Aspects of the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland.
A case study in the problems of archaeological interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

In our view of the Iron Age, Atlantic Scotland appears isolated from the rest of the British Isles not only by geographical remoteness but also by the uniqueness of its monuments. It is intended, in this paper, to focus upon certain of those monuments, and to discuss the processes which may have lain behind their construction. This problem has exercised the minds of antiquaries and archaeologists since the brochs first came to be identified as a distinct class of monument. I do not intend to enter into a lengthy review of this earlier debate, for it is rather my intention to suggest that there are approaches to the problems of the Atlantic Iron Age which allow for perspectives other than those normally offered.

The discussion which follows takes three lines of development. The first requires us to reconsider the relationship between material culture and those societies about which archaeology is attempting to speak. This will lead us to reflect upon our own classifications of archaeological data, and upon the means by which we derive an understanding of the past from the use of those data. We will reject the view that artefacts are either 'type fossils' or 'cultural badges' or, indeed, simply the tools produced by humans in adaptation to a particular environmental regime. Instead we will stress the active role which material culture plays in the formation, reproduction and transformation of the social system. This position recognises the need for archaeologists to develop a theory of material culture as the initial step in the analysis of past social and cultural change. Our second theme will be to examine some of the current debate surrounding these unique monuments of the Atlantic Iron Age, which has focused upon classificatory schemes and the traditional definition of archaeological cultures to describe the origins and development of this period. As an extension of this reconsideration of our use of archaeological data our third line of enquiry will be to review, but briefly, the use of verbal sources in the analysis of protohistoric and early historic periods.

MATERIAL CULTURE IN SOCIETY

Archaeological classifications tend to direct analysis rather than being utilised for analysis. This inversion of the proper path of reasoning results from the continued weakness of archaeological theory, and reduces our discipline to a set of inductive propositions drawn from empirical observation. Archaeological *types* – particular pottery vessels, stone tools, tomb structures, or whatever – exist and can be defined on the basis of attribute clustering (Hodson 1980). The prob-

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lem, however, is not to begin with these types as the subject of our study but to seek the more general processes which brought them into being. This point may be clarified through an example.

Beakers have long been identified as a type of pottery vessel of the late Neolithic, and as the study of them progressed, sub-types were defined on the basis of form, decorative techniques and stylistic traits. The 'beaker problem' was how to explain the existence of this artefact, its origin and distribution. The 'beaker folk' and their European migrations presented an initial solution; in effect, the artefact had managed to produce a people rather than the people an artefact. More recently a solution to the problem has been sought by drawing back from the individual artefact types to a more general consideration of their context in the late Neolithic of Europe. The production and use of beakers has been seen in the wider range of strategies by which symbols of power and rank were manipulated in this period. At the moment these solutions are still part of a general theory, and the challenge which remains is to seek an understanding of the selection of these particular symbolic forms in the different regions of Europe (Clarke 1976; Mercer 1977).

In essence the Beaker debate has followed a path whereby the traditional equation of an archaeological culture with a people has come to be questioned. The use of the term *culture* in Old World archaeology changed radically between the later half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. It is unfortunate that over that period so little attempt was made to define, or to clarify, the concept. This, McNairn has suggested, implies a lack of interest in theory rather than indicating the lack of importance with which the concept was itself viewed (1980, 48). McNairn has been able to outline Childe's own changing approaches to culture; from being indicative of an ethnic, if not racial unity, to a more complex system comprising economy, sociology and ideology. Criticism, when it came, focused upon the very vagueness with which both the concept of culture had come to be used, and the processes of culture change had come to be discussed. The idea of culture as representing a homogeneous whole, a set of rules by which a 'people' lived, has been rejected, and with it the idea that variation in artefacts indicated some form of deviancy from a required norm, or indicated the degree of cultural influence radiating from a more distant 'true' or 'pure' epicentre (Binford 1962; Renfrew 1977). The criticisms are valid but the problem of how we understand material culture remains.

In turning away from the vague, ethnic explanations of culture, we have been invited instead to see it as a complex system functioning between human society and the environment. Binford, in following Leslie White, sees culture as 'an extrasomatic adaptive system employed in the integration of a society with its environment and with other sociocultural systems. Culture in this sense is not necessarily shared; it is participated in by men'. The view that culture is a system which functions to integrate society and the environment presents material culture as something *other than* or largely *outside* the society which generates it. The dichotomy between society and material culture may be understandable from a discipline where only the material detritus of human actions remains available for study, but the dichotomy is a false one nonetheless. To distinguish between material culture as the subject, and past society as the object of our study miscasts the relationship between a society and its material culture (Braithwaite 1981). Past social forms cannot be defined on the one hand and their material elements on the other, for material culture exists *within* society.

Material culture in all its forms – artefact production and use, settlement location, food selection, burial mode and so on – is the result of actions which are at once *both* articulated through social relationships, and are also the means by which those social relationships are constructed. The social being exists through action which is formulated and reflected upon within a culturally modified material world. Material culture is thus an active participant in the construction of the social system, and its meaning is internal to that system.

