paradigm or platitude?' in M.-A. Dobres and J. Robb (eds.), *Agency in archaeology* (London, 2000), 13.

¹⁰ E. Scott, 'Introduction: On the incompleteness of archaeological narratives' in J. Moore and E.Scott (eds.), *Invisible People and Processes: Writing Gender and Childhood into European Archaeology* (London, 1997), 2.

cemeteries¹¹. They buried at least a portion of their dead in cemeteries. While children were not generally buried with gravegoods one infant male, eight to nine month foetal stage was buried with adult male items, specifically a stone knife. This burial is particularly poignant as the baby was buried with an eighteen year old female, presumed to be his mother, the body of the child laid on a swan's wing¹². No other burial includes a swan's wing, which would seem to indicate that this was a deliberate and unique action taken by those conducting the burial in response to particular circumstance or as a response to the deaths of these particular individuals.

STRUCTURE

Agency exists within a structure, which provides a framework within which agents act¹³. It is not an external 'system' like those drawn up in the systems analysis of New Archaeology, or like the 'superstructure' that Marx envisaged; the individuals do not act mindlessly within it¹⁴. According to Anthony Giddens, structure is made up of 'structuring principles', deeply embedded rules and resources through which agents act. Rules, in this sense of the word, are constitutive rather than regulative; Giddens suggests the difference between the rules of chess, without which there is no game, and the rule that says that workers have to clock in at a certain hour as an example of this distinction¹⁵. Many rules within a structure are so deeply buried in the subconscious that

¹¹ P. Rowley-Conwy, 'Cemeteries, Seasonality and Complexity in the Ertebølle of southern Scandinavia' in M. Zvelebil, L. Domańska and R. Dennell (eds.) *Harvesting the Sea, Farming the Forest: The Emergence of Neolithic Societies in the Baltic Region* (Sheffield, 1998), 193.

¹² S.E. Albrethsen and E.B. Petersen, 'Excavations of a Mesolithic cemetery at Vedbæk, Denmark' (1976) 47 *Acta Archaeologica* 8-9.

¹³ J.C. Barrett, 'A thesis on agency' in M.-A. Dobres, J. Robb. (eds.), *Agency in Archaeology* (London, 2000), 61.

¹⁴ M. Johnson, *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, (Victoria, 1999), 79-94.

¹⁵ A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, (Cambridge, 1986), 17-19.

individuals are barely aware of them; they simply know, as Giddens puts it, 'how to go on'¹⁶. The structure is made up of deeply embedded beliefs and values which provide a framework for action¹⁷¹⁸. While constraining action it could also be said to provide a wide range of possibilities from which individuals can choose from¹⁹. While internal, structure is shared between members of a group. Individuals draw upon memories, expectations, and experiences when they act²⁰. Action carried out within a group creates and reinforces a shared knowledge of 'how to go on'. One of the ways this occurs is through ritual, which after all is made up of actions, which are either done as a group or carried out individually by everyone²¹. Structure and ideology are related; structure is an internalised system of going about life that is shared by members of a certain group; ideology forms a part of this, constraining action through recurrent, often ritualised, practice²².

It was suggested above that the non-typical aspects of the burial of the young woman and child indicates the agency of those conducting the burial. However, the event would have taken place against a background of complex structural ideas about how such an event was to occur. Ritual events, of which burial is an example, are structured actions which would have been known, if not

¹⁶ A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, (Cambridge, 1986), 22.

¹⁷ J. Robb, 2001 'Steps to an archaeology of agency.' Paper presented at Agency workshop, UCL, November 2000: <http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/~jer39-steps-to-an-archaeology-of-agency.html>. Last checked: 3/10/08.

¹⁸ M. Shanks, and C. Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1987), 71.

¹⁹ J.C. Barrett, 'Agency, the Duality of Structure and the Problem of the Archaeological Record' in I. Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological Theory Today* (Cambridge, 2001), 150.

²⁰ J.C. Barrett, 'Agency, the Duality of Structure and the Problem of the Archaeological Record' in I. Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological Theory Today* (Cambridge, 2001), 152.

²¹ J.C. Barret, 'The living, the dead, and the ancestors: Neolithic and Early Bronze Age mortuary practices' in J.C.Barrett and I.A.Kinnes (eds.), *The Archaeology of Context in the Neolithic and Bronze Age: Recent Trends* (Sheffield, 1988), 3.

