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Essay

The Community of Practice: An Essential and Elegant Framework for Archaeological Interpretation

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Abstract: Archaeologists deploy a variety of models and theories, often tailored to specific questions or situations, in making sense of the material record we study. The concept of the community of practice, originally developed in the context of modern work and learning situations, describes among other things how participation in shared activities can create and shape social relationships. It therefore offers a powerful and flexible framework for the many archaeological research agendas in which group dynamics play a role. Some archaeologists have already begun to use the community of practice approach (CoP) as an interpretive framework, and this essay argues that a wider embrace would be a benefit to individual archaeologists and to the field as a whole.

Keywords: archaeology; archaeological theory; group dynamics; community of practice; craft production; ritual

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1. Introduction

This essay introduces a growing body of archaeological research that employs the community of practice as an analytical concept. The community of practice is a simple concept that hews close to the first principles of social interaction but remains open to elaboration in the complexity of each case. It is also a powerful explanatory tool that helps not only answer questions of knowledge, behavior, and belonging in human groups but pose new ones. In addition, it is flexible, potentially comprehending the range of human activities at a range of scales and in a variety of configurations. Its simplicity, power, and flexibility make it an elegant framework for archaeological interpretation.

Some brief disclaimers: the focus here is on excavation and the interpretation of excavated material; archaeological method is largely omitted, but naturally, meticulous techniques of excavation, collection, and documentation are ideal. There is a body of literature on archaeological pedagogy and methodology as a community of practice in the original sense of the theory as well [1–4]. Similarly, this article is not about "community archaeology", which has its own growing literature, although some of the research projects mentioned below, especially those focused on more recent archaeological and historical contexts, do involve local and descendant groups as fellow knowledge producers to greater and lesser extents. In another venue, it would be interesting to consider how community archaeology projects function precisely as communities of archaeological practice (excavation, analysis, interpretation) that cut across pre-determined lines (scholar, public, etc.) [5,6]. Finally, in this essay I largely avoid use of the term community in its conventional sense, reserving it for the specific type of community described by the community of practice framework and instead using words like "group" or "population" where one might have used "community". This choice allows me to avoid, for the present purposes, debates over the meaning of the term "community", which are important but not relevant to the fairly narrow point of the essay. I acknowledge that the phrase "community of practice" necessarily raises those issues, and ultimately I do not think that it should displace the term "community" in its conventional and debated usage. Until a new name for the framework can be agreed upon, the usual meaning of "community" and its technical meaning in the community of practice framework will continue to align poorly.

2. Approaching the Social in Archaeology

Archaeologists have a long history of applying and adapting social theory from other disciplines in order to interpret the material evidence we study. Indeed, from the earliest attempts at a systematic analysis of ancient remains in the 18th, 17th, and 16th centuries (and in the more idiosyncratic studies of the centuries and millennia before that), prevailing general ideas about how societies work have influenced both the way the evidence is read and the conclusions that can be drawn. Although that unconscious osmosis has continued in various forms to the present day (namely, the uncritical version of cultural history), it was in the 20th century that archaeologists began to intentionally and self-reflectively engage with the theories of the time: first, the processual New Archaeology of the 1960s, and afterward the multiplicity of approaches that are by definition "post-processual" [7–9]. Thus archaeologies devoted to one or another body of theory have begun to redress the prior lack of scholarly interest in many obviously critical areas and to enrich the field with a mosaic of specific sub-fields: archaeologies of colonialism, (ethnic) identity, gender, slavery, labor, etc. [10].

Much compelling archaeological research today deals in some way with group dynamics, membership, belonging, etc. This is not to say that past studies on technical or hard-science topics are without interest, only that they come to have a fuller meaning when related to the people who produced the material record under consideration, i.e., agents in a world that is social, as more broadly defined. Undoubtedly our collective interest in such questions owes much to contemporary (early 21st century CE) concerns about identity and belonging, and some future society less troubled by these would diagnose our focus on them as dispassionately as we do the preoccupations of scholars from generations ago. Still, when the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of groups is such a central question among archaeologists, the dynamics of human groupings remain rather undertheorized in the field. The social theory most absorbed by archaeologists today is undoubtedly the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu, with its attention to individual and collective actions that create and reflect social structures, and with its central concept of habitus, i.e., the logic by which practices are rendered natural to individuals and meaningful to groups [11,12].