It follows that material culture can only be understood in terms of the social actions which not only produce that material world but which are also guided by it. It is not merely the external product of some particular social form. In presenting the dialectical relationship between material culture and social action we must also recognise the diachronic nature of the relationship, for the social system is reproduced within the structuring principles of culture and it carries its own history and future with it (Giddens 1979). There is no useful way in which these relationships can be analysed at some synchronic moment, as if in cross section, for they are the very essence of the historical process. This is not to say that the future development of the social and cultural system is historically determined other than by the fact that societies' members choose to adopt strategies of production and reproduction which are valid within their own cultural and social world. And this brings us back to the particular nature of each culture and historical trajectory. General theories of historical development can only be the starting point from which an interrogation of the evidence must be mounted, they must return us to the particular and not remain as some abstract reduction of all human cultural variability.

THE ATLANTIC IRON AGE

The meaning and value of the various elements of material culture are internal to the social system, and yet our own classifications of archaeological data are taken to have 'meaning'. Are the different artefact and monument *types* which we define only of relevance to us and not of significance for past societies: are they simply modern, and arbitrary, abstractions of past social action? The solution to this problem is to return to context; to put aside the corpus of individual artefact or structural types and to examine, through an analysis of the archaeological record, the context of manufacture and use (cf Foxon forthcoming). We must seek an understanding of the production and use of artefacts in the reproduction of the cultural and social system.

The Iron Age of Atlantic Scotland is defined through a number of seemingly well-known monument types; brochs, duns, crannogs, wheelhouses and forts, and through a perhaps less well-known range of artefacts. The study of this material has commenced with the definition of monument and artefact types, and from this has run a consideration of the origins and evolution of these types, and of their use. The individual monument types are seen to present a guiding framework for analysis, and the greater the precision with which each type is defined, the clearer, it appears, will be the path of that analysis.

One particular type of monument, the broch, has received considerable attention in the literature over the past century. Whilst argument has focused upon whether or not these buildings were refuge towers or dwellings, it has also sought to identify their point of origin, either in the Western Isles or in the north of Scotland. Hamilton and MacKie have examined the relationship between brochs and other monuments such as wheelhouses, duns, semi-brochs and block-houses, in terms of the 'influences' postulated as existing between one building tradition and another. Indeed MacKie's approach has been explicitly evolutionary. He distinguishes between houses and forts, and hypothesises the development of the monuments belonging to each group, from their point of origin through the chronological and geographical spread of each type of building (1965, fig 2). The comparisons which might be drawn here between the Linnaean system of classifying the plant and animal kingdoms into a hierarchy from phyllum to species, and the classification of the monument types within the broad house/fort division may be crude but it does at least give the flavour of the argument. Although the latter relationships are not directly synchronous, closeness of from between types is seen to define closeness in the evolutionary scheme; and any classification into types implies a degree of cultural and chronological proximity (MacKie 1965,

98). The graphical representation of these supposed paths of evolutionary development is a perfect example of the cladistic tree (MacKie 1965, fig 8; cf Renfrew 1979a). Thus precision in definition is the means for establishing relationships in time and space. The early Iron Age building at Jarlshof fails, in a way not entirely clear, to match the full required definition of a wheelhouse and may thus be removed, chronologically, from the main wheelhouse development on that site and in the northern isles as a whole (MacKie 1965, 112). For Hamilton, the block-houses of Shetland present, with their hypothetical timber ranges, an adequate precursor for the brochs (Hamilton 1968a). However, for MacKie, it is to the Hebridean semi-broch that we must turn and seek, from its union with the roundhouse and dun traditions, the birth of the broch (MacKie 1971, but see also MacKie 1980). Building skills and traditions do develop within a community, and somewhere within Scotland, but only in the terms of our definition, there lies the earliest broch. But if we ever find it, and we will never know if we have, will we really be closer to understanding these monuments?

The continual refining of definitions cannot be an end in itself and it is sigificant now to recall an approach which seems to seek a blurring rather than a refinement of distinctions. In two papers published in the 1940s Sir Lindsay Scott examined the broch and wheelhouse traditions of the western and northern isles (1947, 1948). It was Scott's thesis that the brochs were not the tall refuge towers suggested by Anderson, but rather farmhouses of a defensive character (Scott 1947, 15). He indicated that their siting tended to lie towards cultivable land, and he suggested that for most the enclosing wall stood to a height of no more than 6–8 feet. Such houses might then have been roofed with the eaves resting on the scarcement ledge of the inner wall-face. Scott accepted that some brochs may have had a wall which rose higher, up to 15 feet, with some 'towers' rising to around 40 feet in height. In stressing the potentially agricultural location of the brochs Scott was repeating the earlier observation of Childe (1935). Scott was, however, careful to reject Childe's concept of a *castle* complex, in which Childe equated brochs and duns with the residences of overlords from whence a subjugated native population had been controlled. Scott rightly suggested that the analogy made by Childe between these 'small forts' and the Norman castle was inaccurate, both in terms of the density of broch and dun distributions, and in the requirement for a standing military force normally attached to the Norman castle. Scott himself preferred to look to internal pressures of raiding and land hunger giving rise to the need for defensive farmhouses. In presenting the broch as a house Scott examined the close architectural similarities between brochs and wheelhouses, and compared the material culture associated with both types of structure. He suggested that both sets of artefacts were indistinguishable, and proposed that the broch had arisen from the wheelhouse/roundhouse tradition through those pressures already stated.