²² M. Shanks, and C. Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1987), 75.

understood, by those involved in them²³. While certain aspects of the inhumation are unique, the style of the burial, an extended inhumation in an area used as a cemetery for similar burials, the grave goods buried with the woman, and the double inhumation of a woman and a young child are all things which would have been known and considered normal. It is very likely that the people concerned were acting according to how they perceived a 'proper' burial to be. This 'norm' is a practical expression of the structure. By following the pattern of what was right and proper, the norm was reinforced and recreated, joining a body of memories of proper burials which would have been subconsciously referred to again and again²⁴.

AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

According to both Bourdieu and Giddens structure and agency are deeply connected²⁵. Structure both constrains action and is itself created by the actions of individuals who are part of it²⁶. The mechanism for this, according to Bourdieu, is the *habitus*²⁷. The *habitus* is a system of actions that perpetuate the structure; at once recreating the structure, while at the same time being a product of it²⁸. These are unconscious, everyday actions which in the very

²³ L.N. Stutz, *Embodied Rituals and Ritualized Bodies: Tracing Ritual Practices in late Mesolithic Burials*, (Lund, 2003), 318-320.

²⁴ L.N. Stutz, *Embodied Rituals and Ritualized Bodies: Tracing Ritual Practices in late Mesolithic Burials*, (Lund, 2003), 322-323.

²⁵ M.A. Dobres and J. Robb, 'Agency in archaeology: paradigm or platitude?' in M.-A. Dobres and J. Robb (eds.), *Agency in archaeology* (London, 2000), 5.

²⁶ I. Hodder and S. Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2003), 94.

²⁷ M. Dietler, and I. Herbich, 'Habitus, techniques, style: An integrated approach to the social understanding of material culture and boundaries' in M.T.Stark (ed.) *The Archaeology of Social Boundaries* (Washington, 1998), 247.

²⁸ M. Postone, E. LiPuma, and C. Calhoun, 'Introduction: Bourdieu and Social Theory' in C.Calhoun, E. Lipuma, and M.Postone (eds.), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1993), 2.

nature of being done reinforce the structure they flow from. Giddens described this as the practical consciousness, the knowledge of 'how to go on' and the practical daily outworking of that²⁹. Every action has a past in the sense that it draws on the structure, a resource of past actions and experiences. Bloch's study of the Zafimaniry gives several examples of this, such as the connection between the man of the house and its central post. This 'ideology' if it can be called that, was recreated by the man's role in the building of the house, and in chopping down the tree to provide the wood for the post. This would be reinforced day by day in the way the man would sit at the foot of the post while in the house³⁰.

Structure always has the potential for change because of its relationship to agency³¹. It is not an external but an internal force, sustained through memory and continual practice. The actions which sustain and create it are taken from the structure, which is itself a resource for action. The rules which make up the structuring principles present a variety of choices rather than a single option. The structure constrains an agent's choice of actions to choose from, but there is still variation. If one variant is consistently chosen over another, or new options are introduced creatively the structure will change as it is created continuously from action. Structure can also change through deliberate decision. A characteristic of agency is the reflexive monitoring of action³². Many of the actions which get us through the day may be unconscious, but we constantly monitor them. If something unexpected occurs, this will affect the

²⁹ I. Hodder and S. Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2003), 91.

³⁰ M. Bloch, 'What goes without saying: the conceptualisation of Zafimaniry society' in A. Kuper (ed.) *Conceptualising society* (London, 1992), 141.

³¹ A. Gardner, 'Introduction: Social Agency, Power and Being Human' in A. Gardner (ed.), *Agency Uncovered: Archaeological Perspectives on Social Agency, power and Being Human* (London, 2004), 2.

³² A. Gardner, 'Introduction: Social Agency, Power and Being Human' in A. Gardner (ed.), *Agency Uncovered: Archaeological Perspectives on Social Agency, power and Being Human* (London, 2004), 6.

next performance of that action. When things do not work, or when there is a crisis, the knowledge of 'how to go on is disrupted'; Giddens described the reaction to this as 'discursive consciousness'³³³⁴. This is where change is likely to occur, and new ways of doing things introduced. Decisions will have a social element, as individuals discuss what is to be done. Action always occurs within a social setting although it is conducted by individuals³⁵.