The term "social" here means the broad range of ideas and activities related to the association or grouping of humans, encompassing both the casual understanding of social life (e.g., family, friendship, recreation) as well as spheres labelled political, religious, economic, cultural, etc. This broad definition understands the "social" as constitutive and descriptive of, rather than separate from, the whole range of things humans do or think in association with one another [13].

The multiplicity of social theory frameworks currently in use in archaeology presents something of a daunting challenge to anyone who seeks to understand ancient social life holistically. Perhaps that is as it should be; as Einstein said, theories should be as simple as possible but no simpler, and of course social life is and has always been complex. Nor do I suggest that the contributions, provocations, and claims to legitimacy associated with these frameworks are complete and no further work should be done in them; still less do I seek to impose some orthodoxy on them or subordinate them to some mainstream-acceptable pablum. On the contrary, I am advocating for more engagement between scholars of ancient societies. And yet, the fragmentation of concepts and terminology that currently characterizes academic discourse on ancient groups can make it difficult to see how the various camps intersect, as they must do, and nearly impossible to imagine inhabiting more than one at a time.

Moreover, a related problem in the present scholarly landscape is the reification of groups. Many groups in antiquity performed self-identify as such, as far as we can tell from texts and inscriptions, but many did not, and in the case of subjects exclusively attested in archaeological evidence, self-identification lies entirely in the realm of speculation. Part of the issue is that we scholars tend to prefer neat labels when discussing the people of the past. Yet, the comfort with which we sometimes speak and write about "Phoenicians" (in the most generous construction, a shorthand for the variety of people with origins in the coastal

Levant) or "metics" (free non-citizen residents at Athens, making up a large percentage of the city's inhabitants) or "the townspeople" of some small settlement forecloses the significant open questions of just how and how much those people understood themselves to be associated. Overdetermined labels can thus impose particular social structures that do not necessarily fit, and such deductive identification reflects modern understandings more than ancient realities. Desperately needed is a corrective in the form of an inductive theory, ideally one suited to embrace both emic expressions and etic configurations of social dynamics.

This essay argues that there already exists a fundamental theory of society capable of doing just that: the community of practice. The following section describes the origins and substance of this framework, Section 4 highlights recent and ongoing work demonstrating the advantages of the approach, and Section 5 offers avenues for future research and theoretical development. Sections 4 and 5, especially, will show how the community of practice approach can easily bridge multiple social theory frameworks and account for complex ancient social realities.

3. The Community of Practice Approach (CoP)

A community of practice is a group (the community) that is defined and held together by the participation of its members in a particular activity (the practice) and a shared goal of excellence in that activity. In a community of practice, newcomers become full participants over time as they learn by doing, starting with the easiest tasks or sub-tasks ("legitimate peripheral participation" in Lave and Wenger's formulation) but gradually taking responsibility for more critical parts of the work [14]. Association in such a group is voluntary, but there may still be a hierarchy based on skill or imported from other social contexts. A number of features characterize the operation of such a group, including a general agreement about who is included in the group, rapid communication, knowledge of fellow members' capabilities, shared stories or jargon, a common style that advertises belonging, etc. [15] (pp. 125–126). Depending on circumstances, any given feature may arise organically or may require intentional cultivation.

CoP was developed by Lave and Wenger, primarily to describe the social dynamics of institutionalized learning, particularly in the workplace, and to show how to optimize them [16]. This original context of business and management studies remains a primary context for the framework's application, although a close second is modern pedagogical theory, where education scholars have since adopted it. Both applications involve the explicit purpose of leveraging theory for more successful learning, a purpose absent from the more recent experimentation with the framework by archaeologists (see Section 3 below).

The concept has a great deal of potential across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences as an analytical tool rather than as an organizational model for an office or a classroom. Theoretically, many, or in some cases, all of the basic dynamics and additional features of an intentionally created and maintained community of practice ought to also be present organically in more informal groupings around a shared activity. Thus, the practice that anchors a community of practice might be any activity at all, meaning that artistic schools, literary circles, political associations, sports fan clubs, and more could all be re-evaluated in this light. As early as 1998, Wenger himself was already considering the implications of the model for questions of identity, group boundaries, and the tensions inherent in belonging to multiple communities of practice at the same time [15]. Because communities of practice can exist in different forms beyond managerial and pedagogical contexts, identifying them as such is a step toward understanding some of the phenomena central to human social life and toward making some sense of past or present realities that are kaleidoscopically complex.