A number of detailed objections have been offered against Scott's ideas. The chronological primacy of wheelhouses over brochs depended, partly, upon an interpretation of the structural sequence at Jarlshof which was later reversed by Hamilton's excavations. The case against broch towers remains hotly disputed (MacKie 1965; 1971). For example, Angus Graham was able to present examples of brochs with wall heights originally observed as being many courses above their current state, a result of stone robbing and collapse in recent times (Graham 1947). Graham was also able to point to intramural galleries which opened into the interior of brochs above the level of the scarcement. Such occurrences would indicate a high roof line above the scarcement, if roofing brochs is to be accepted. It might also suggest at least one upper floor level utilising the scarcement. Having said all this, it has still to be remembered that many brochs are now represented by low mounds of stone rubble, albeit with massive wall foundations, and in these cases detailed reconstructions are impossible. It is perhaps misleading to seek the norm in this building

tradition and rather to accept the wide variation in the height achieved in building the broch wall. There can be no neatness in the classification here, rather it is diversity which requires explanation.

These objections accepted, we may now return to the case presented by Scott and contrast it with the later approaches of Hamilton and MacKie. The contrast is in that blurring of distinctions, for Scott saw behind the different classes of monument and structural details common functions and a common purpose. In discussing the similarities between wheelhouse and broch Scott noted that in general design, 'and, what is more important, in the practical purposes served by the design, the resemblance between these farmhouses and the simple broch farm is close; and a series of detailed structural features occurs identically in both classes of building' (1947, 23). In his further investigation of wheelhouse and 'aisled roundhouse' architecture, Scott drew comparisons between such features as intramural galleries and the souterrains known to lead out from certain houses (1948, 95). In his writings, there is still an overriding concern with cultural groupings and 'Iron Age A' and 'Gallo-Belgic' colonists, but architectural forms still had to be seen in terms of the requirements of habitation which they satisfied. By this means equivalences could be drawn which cut across classificatory schemes and seemed to allow a clearer understanding of these architectural forms. 'If regard be paid to the basic plan of the house, and particularly to the *social purpose its plan is designed to serve*, prototypes of the broch and wheelhouse can be found in the source whence so much of their material culture is known to be derived, the Iron Age B culture of south-west England' (Scott 1947, 26, emphasis mine).

Despite Scott's concern that we must understand the requirements of habitation before we can understand the monuments themselves, there does remain a confusion which is central to the whole debate. Architectural forms are seen by Scott as having some relevance to 'social requirements', however vaguely he formulates that relationship, and he suggests that these requirements, exercised in different building traditions and materials, may yield different structural *types* for essentially similar processes. But the comparisons he makes are still between *traits* – souterrains, intramural cells, radial piers, circular plans and so on – and the matching of traits, abstracted from their full context, is the essential characteristic of evolutionist and diffusionist schools of study. The break between such schools and a consideration of social process is never achieved by Scott, nor in these terms is it possible.

The problem raised here is further exemplified in the writings of Hamilton. In discussing the results of his excavation at Clickhimin, Hamilton draws attention to the evidence for timber ranges set against the inner wall face of the fort. He goes on to suggest that such ranges are in fact common to Iron Age sites from central Europe through to Britain. Indeed he postulates that they are an essential structural element of timber-laced ramparts, and that their accidental firing would explain the occurrence of vitrified ramparts in Scotland. 'It is possible to see in these widely dispersed stone built forts a common arrangement of peripheral timber-ranges to house the inhabitants. Though forts may be separated by several centuries in date the variant forms stem from common building practices already well established in the fifth–first centuries BC, as seen at Clickhimin. That this social arrangement was not confined to the north-western seaboard but was common over a much wider area – and must ultimately be traced back to a continental source – is apparent from an analysis of both archaeological and literary evidence' (1968a, 66). Hamilton argues that these structural details, and the descriptions contained in later Irish epic literature, allow the identification of a type of Celtic fortification which was spread through Europe via Celtic migration (1968a, fig 21).