Structure and agency are two opposing forces which must be held in tension with each other if we are to study human action and the potential for change. To take another of the burials from Vedbæk Bøgebakken: that of an elderly male. His body was laid on antlers, which are only included in the burial of old people, male and female, in the cemetery³⁶. He was buried with tools, which was typical for adult male burials³⁷. In the way of the burials at both Vedbæk and at other cemeteries, he was laid on his back, and there was red ochre present in the grave. Unusually, his legs were weighed down by large stones, which is a practice not found in any other graves at the cemetery³⁸. It is interesting to wonder what an onlooker at the burial might think of the archaeological analysis of the grave today. The onlooker's experience would have been infused by memories of other burials, and of the life of the man being buried. Many things picked up on by archaeologists today might seem far too obvious to even mention, they would have, to use Bloch's term, 'gone

³³ J.C. Barrett, 'Agency, the Duality of Structure and the Problem of the Archaeological Record' in I. Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological Theory Today* (Cambridge, 2001), 154.

³⁴ I. Hodder and S. Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2003), 91.

³⁵ I. Hodder and S. Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2003), 104.

³⁶ S.E. Albrethsen and E.B. Petersen, 'Excavations of a Mesolithic cemetery at Vedbæk, Denmark' (1976) 47 *Acta Archaeologica* 22.

³⁷ S.E. Albrethsen and E.B. Petersen, 'Excavations of a Mesolithic cemetery at Vedbæk, Denmark' (1976) 47 *Acta Archaeologica* 21.

³⁸ S.E. Albrethsen and E.B. Petersen, 'Excavations of a Mesolithic cemetery at Vedbæk, Denmark' (1976) 47 *Acta Archaeologica* 22.

without saying³⁹. The onlooker would, however, know things that we may never know, such as the activities that accompanied the burial, the significance of the cemetery and what the deceased meant to the community.

There is more that we can take from this evidence, however, than just these bare facts. We know that he was buried, which was not the case for the entire population, so the decision to bury this individual was not the only option available⁴⁰. We can tell that the place of the burial was significant; it was within a cemetery, suggesting that memory and tradition played a role in the placing of the grave⁴¹. This style of burial is found throughout the known Ertebølle cemeteries, with some variations, such as multiple instead of single inhumation, and different positions for the body⁴². This practice was, it seems, generally accepted; what we can call the norm. The inclusion of antlers and weapons also fit within a pattern, reflecting his age and his gender, suggesting that this was also a structured practice. The stones, which are unique, may have a particular significance to the individual buried, or may have been a practical solution to a problem; perhaps the body was in rigor mortis⁴³. According to Chapman, people

³⁹ M. Bloch, 'What goes without saying: the conceptualisation of Zafimaniry society' in A.Kuper (ed.) *Conceptualising society* (London, 1992), 143.

⁴⁰ L. Larrson, 'Man and Sea in Southern Scandinavia during the Late Mesolithic. The role of cemeteries in the view of society' in A. Fischer (ed.) *Man and Sea in the Mesolithic: coastal settlement above and below the present sea level* (Oxford, 1995), 19.

⁴¹ L.N. Stutz, *Embodied Rituals and Ritualized Bodies: Tracing Ritual Practices in late Mesolithic Burials*, (Lund, 2003), 363.

⁴² L. Larrson, 'Big Dog and Poor Man. Mortuary Practices in Mesolithic Societies in Southern Sweden' in T.B.Larrson, and H.Lundmark (eds.) *Approaches to Swedish Prehistory: A Spectrum of Problems and Perspectives in Contemporary Research* (Oxford, 1989), 215.

⁴³ S.E. Albrethsen and E.B. Petersen, 'Excavations of a Mesolithic cemetery at Vedbæk, Denmark' (1976) 47 *Acta Archaeologica* 22.

always have choices at a burial and it is probable that there were indeed a range of choices to be made during the burial of this man⁴⁴.

When the man died decisions were made as to how to treat the body. The result is what remains today, although we may not know how the decisions were made. The burial followed certain norms, in the style of the inhumation, the choice of grave goods and the inclusion of ochre. The burial may have been accompanied by some kind of ceremony which would also have followed a set pattern. The antlers, which are unusual, may have represented his position in the community, or had some kind of religious significance.