For archaeologists, CoP is an especially attractive framework, simply because archaeologists study material culture, i.e., the physical evidence of past activities (and often a fellow participant in them with human agents), usually with some aim of reconstructing or understanding what people used to think, feel, and believe, as well as what broader ideas

and forces shaped their lives. Massive public or private structures, by definition, involve the coordinated activity of many individuals during construction, and afterward they maintain a kind of gravity (spectators circling Trajan's Column in Rome; people gathering regularly in theaters and assembly places). Beyond the monumental, the archaeological record of non-elite activities better preserves those that took place often and for a long time (the wheel rut in a stone street, the ash ground into the floor around a home altar) or those that involved a large number of people acting together (the refuse from a communal feast, the accumulation of dedications in a shrine, or even the remnants on a battlefield). CoP offers a clear but flexible path from the physical traces to the social experience of the people who produced them. When we recognize that each activity visible in the archaeological record represents the anchoring practice of a community of practice, an entire past social world comes alive.

4. How Archaeologists Are Using CoP

Most concrete archaeological research drawing on CoP addresses three types of practice: labor (especially craft production), consumption, and ritual (whether explicitly "religious" or more civic-secular). Some scholars have, in a theoretical manner nonetheless informed by case studies, built upon CoP as part of broader synthetic arguments about archaeologically attested communities. A comprehensive literature review is beyond the scope of this paper and can be approximated with database searches for "archaeology" and "community of practice", the results of which will show an explosion in the past few years that shows no sign of diminishing. Instead, in this section I provide a selected evaluation of work that charts the progressive embrace of CoP among archaeologists and demonstrates the advantages of pursuing archaeological research questions with this framework in mind.

Archaeological research on craft production and other forms of work was a natural extension for using CoP, given the original context for which the concept was formulated, and indeed this was the first area in which archaeologists tested the approach (it remains by far the most popular focus of archaeological interest utilizing the concept). As early as 2001, archaeologists working in the American Southeast were using CoP to show that rope-making and ceramic production traditions challenged or augmented knowledge about conventionally understood groupings [17,18]. In other words, the inductive nature of the approach allowed them to see culturally significant groups that cut across and might otherwise have been obscured by other previously attested groups. Over the next decade, archaeologists studying the ceramics of the American Southwest began employing CoP as well, finding that when they could discern several overlapping communities of practices in operation, a thicker description of social life in their study areas became possible [19,20]. The idea that communities of practice could overlap in significant ways had been anticipated by Wenger himself in what he called "constellations of practice", a concept adopted by a number of these archaeologists [15]. In other words, the flexibility of the approach allowed them to accurately reflect some of the multiplicity and complexity found in human social life at any given time. Indeed, these two advantages—an inductive method that avoids predetermined results and a flexibility that accommodates the intersecting and even nested groupings that are part of complex social life—characterize subsequent research using CoP, whether focused on production or other human activity, and they remain a source of potential for future work (see Section 4 below).

This material-focused, identity-embodying, complexity-friendly counterbalance to the received wisdom of groups and labels previously taken for granted has proven appealing in studies of craft production beyond the academic tradition of American archaeology. For example, the contents of two wide-ranging edited volumes represent the development of CoP in archaeological contexts spanning Australia, Africa, the Amazon, the Mediterranean, and the Arctic [21,22]. Recent work on the ancient Mediterranean, with that region's relatively well-documented political history, has used CoP to identify the nature of local labor continuity under imperial rule [23].

With production comes consumption, another sensible and fairly early extension of CoP. Although the context is less formal, and less obviously pedagogical, consumption is also a site of learning (as any modern foodie or wine taster can attest), and scholarship has recognized this for some time without CoP [24]. Archaeological research based in the American Southwest has shown that studying communities' consumption practices, i.e., of food and drink, can shed light on segments of the societies under consideration more broadly than study of the relatively narrow ranks of craft producers [25,26]. Meanwhile, research on the consumption of non-food items (i.e., the acquisition and display of glass beads) in the American Southeast as the anchoring activity for communities of practice (and constellations of practices) has highlighted the complex social interactions represented and conditioned by material culture [27]. Additionally, in South American archaeology, communities and constellations of practice related to the consumption (i.e., acquisition and use) of ceramics can be seen to have played a critical role in the integration of regional political entities [28].