This is a remarkable claim, particularly if, as is suggested, the epic literature allows a clear understanding of the use to which these ranges were put. It is however, more likely to be a *reductio ad absurdum*. Are we to accept that all buildings placed within the lee of ramparts conformed to a

particular structural and social arrangement? Are we to expect, for example, the consistent placing of the lords *grianan* to the front of the fort by the gateway? If such expectations are well founded then it is necessary to enquire as to the process by which this particular plan, or set of *rules, was maintained and transmitted through Europe to survive far removed in time and space* from its original 'Celtic homeland'. What is in fact offered here is the traditional view of an archaeological culture, namely a set of rules adhered to by a particular people. These rules dictate the forms of pottery to be made and also, seemingly, the arrangement of buildings within a fort. They are transmitted by the migration of these peoples. In discussing the blockhouse at Click-himin, Hamilton says that 'as with the ringwall this structure exhibits a curious blend of defensive and domestic architecture, the interpretation of which was difficult until the *principles involved* were clearly understood. When these were elucidated, however, a structure emerged which is very closely related to forts on the west coast of Scotland and in Ireland' (1968a, 54, emphasis mine). At times it would appear that the rules, or principles, were only partly applied or imperfectly remembered allowing for the survival of single traits rather than the whole suite of cultural attributions, so 'the blockhouse might be regarded simply as a segment of a fort wall conceived as a separate unit' (Hamilton 1968a, 59). In the development of material culture such isolated rules or principles take on the form of a single genetic code, to be wedded to other sets of genetic/cultural information carried as the cultural rules of another people. 'This early dating for the semi-broch's construction supports the inference that this group of forts as a whole was an important element among the building traditions which eventually coalesced to produce the broch tower... However, it is now also clear that the massive round stone buildings of the Late Bronze Age in Orkney ... and the broch-like structure at Bu ... probably provided the other main element, that of circularity and a very thick wall. The way in which this coalescence of traditions occurred will have to be thought out afresh' (MacKie 1980, 72).

For all this talk of 'society' we are no further forward. Society, it appears, generates material culture through the application of rules which may be altered by the requirements of environmental adaptation or by the introduction of exotic traits. Society and culture remain separate and we have no idea how those vital rules which link them are formulated, remembered, reproduced or modified. Is this really all that those 'social principles' to which Scott refers amount to; an imperfectly remembered handbook? To refute this notion we must return to consider the active role material culture takes in the reproduction of the social system itself.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF HOUSES AND FORTS

Settlements are more than the sum total of their architectural traits. The establishment, expansion and elaboration of settlements takes place at particular moments in the history of a community and involve the mobilisation of particular relations of labour and of resources. These resources are themselves wider than the set of raw materials, for they include the body of knowledge by which those materials are classified, understood and worked. The relations of production are constituted within, and constitute, social structure. The acts of clearing, quarrying and building, allow those relationships to exist by bringing them into play. The acts of building need not follow rules as such, rather they involve judgements taken within a shared understanding of the world and its workings (Bourdieu 1977). It is the individual recognition of a social body of knowledge of what is proper and what is possible which governs this process, there is no need for a rule book. The retrospective formulation of rules lies with those who wish to analyse and to control (rather than change) the world. This point is of crucial importance in our use of literary sources, and it is one to which we shall return.

The settlement further provides a 'framework of spaces and boundaries' which will not only contain distinctions between occupants and their activities (Fletcher 1977), but will also be the means by which cultural and social values will be learnt. Indeed 'inhabited space – and above all the house – is the principal locus for the objectification of . . . generative schemes; and, through the intermediary of the divisions and hierarchies it sets up between things, persons, and practices this tangible classifying system continuously inculculates and reinforces the taxonomic principles underlying all the arbitrary provisions of . . . culture' (Bourdieu 1977, 89). In construction, use, maintenance and extension, the settlement both mobilises the structuring resources of culture and maintains aspects of the social system.

In the archaeological analysis of settlements this approach has certain radical implications. Comparisons of abstracted architectural details are meaningless. It is the totality and context of the settlement that matters. Even the comparison of overall plans may mean little. We are not dealing with settlements conceived *in toto* on the basis of an 'architectural plan', but settlements whose construction and use is formed from within the classificatory, cultural schemes of a social and material existence. Thus the view of culture as a set of rules has to be abandoned for other views of how practice generates its own guiding and explanatory schemes. Fletcher, in his analysis of settlement studies, has examined the way in which lived experience within a particular cultural context allows the recognition of modules of spatial arrangement. These regularities are neither learnt as, nor conceived as, 'rules'. People 'are plainly capable of estimating distances without being deliberately aware of the actual distance used and without the aid of any concrete measuring standard. Regularities in the spaces between people or within and around structures need not, therefore, depend either on conscious recognition of order, or on the use of any measuring device other than visual estimation' (Fletcher 1977, 49). This, obviously, has immediate implications for the claim that standard units of measure, recognisable from broch architecture, imply specialised architects (MacKie 1975). Such 'standardisation' may be analysed quantitively; to claim that this analysis implies the past existence of rules applied by specialised architects is to transfer present day cultural values and mechanisms of analysis onto the past.