As has been discussed, however, structure is not static; it has the potential for change: this is perhaps demonstrated by the change in the pattern of the burials between the two cemeteries at Skateholm in Sweden. At the first cemetery the inclusion of red deer antlers with bodies is common, yet this is effectively non-existent at the second, while at the same time the number of bodies in a hocker, rather than a supine position increased greatly. This may reflect a change in the components of a 'proper' burial within the structure of the people at Skateholm⁴⁵. Some of the most intriguing finds at both the two excavated Ertebølle cemeteries, Vedbæk Bøgebakken and Skateholm are the graves without bodies. These follow the pattern for burial of a pit dug and quickly filled in again containing items normally associated with burial, like antlers, grave goods, and ochre, but without the presence of a body⁴⁶. There are enough of these that it can be included in the picture of a burial norm, particularly at

⁴⁴ J. Chapman, 'Tension at funerals: Social practices and the subversion of community structure in later Hungarian prehistory' in M.-A. Dobres, and J. Robb (eds.), *Agency in Archaeology* (London, 2000), 192.

⁴⁵ L. Larrson, 'Big Dog and Poor Man. Mortuary Practices in Mesolithic Societies in Southern Sweden' in T.B.Larrson, and H.Lundmark (eds.) *Approaches to Swedish Prehistory: A Spectrum of Problems and Perspectives in Contemporary Research* (Oxford, 1989), 22.

⁴⁶ L.N. Stutz, *Embodied Rituals and Ritualized Bodies: Tracing Ritual Practices in late Mesolithic Burials*, (Lund, 2003), 208.

Skateholm. One of the interpretations of these is that they are cenotaphs. If this is the case then there must have been a situation where a person died without leaving the community a body, perhaps lost at sea. The individuals in the community would have been faced with a dilemma; how to have a funeral without a body. Perhaps a decision was made to do everything the same, but without a body. The structural norms demanded a burial, but the individuals were forced to work out how to do this in unusual circumstances themselves. A related phenomenon may be the canine burials found at Skateholm. There is no evidence that dogs were particularly revered by the Ertebølle, with canine remains found at many domestic sites, often just dumped with other rubbish⁴⁷. However at Skateholm II, the older of the two cemeteries, a dog has the most richly furnished grave; indeed the grave goods would have lead the excavators to think him the chief or certainly an important figure, had he not been a dog. It is possible that the dog plays some kind of role as substituting for a human⁴⁸. Actions in response to unusual, even crisis situations, may have played a role in recreating the structure.

CONCLUSION

According to Chapman, in his study of mortuary ritual in the Hungarian Neolithic, funerals are moments when a community reflects on itself, the actions surrounding a burial become statements of their culture, reinforcing the structure in the process⁴⁹. The mortuary practices of the Ertebølle demonstrate both the role of individual agency in the decisions surrounding a burial,

⁴⁷ T.D. Price, and A.B. Gebauer, Smakkerup Huse: A Late Neolithic coastal site I northwest Zealand, Denmark (Gyelling, 2005), 96.

⁴⁸ L. Larrson, 'Big Dog and Poor Man. Mortuary Practices in Mesolithic Societies in Southern Sweden' in T.B.Larrson, and H.Lundmark (eds.) *Approaches to Swedish Prehistory: A Spectrum of Problems and Perspectives in Contemporary Research* (Oxford, 1989), 219.

⁴⁹ J. Chapman, 'Tension at funerals: Social practices and the subversion of community structure in later Hungarian prehistory' in M.-A. Dobres, and J. Robb (eds.), *Agency in Archaeology* (London, 2000), 188.

including the potential for creativity and change, while at the same time showing that most decisions fit into a norm, providing evidence of the role of structure and ideology in the decisions that were made. Almost all the burials shared features in common, and were placed within an area which was set aside for burial. It is easy to assume that people in the past were controlled by ideological rules, which instructed them on how to go about their lives. But if we are to accept that individuals had agency, and were conscious and self-aware, then we cannot simply believe that their decisions were forced by subconscious structuring principles. It is clear that the role of agents should not be discounted from archaeological study. If agency is fundamentally connected with the ability to act then the decisions that lead to action are very important. Decision making is an internal balance of agency and structure. The structure, a resource of memory, knowledge and awareness of 'how to go on', provides a set of possibilities for the agent which can be chosen between. The agent brings their own conscious awareness to the decision, as well as their creativity and the advice of those around them. Our consideration of the past should not merely have an 'add actors and stir' approach⁵⁰, but should consider agency as a vital part of the ability of individuals to interact with their world.

⁵⁰ Dobres, M.-A. and Robb, J. 2000 'Agency in archaeology: paradigm or platitude?' in M.-A. Dobres and J. Robb (eds.), *Agency in archaeology*, Routledge, London, 13.

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