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Why the Archaeology of Everyday Matters?

SARAH E. PRICE AND PHILIP J. CARR

Indeed, it seems a common assumption that everyday life in prehistory is simple to understand, essentially unchanging, and merely a backdrop against which the more important action was played out. Where everyday life is discussed or portrayed, it is usually in popular accounts, museum displays, and reconstruction drawings. The picture painted contains little which is not immediately familiar to our own lived experience, or at least to our recent rural forebearers.

Hill (2001:432)

The foundation of this volume was doing something different, outside of the norm. We asked a group of archaeologists to discuss everyday matters, a scale not often utilized or made explicit in the archaeology of a particular period or topic. Our proposal was met with some resistance, both from participants and from conference attendees; it was even interpreted as a postprocessual symposium, as if one paradigm owned a concept or scale of investigation. It is difficult, at first consideration, to think seriously about single events, thoughts, or actions of people that are represented in the pieces and parts of an imperfect archaeological record, which is why that is not what we asked the contributors to do. As Carr and Bradbury (Chapter 10) and Miller and Tune (Chapter 2) discuss, the archaeological record as we excavate and document it is a palimpsest of everyday events. It is too coarse-grained (and our methods are not developed in such a way) to tease apart singular aspects (*sensu* Kuhn 2013). However, considering everyday life, even if it is unseen with current archaeological methods, is not without utility. Archaeologists generally want to investigate the how and why of variation and change in past human cultures, and change is the result of many small, individually unimportant actions. Thus the culmination of everyday actions of people in the past is where cultural change occurs (*sensu* Gladwell 2000).

This volume is not meant to be a guidebook to doing a particular type of research, on a particular topic; nor is it intended to be a jargon-laden theoretical treatise for a particular brand of archaeology. Case studies and data-dense papers were discouraged from the outset. We did not specify a theoretical approach; rather, we encouraged looking outside archaeology for inspiration and indeed found ourselves at odds over theory during the course of writing and editing this volume. Our intent was, and is, to spur researchers to think about the archaeological record in new ways and about how the scale of everyday life for people in the past and our everyday archaeologies as professionals affect the perception and consumption of our field by both other archaeologists and nonprofessionals.

Defining “Everyday”

“Everyday matters” is a phrase with more than one meaning and can be seen as simple or very complex. It can refer to daily concerns or events that are common and ordinary. Or it connotes that actions occurring daily or “every day” are of significance, that such actions matter. From an archaeological perspective, we think that common concerns reveal something about the lives of the people in the past that we investigate. Additionally, it is clear that the archaeological record is formed on a daily basis, so the events of a day are significant regarding the evidence that archaeologists have or lack. For example, getting food is an everyday, and every day, matter for any human being on earth. However, on some occasions, people fast and choose to ignore this biological imperative for a time, and this time of fasting informs the everyday. Basket weaving, while probably not an activity that took place every single day, produced an item of material culture that once manufactured was part of some everyday activity. What mattered every day to an Early Archaic female child (Hollenbach and Carmody, Chapter 5) is probably not what mattered to a nineteenth-century Cherokee man (Greene, Chapter 4). Likewise, the authors in this volume chose their approach to everyday matters based on how they envisioned their particular topic articulating with an everyday concern in the past.

So why did the everyday appeal as a way of examining what we think we know about the prehistoric Southeast? We see archaeology in the Southeast at a similar point in development as the field of physics in the 1970s. James Gleick (1987:5) states: “Science was heading for a crisis of increasing specialization,” as all of the major questions within grasp of physicists at the end of the twentieth century had been answered. Out of their crisis rose chaos theory, which

was essentially a return to the most basic, and often complex, phenomena (e.g., weather prediction, the behaviors of smoke, waves, and turbulence), in essence a return to questions of everyday matters. These seemingly simple problems are actually the most complex processes and the most difficult to predict and formulate and had been ignored because they were considered too mundane by researchers. Although these topics are everyday processes, they are very complex and nonlinear systems (meaning that we cannot predict the output from known input). Chaos theory deals with these nonlinear phenomena and accepts that they are effectively impossible to predict or control (e.g., human behavior?). But chaos theory posits that the connections can be understood and predicted by understanding how our social, economic, and ecosystems are interconnected (see Rodning et al., Chapter 3).

These everyday matters in physics would be something akin to excavating a “lithic scatter” versus Moundville. Scientists in general, and archaeologists specifically, are not enamored with everyday matters when it comes to research topics. For example, medical researchers were quick to figure out sickle cell anemia, a disease that affects many people, because it has a single gene root; but to this day they have not distinguished the genes that determine skin color or hair texture or inner ear balance, as these “everyday” questions do not have devastating health consequences and are genetically very complex. Likewise, a site such as Moundville is so readily observable that its significance is taken for granted by archaeologists and the public alike. A lithic scatter is a site type commonly identified by archaeologists during Phase I survey but invisible to most of the public, who would view arguments for the significance of a site without impressive features or diverse and exotic material culture as forced. In short, everyday matters can be seemingly mundane but in actuality are incredibly complex, as demonstrated by the medical example above and the varied contributions to this volume.

Conversely, in archaeology, the kinds of questions asked about sites like Moundville are easier to answer due to preservation, context, and range of available data and thus more satisfying to answer. These same questions and methods do not work with “lithic scatters.” This pejorative site type persists in archaeology today. There is only one Moundville for every thousand lithic scatters, so perhaps we should take a cue from physics and turn our archaeological powers to understanding the activities and behaviors that produced these sites, rather than the object-centric view that has dominated and continues to pervade southeastern archaeology. Looking at lithic scatters as everyday expressions of Moundville might cause us to rethink our everyday archaeology in terms of how we interpret and preserve this site type.