This final point brings us back again to the underlying theme of the argument. We approach the past through material culture and our understanding of the past must stem from a consideration of the contexts of production and use; the processes behind the existence of that material culture.

Despite disagreement over the details of Scott's case, that brochs should be interpreted as houses, his full argument cannot be easily dismissed (Scott 1947). In roofing such buildings it may well be, as Graham argued, that tower structures existed and a roof line higher than that proposed by Scott needs to be accepted. Nonetheless, surviving high-level scarcement ledges, which might carry the eaves, are rare. In either case such problems do not deny that a totally roofed building is a more reasonable reconstruction of the broch interior than the partly roofed ranges, with rain water draining into the centre of the court, suggested by Hamilton.

Scott's argument that brochs are houses has now received strong support from the excavations of John Hedges and his colleagues in Orkney. Two brochs, or as some would prefer in maintaining the dictatorship of classifications, 'broch-like' buildings, have been excavated at Bu and Howe, both near Stromness (Hedges & Bell 1980; Carter 1980). The earlier excavations at Gurness have also been reconsidered prior to publication (Smith 1981). At both Bu and Howe, floors and internal structures contemporary with the outer wall have been identified. These have thrown new light on similar structures, found within the central courts of other brochs and which have normally been interpreted as secondary additions within an earlier structure. At Gurness it can also now be demonstrated that the internal stone divisions there belonged to the initial construction

of the broch. Earlier suggestions that such internal arrangements were secondary supported the idea that brochs originated as fortified sites, and were only later adapted as dwelling houses. In following the line of this argument brochs were seen to evolve in essentially 'non-domestic' contexts. The rejection of this view is important, not because it places the broch in one part of an evolutionary scheme, but because it places the broch in the context of its construction and use. The case for a non-domestic origin at Dun Mor Vaul, as argued by MacKie (1974), rests with the occurrence of occupation debris in the floor of the broch into which was inserted a central hearth. Instead of seeing these as distinct periods in the site's history, an alternative would be to see these as phases in the continuous building of the original broch. In that case the earlier occupation debris simply becomes material brought in with the original floor make up.

The logic of this overall argument aligns us with Scott; the broch is a particular house type in the Iron Age of Atlantic Scotland. This does not mean that we now have to reduce its architectural form to some generalised 'roundhouse' type in which we might include timber houses, crannogs and duns, and follow Piggott in chasing the 'variant versions of the same type of 'Celtic' roundhouse' (1947). Rather we recognise that brochs, along with these other monuments, were constructed for the occupancy of a particular residential unit. Our interest is in process rather than in the comparison of plans and architectural details, and we are not pursuing refinements in classification. Of course it is important to recognise that the floor areas occupied by these different types of building may be similar, as might the internal arrangements of the furnishings. Such observations go to support our argument that we are dealing with house structures. But it is in the details of construction and use, and of how the residential unit was defined, that a fuller understanding of the essential *variety* of these monuments lies.

In moving beyond the argument of Scott, we are interested in the patterning of activities and relationships structured through the medium of the house. These buildings were not understood in terms of the plans we prepare for analysis, but as that structured set of relationships 'between things, persons, and practices'. Thus at Bu 'on coming into the broch one entered a vestibule, from which one could turn right to three flagged rooms in a row, the middle one of which was like a large bent hall; one could go straight on into the kitchen service area; or one could turn left through a series of compartments floored with mud and midden which may have been used for animals' (Hedges & Bell 1980, 90). At Midhowe the interior of the broch is divided by an off-centre, transverse wall (Callander & Grant 1934, pl VII). This division, perhaps into two residential units, would obviously not be revealed to an observer outside the broch. Nor need it have been directly experienced by anyone situated in one or other of those two units. The existence of such a division, and the relative relationship between the two units, is explicitly acknowledged only upon passing through the main door passage of the broch leading, either into a cell of the larger unit (Callander & Grant 1934, pl VII, D), or into a vestibule, and then by turning left, through another door, pivoted to the left, to enter the second unit (*ibid*, pl vii C).

The broch interior, as with all house interiors, was reproduced through the structuring principles which guide the relationships of the social system. Those principles, for example the placing of persons and activities left to right or fore to back, are drawn from the full range of social experience and generate a variety of complex arrangements within the house. Indeed in the case of brochs these two dimensional relationships may have been repeated on the upper levels of floors and galleries and in the lower settings of passages and souterrains. And if we are now to focus upon, or to identify, these *structuring principles* then they are not to be found by merely comparing plans, any more than in comparing pots or architectural details. These principles lay at a deeper level, and are implicit in the sets of oppositions or equivalences established between activities and things which are repeated at the level of settlement organisation and on down into

the house itself. 'The house, for example, is defined as female, damp, etc, when considered from outside, from the male point of view, ie in opposition to the external world, but it can be divided into a male-female part and a female-female part when it ceases to be seen in reference to a universe of practice co-extensive with *the* universe, and is treated instead as a universe (of practice and discourse) in its own right' (Bourdieu 1977, 110). Thus the principles around which activity within the broch at Gurness were organised are those same principles which were brought into play in the organisation of the surrounding settlement complex, and the place taken by the broch within that complex (Smith 1981).