By contrast, it is only quite recently that archaeologists have begun to utilize CoP in their analyses of explicitly ritual and religious practices. At first, ritual in its broad sense, involving a wide range of socially significant activities, came to be analyzed as a field for communities of practice [29]. In the past few years, however, scrupulous study of mortuary traditions in a range of historical contexts has shown these to be areas in which CoP productively makes sense of our evidence for burial ritual [30–32]. The three studies cited are notable because they each contribute toward a nuanced understanding of how specific burial practices and related activities generated specific forms of attachment to groups at different scales, without privileging the settlement as a natural community. Topics of ritual practices of all types are ripe for analysis with CoP, and more projects of this type are certainly in progress as I write.

Studies that seek to apply CoP to a particular body of evidence for a particular type of activity have thus proved productive. An obvious next step, the comprehensive tracing of communities of practice in a given region across the whole range of available evidence, appears to have been attempted only rarely as of yet [33].

Beyond these case studies, the framework has also inspired scholars developing new ideas about archaeology, community, and practice. Some of this work has, for example, attempted to combine CoP with that of social network analysis (SNA). For Knappett, communities of practice help explain what he calls "meso-networks", which form a bridge between activity at the level and scale of the household and activity at the level and scale of the region, in this case, Bronze Age Crete [34] (chapter 5). Blair, meanwhile, argues that a social network analysis of glass bead consumption in the American Southeast in the 17th century CE as informed by CoP can address questions of social identity and group dynamics that SNA would otherwise miss [35].

Similarly, an "archaeology of communities" already existed as a vibrant research discourse without explicit reference to communities of practice, though often with foundations in practice theory [36–39]. A related approach is that of Wynne-Jones' "biographies of practice", which make sense of interlaced networks of production, consumption, and exchange, not to mention culture, in the archaeology of East Africa [40]. Harris cites CoP, with its attention to agency, learning, and change over time, as a strength of current archaeological research on communities, in an essay arguing that too little attention has been given to coercive power, to objects, and to emotion [41]. Steidl's research on ancient western and eastern Mediterranean social contexts explores communities of practice across a range of activities and frames CoP as a key component of her contribution to the archaeology of communities [42,43].

Perhaps the most ambitious theoretical use to which CoP has been put is in the elaboration of translocalism as a means to understand ancient social life. In a recent monograph on Greek culture among the populations of ancient central Eurasia, Hoo employs CoP as the proper methodology for conducting the translocal analysis she champions [44] (chapter 9). Translocalism is a common theme in globalization and migration studies, and in this context

it is a concept that "captures *the entanglement of scales* in the actions, behaviours, expressions, and identifications of various actors, whose social relations stretched across geographical space yet were embedded in a particular place" [44] (p. 241, emphasis original). Hoo's synthesis, like the others mentioned above, demonstrates the power and flexibility of CoP to contribute significantly to a variety of existing frameworks. We thus encounter a variegated academic landscape somewhat like that decried at the beginning of this essay, but with a key difference: each of the scholars cited in this section has a common understanding with the others about the building blocks and dynamics of human social interaction and about the formation and maintenance of groups through practice.

5. How Archaeologists Could Use CoP

If archaeologists simply proceed along the lines of inquiry discussed in the previous section, CoP will continue to yield valuable results in both individual case studies and big-picture contemplations. More local or regional studies, inspired by CoP to encompass ever wider ranges of attested activities, will trace the outlines of ever more social interactions potentially obscured by conventional categories. More theoretical work can combine CoP with other analytical frameworks and lead to compelling new syntheses. In this section, I outline some possibilities for the further development of CoP itself and its application to some current areas of interest in archaeology.

Perhaps most fundamentally, it would be worth exploring how existing social relationships shape communities of practice and how this interacts with the reverse phenomenon, the one that archaeologists using CoP have been primarily concerned with: the way communities of practice shape social relationships. Because archaeologists, unlike business managers and pedagogues, do not know in advance the purpose of the communities of practice they identify, the motivation for and emergence of ancient communities of practice has not attracted much attention. In many cases, the purpose may seem clear to us, but CoP should caution against any such assumptions and call for an explanation of the way(s) communities of practice come into being.