The recognition of overlapping sets of structured activity, such as the patterns in settlement and house organisation, will also extend into other spheres of the archaeological record. Because of this, the structuring principles are empirically available in archaeological data by the repetitive nature of structured action so generated. Archaeological analysis must therefore interrogate the full range of data available within, say, the settlement context. The pottery from one site, the bone-work from another, a corpus of pins; all may awaken our understanding of the range of data available and the techniques drawn upon for its production, but it is to the full context of that material to which we must return, and to the processes of formation behind those particular archaeological deposits.

So far our discussion has centred upon brochs, but it must now be widened to include a fuller range of monuments. If the broch did, as we propose, represent a domestic building housing a single residential group, than the same case can be made for many of the smaller duns and also, presumably, for many buildings on crannogs. The dun has been defined as 'a comparatively small defensive structure with a disproportionally thick dry-stone wall, usually but not always sub-circular or oval in plan, and enclosing an area not exceeding 375 sq m; it would thus normally hold only a single family group' (RCAMS 1971, 18). Whether that family group was crouching in terror in a refuge, defending a fortified citadel, or living in a house is not explored, although more recently it is suggested that 'a dun could have provided protection to an extended family unit' (RCAMS 1980, 17). Let us start then with the premise that duns were constructed for the use of a particular residential group which was, more likely than not, defined by familial ties. We would envisage many duns to have been roofed entirely, although at the moment there is little supporting evidence for this assumption. As with brochs, we would see these buildings as single houses with a complex internal organisation of activities. This is not to equate brochs, duns and crannogs on any level other than being houses. Differences, in the organisation of activities within and around each house, in the means of recruitment to the residential unit, and in the building traditions employed, might have existed, not only between each archaeologically defined group of monuments, but also *within* each of those groups.

It is at this point that we again confront the problem of the relationship between our empirically derived classifications, and those past processes supposedly reflected in these classifications. Our argument is that we need a dialogue to be established between our ideas about process and archaeological data, and by such a dialogue we escape the trap of empiricism (Thompson 1978). It is only when our classifications are set into the context of past social existence that they become meaningful. Thus in order to accept a distinction between brochs and duns we cannot continuously recite arbitrary traits such as shape, or height of outer wall, or wall construction, as a means of distinguishing between the two types of monument. Rather we must establish the different principles which brought such distinct traits into being. In such an analysis, continually referring back to available information and seeking new data, we may recover principles which, in fact, cross-cut previously established classificatory schemes.

Social systems cannot be considered as frozen in time. Material culture is an active partici-

pant in the structuring of the social system which itself is involved in its own reproduction. The relationships between individuals and groups, set out in the organisation of house and settlement, and also contained in the location of different settlements within a particular locality, are also those relationships of power, domination, conflict and inheritance by which the social system evolves and is ultimately transformed. In an analysis of settlements and houses which seeks the principles behind the organisation of activity we are confronting historical processes. The selection of a settlement site, the mobilisation of the resources of labour and skills for construction, the granting of land-rights through inheritance, all such factors are dynamic and socially derived. They give the lie to the idea that we may analyse sites as though they were isolated and 'self-supporting'; to the approach which assesses the land potential around a settlement, and the plant and animal remains recovered in excavation as being indicative of the site's economy, and isolates 'external' contact to the limited context of exotic artefacts. Such an approach never questions the relationships of inheritance by which the land might have been granted for the settlement, the relationships of marriage and kinship by which the residential unit was recruited and by which external alliances would have been established, nor the bonds of tribute and debt by which labour and resources were exacted for the construction of the house or fort. In writing on the Orkney brochs Cunliffe states that 'each was sited so that its resource potential would have included up-land sheep grazing, a length of coastal shelf suitable for crop growing, the sea shore zone itself for shell fish collecting, and the sea, providing a range of possible food resources' (1978, 238). This neat balance is not derived simply from the logic of the available resources. The total distribution of sites contains a time depth, during which claims of inheritance, kinship and social debt might have run in conflict with those resources. It was a competitive and dynamic system, which not only produced an increasingly infilled landscape of settlement, but also generated the refinements of broch architecture.

It is in this dynamic system that the principles of culture are maintained and, in effect, re-invented in the process of social evolution. The cultural system carries knowledge and understanding as to the workings of the world, and the means of communication and dialogue. This, as we continue to stress, is not manifested as a set of rigidly applied and unyielding rules, nor simply the result of material needs adapted to particular environmental conditions. Rather it contains a flexibility in its utilisation, and the path of cultural change and evolution is in the hands of societies' members. In seeking 'norms' in human cultural behaviour we find a distraction in variety; and yet it is this variety which best describes the social mobilisation of the cultural resource in strategies of adaptation and exploitation, and in strategies of competition and domination between individuals and groups. The statistical manipulation of cultural data thus urgently needs to be rethought, and the adoption of many of the techniques of the 'new geography', which offer a fog of normative descriptions rather than a clarity of explanation, needs more critical assessment (Gregory 1978).

The distributions of brochs in Orkney, as described by Cunliffe, or the brochs and duns of the Western Isles, must be presented as the outcome of a developing strategy, formulated within a particular social and cultural context. The means of resource allocation, the claims of inheritance and tribute and the conflicts between groups will evolve within certain ecological limits. The relationships between the elements of this system will therefore change as land resources are subdivided, as wealth is transferred in bridewealth or dowry, and as new houses are established from parent settlements. This evolution does not follow a pre-conceived scheme, its logic is contained within the social and cultural system, and in the options exploited or lost in manipulating the environmental resource and the alliances and relationships with kinsmen, friends and enemies.

This structure of conflicting interests, of power and domination wielded by individuals and groups, will be mediated through the cultural system. Bourdieu (1979) sees a threefold role for the symbolism within culture; as allowing the formation of an objective knowledge of the world; as forming a means of communication; and as legitimising relations of power and control. Clearly, these three facets may stand in conflict one with another. It is the role of rituals and certain institutions to legitimise the relationships of authority, by presenting them as the natural order of the world. The institution of *clientage*, for example, thus offers as natural the relationship of patronage, repaid by dues, between individuals of distinct and unquestionable statuses, a relationship of benefit between client and master by which the reality of exploitation remains concealed. And yet, the reflexive nature of cultural experience can, at times, run counter to established ideology. The whole problem of the ideological representation of order and of the determining relationships between this and other elements of the social and cultural system is obviously complex, but it is one which is of relevance to archaeology. These systems can only be analysed through their historical development, and through this we may trace, and understand, how symbols of power come to be selected, mobilised and eclipsed (Braithwaite 1981).

If brochs are placed in an evolving tradition of house building, the roots of which have now been traced back to the late Bronze Age (Renfrew 1979b, 181), then we might see the emergence of such an elaborate building form contained in the competitive social system whereby certain households ultimately achieved a pre-eminence. The authority of that domination would be explicitly stated in the rituals of legitimisation and in the symbols of power displayed, but that authority would also be implicit in, amongst other things, the payments of tribute. Indeed the mobilisation of labour to build the broch itself would signify the acceptance, not only of dues owed, but also the mechanism by which those dues were demanded. The broch, and other architectural elaborations – duns and the Shetland blockhouses for example – are not simply 'status indicators' which appear as if from nowhere (Lamb 1980), but the very acts of their construction contain the recognition of, or submission to, an authority continually seeking to reassert its own natural validity.

Set in this historical context the abandonment of these buildings is a significant transformation. The context of abandonment must surely be broader than those explanations normally offered; namely the passing of some military threat or the actual collapse of the unstable broch tower. If our concern is now with the symbols of authority and legitimisation then any future consideration of the transformation of this settlement system might fruitfully consider the changing political and ideological structures which are historically attested by Norse settlement and by the Christian missions. The church itself offered a new and powerful ideology through which kingly power might be sustained, it also offered a new formation of knowledge and authority in the written text.

THE VERBAL EVIDENCE

The need to consider the use of verbal evidence in studying this period stems not only from the use which others have made of it in their own work – in particular the case made by Hamilton for utilising the epic tradition of the Ulster cycle in the study of fort architecture – but also from the recognition that verbal traditions are that part of the cultural world which first become accessible in protohistoric and early historic periods. Essentially there are two inter-related problems here. The first concens the relationship between the historian and the archaeologist, for both, at times, see such great distinctions between their individual subject matter and their respective methodologies that interdisciplinary approaches to a period hold few attractions. The second

problem follows upon any attempt at such an interdisciplinary study, in the need to correlate verbal testimonies and archaeological information. The case which Hamilton presents lies in that second category where the descriptions contained as a backcloth in the epic tales of the Ulster cycle are drawn upon in discussing the archaeological evidence for the construction and use of forts and houses (Hamilton 1968a & b). Against this we may also set other uses which have been made of verbal sources; to fix chronological horizons between verbally and archaeologically attested events (Alcock 1971; 1976); to provide a description of artefacts and their uses (Graham 1951); and to evoke, or describe, the principles of the social system and its functioning (Graham 1951; Jackson 1964).