Further, one exciting set of questions has to do with the internal dynamics of pre-existing groups. Wenger's "constellations of practices" and the incidence of multiple overlapping and nested communities of practice raise the question of whether a community in the common sense can be usefully analyzed as a constellation of practices, i.e., as containing multiple communities of practice, including some that extend beyond its borders, rendering it somewhat fuzzy around the edges. A political community, like a town, a city-state, or even an empire, depends on a great deal of situated learning, whether that is a citizen learning how to participate (or not) in communal decision making, a subaltern learning how to navigate a world defined and governed by others, or a leader learning how to lead. Can the coherence (or lack thereof) of a political community be explained by the nature of the multiple communities of practice of which it is composed? Are some communities of practice here more salient than others, and if so, how does that happen to be? Likewise, religious communities function with uniformity in some areas of ritual practice and belief and variation in others; faith and belief are only accessible to the investigator through practice, including speech or writing. If every ritual practice of a religious community anchors a community of practice, can the extent and shape of these communities of practice explain the whole? Finally, might CoP provide a useful way of abandoning troublesome but hitherto necessary labels like "political" and "religious"?

Alternatively, CoP's relevance for border/boundary contexts or for situations of mobility/migration could be tested. In which cases can CoP confirm the power of boundaries to contain people? In which cases can it suggest that such power is illusory? In the case of durable social boundaries, could one speak of a community of practice anchored by the acceptance of that boundary, and in the case of permeable boundaries, a community of practice anchored by a refusal to accept it? Migrants are by definition dislocated from an original social setting but not yet settled among a host population. What light can CoP shed on the social lives of people in motion, on the groups they were once part of, and on

the groups they may eventually join? Might high mobility challenge the formation and maintenance of communities of practice in some arenas while enabling them in other areas?

While archaeologists are already asking how communities of practice extend across space, much less has been written about how they can extend (or not) across time. Here, the existing discourse on the theory and archaeology of ritual, particularly on questions of continuity and persistence, would be foundational [45–47]. Microhistory has also proven to be a compelling approach to the question of practice and belonging over time [48]. We might nevertheless ask: does anything else characterize ephemeral communities of practice apart from their short lives, or long-lasting communities of practice apart from their longevity? Did it feel different to participate in an old community of practice as compared with a new one? The related question of null cases arises: what explains the failure of a community of practice to endure, and what are the forces tending to stop them from functioning? Do all activities lead to communities of practice? If so, are they all of equal intensity and nature? If not, why not?

CoP also has potential to provide a common language between existing scholarly discourses and areas of interest and debate among archaeologists, as already demonstrated by the work related to the archaeology of communities and SNA discussed above. What might arise if the archaeology of colonization and the archaeology of gender identity/performance both articulated their research questions in terms of communities of practice? Could archaeology with CoP bring into relief the overlaps and disjunctures between the rulers and ruled in imperial situations, and could one use the same method to illuminate issues of class both within and between societies? Could CoP provide the foundation for a critical archaeology of race, or an archaeology of power/despotics?

6. Conclusions

The aim of this essay was to introduce the community of practice as a concept that is useful for archaeologists studying a range of topics, times, and places. Rather than filling any glaring deficiency in archaeological theory, CoP encourages an inductive approach to fine-grained archaeological evidence and provides a compelling logic that builds from the evidence into practices and then into social relations. It is powerful enough to answer interesting questions and flexible enough to use in nearly any context and at nearly any scale. Archaeologists are increasingly embracing CoP, which not only enhances their own research but creates a community of practice anchored by their very engagement with CoP. The more this happens, the better for all of us; the future of archaeology with CoP is bright.

Why scholars in other humanities and social science fields have not as yet dealt much with the CoP is unclear to me. I would think that CoP has much to contribute to the study of literature, linguistics, markets, religion, art, etc. Perhaps for some working in the humanities, suspicion of an overly rigid structure makes the framework unappealing. As I hope this essay has shown, the community of practice can be an extremely flexible concept, which only requires us to start with the human interactions at the core of our research questions and plays nicely with a variety of other theoretical commitments. Perhaps for some working in the social sciences, a preference for and loyalty to Bourdieu's theory of practice or another approach deriving from sociology or economics preclude the adoption of others. To me, CoP complements rather than supersedes Bourdieu's habitus or any other socioeconomic theory, and a synthesis of these could have a very wide application. Perhaps still, others, including archaeologists, have not been exposed to the idea of the community of practice as an interpretive framework. For anyone in this third category, this essay should be a stimulus to consider the possibilities.

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