The solution to the second of these problems lies in the first, and in questioning the idea of an essential difference between archaeological data and the verbal record. This distinction, still vigorously rehearsed by some archaeologists, needs to be re-set less strongly, for if our approach to the archaeological record is to originate in an adequate, theoretical, understanding of the processes of formation of material culture then there is common ground for the archaeologist and historian in such a theoretical position. It is inaccurate to separate the verbal account, as being in some way value-laden and an intentional representation of ideas and records from the material detritus of the archaeological record which such purposeful recording is not supposed to affect. 'Archaeological facts, because they are usually unconscious evidence not created with communication in mind, are often thought less prone to misinterpretation than written evidence with its conscious or unconscious bias' (Addyman 1976, 311). It is similarly inaccurate to continually refer to the verbal account as 'historical' as if archaeological material lies outside history. Both these views run counter to the idea of material culture as already outlined and continue to trap us in a false dichotomy which sets archaeological against verbal resources. We can avoid this dichotomy by analysing the total cultural system, which includes verbal evidence when and where it is available. This does not reduce all aspects of culture to a similar form, nor does it deny the specialist expertise of analysis. It does however suggest that our primary concern should not necessarily be in extracting from verbal sources data which might have some archaeological implication – the date of a siege, an inventory of castle buildings – but in considering the processes which brought those sources into being, and which lay behind their reproduction and preservation. In examining the context of the social system we may specify the importance of Easter tables, stained-glass windows, penannular brooches, king-lists, E-ware and monasteries, only through an enquiry which encompasses the structure of the total cultural system. The verbal source does not stand aside imparting accurate or inaccurate information about a period which then supports, or finds support from, archaeological analysis. The verbal tradition, in either its oral or written mode, has itself to be placed in the context of the production and reproduction of the cultural and social system.

This argument needs a more detailed examination than can be offered here, but before we return to the main theme of this paper it is necessary to make one further point. Verbal information is contained in oral and written modes of transmission. For the archaeologist and historian it is by necessity the written mode upon which study focuses, although it is then argued that some early texts contain an antique tradition which had been preserved in the oral mode before being committed to writing. Thus certain texts are seen to have a relevance pertaining to periods which predate the texts' original formulation. The major problem here is that the written mode and oral mode offer distinct techniques in the formation of knowledge and the way in which that knowledge is reworked and recalled (Goody 1977). The written record cannot be simply projected back into a retrospective view of an oral tradition for the form of the knowledge has already been transformed by writing, and has then been reworked by copyists and scribes into the medieval manuscripts we possess today. To all intents and purposes the oral traditions are lost, except in

the sense of an aura of the past, which was appropriated when the written texts came to be constructed (Byrne 1973, 49; Warner 1979, 43).

If we now return to consider the verbal record in the context of the late Iron Age, it follows that we cannot simply dredge these records for a 'window' onto the period, using widely disparate sources formulated in the written mode, and expect anything but the most generalised and distorted of views (Jackson 1964). The Ulster cycle and Homeric Greece were pasts dreamt of, artefacts for past glories, just as was the later Iron Age use of the Neolithic tomb at the Mound of the Hostages for the legitimisation of kingly power. The importance of the Ulster cycle must lie at the point of its written construction and subsequent preservation, it cannot be used for general application in every form of late Celtic society. This argument negates the position adopted by Hamilton in discussing the details of construction of Iron Age forts. Similarly we must reject the arguments of Clarke when, in discussing the site at Glastonbury, he is moved to explain that 'of course, Celtic society varied through time and from tribe to tribe. Yet, everywhere, the web of Celtic kinship seems to have been cross-cut by broadly comparable grades, often elaborately distinguished by the almost heraldic significance of the sub-cultural artefact insignia appropriate to each status' (1972, 845). And yet the Irish laws upon which Clarke drew present a form which Goody might see as entirely consistent with the literary mode, with the incessant listing and ordering of persons, statuses and artefacts (Goody 1977); a formulation of knowledge which is possible in the written mode but unlikely to have ever lain within an oral tradition. To seek some general application of these laws is to return to a form of cultural diffusionism, which may be consistent with the arguments presented by Hamilton, but is no more convincing because it is based upon written texts rather than upon sherds of pottery. And if the construction of the laws must now be explained within a particular historical context, then we can dismiss any idea that the ordered world they present to the reader conflicts with our own approach to the formation of material culture. Those laws do not suddenly offer us that 'rule-book of culture', the existence of which we have been so concerned to deny. Rather they present us with a retrospective and idealised analysis formed in a search for order amongst a world of fluctuating fortunes between royal households and princes, and into which a written mode of knowledge was becoming available through the church and its monastic foundations.

The theme of this paper has been the Iron Age of Atlantic Scotland, but in its execution we have dwelt upon the need for a theory of material culture. In emphasising this need, it has been necessary to offer a critical assessment of other approaches to this period. Few are likely to consider the argument resolved, but in attempting to clear a way towards a consideration of the formation of the archaeological record one final point must be made. If an understanding of past social and cultural development is internal to the particular case, and if archaeology can approach these problems, which I believe it can, then our need to study the context of material culture within a particular social system must direct us to those regions and periods with optimum preservation of archaeological data. The Iron Age of Atlantic Scotland is one such case. It is a case which contains its own historical logic, and which requires neither English migrants, nor generalised models of Celtic society, to be understood.

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