Chapter 18
The identification and interpretation of ranking in prehistory: a contextual perspective Ian Hodder

A distinction is made between social systems (patterns of relationships and roles) and social structure (the rules and concepts which order and give meaning to the social system). Most archaeological studies of ranking have examined only functional relationships in social systems, and there is a need to examine how ranking is presented and accepted within the social structure. The dangers of the ecological functionalism rife in prehistoric archaeology are, first, that ranking in, for example, burial is seen as directly reflecting social hierarchy, whereas, in fact, burial patterns are meaningful transformations of social differentiation. Second, interpretation of changes in ranking must consider the cultural as well as the adaptive context within which evolution occurs.

The aim of this paper is to attract attention to a distinction between social system and social structure which has rarely been made in archaeology and which is absent from the articles in this volume. It will be suggested that the making of such a distinction leads to an awareness of the limitations of existing archaeological studies devoted to the identification and explanation of social hierarchisation or ranking.

Most archaeological work on hierarchisation has been concerned with social systems, by which is meant the patterns of relationships and roles, the communication and use of power, relations of dependence and authority, the movement of resources and trade. It is in discussions of social systems that archaeologists talk descriptively of degrees of complexity and of adaptation and homeostasis. Functional relationships are set up between trade, hierarchy, subsistence and so on — between the different subsystems of the total social system. This functional and utilitarian view of society has been the main concern of recent work, and is identifiable by reference to the following texts on ranking: Brumfiel 1976; Carneiro 1970; Cherry 1978; Crumley 1976; Earle 1977; Flannery 1972; Gall and Saxe 1977; Johnson 1973; Renfrew 1975; Wright 1977; Yoffee 1979.

By social structure, on the other hand, is meant the rules and concepts which order and give meaning to the social system. The framework of rules is built up from general principles which exist in all societies but which are manipulated and negotiated in particular ways specific to each context. These structural and symbolic principles by which interaction is organised include, for example, the rules of ideologies of domination and the symbolic principles of purity, hygiene, godliness, etc. All these various dimensions of meaning are organised and continually reorganised in relation to each other. The structures are continually being renegotiated and manipulated as part of the changing strategies and relations between groups with different powers.
**Ranking in social systems: some problems**

Existing studies of ranking within prehistoric social systems have been concerned with description and with functional relationships. Thus analysis proceeds by describing burial and settlement patterns, and by examining relationships with trade, subsistence and so on (Flannery 1972; Peebles and Kus 1977; Renfrew 1975; Wright 1977).

Societies are classified into chiefdoms, stratified societies or states, or into degrees of complexity, with associated categories of exchange (reciprocal, redistributive, prestige etc.), and with associated typologies of evolutionary development (however multilinear — Sanders and Webster 1978).

The functional relationships between the different categories and divisions of societies concern regulation and equilibrium within an ecological framework. For example, in Flannery's (1972) systems model for the growth of states, the job of self-regulation within the socio-cultural system 'is to keep all the variables in the subsystem within appropriate goal ranges - ranges which maintain homeostasis and do not threaten the survival of the system' (Flannery 1972, 409).

'Culture from a systemic perspective is defined... as interacting behavioural systems. One asks questions concerning these systems, their interrelation, their adaptive significance' (Plog 1975, 208). Such an emphasis on functional relationships assumes that if ranking 'works' (i.e. if it functions to do something like coping with exchange or a very dry environment or just to keep itself going), then the 'working' is a sufficient explanation. There is a certain circularity in such arguments. By its very existence a society 'works'. To show that an institution functions in a certain way does not by itself constitute an explanation of that institution. Unless the analyst is willing to accept that human societies function just to keep themselves functioning within a social and physical environment, it must be acknowledged that broader questions must be asked. While an awareness of the circularity of such functional arguments is shown in the work of Flannery (1972), Flannery and Marcus (1976), Renfrew (1972), and Friedman and Rowlands (1977), the problems and limitations have yet to be fully laid bare.

It is not the concern of this paper to contest the view that the explanation of ranking involves functional relationships, but rather it is suggested that such explanations are insufficient and incomplete. The point can be further demonstrated by considering the emphasis on 'wholeness' in systems theory. The ecological and functional viewpoint explains one subsystem in terms of its connections to others. As one part of the system changes, the others regulate and adapt to regain homeostasis. One subsystem which has recently been seen as important is the ideational (Drennan 1976; Fritz 1978; Flannery and Marcus 1976). Flannery (1972, 409) accepts that the human population's 'cognised model' of the way the world is put together is not merely epiphenomenal but plays an essential part in controlling and regulating societies. Everything ideational is put in a separate subsystem and then the functional links between this and the other subsystems are examined in terms of regulation and management.

The idea of wholeness in archaeological systems theory thus concerns the functional relationships between separate subsystems. The structure of the whole derives from the functional links between the parts, and there is no real concept of wholeness itself except as a by-product of the relationships between parts. Few archaeologists have claimed that there are absolute one-to-one behavioural links between environments and human societies. So if one asks 'why does the system have the form it does?', 'what structures the whole?', the functional view inherent in systems theory can only provide partial answers.

On the other hand, it may be easier to answer such questions satisfactorily if archaeologists consider the symbolic principles which link the parts together. These principles permeate the functional relationships, and they form the whole. The whole does not come from the parts but from the underlying structures. It is not adequate to separate everything ideational into a separate subsystem. Rather, idea and belief are present, and are reproduced, in all action, however, economic or mundane. Structures of meaning are present in all the daily trivia of life and in the major adaptive decisions of human groups. Material culture patterning is formed as part of these meaningful actions and it helps to constitute changing frameworks of action and belief. The concept of wholeness from this structural point of view is more absolute and more far-reaching than in systems theory as used by archaeologists.

So beliefs are important in understanding the functional relationships between the different subsystems, and it is insufficient to place them in their own ideational subsystem. Renfrew (1972, 498) suggested that the 'symbolic', and 'constructs of the human mind', linked the functioning of the different subsystems together. Many archaeologists have made similar claims. For example, Childe (1949, 22) noted that the 'environments to which societies are adjusted are worlds of ideas, collective representations that differ not only in extent and content, but also in structure'. Thus the behavioural and adaptive interrelations, and the self-regulation, take place within a framework of ideas. The objects found by archaeologists are not just functional tools but must be treated 'always and exclusively as concrete expressions and embodiments of human thoughts and ideas' (Childe 1956, 1). But in such viewpoints there is a danger that societies, their beliefs, rules and norms, are set up as abstractions which have little relation either to practical action or to the individual. It becomes difficult to explain behavioural variability and adaptive intelligence. Such difficulties result, rightly, in the rejection of what was termed the 'normative' approach (Binford 1972; Willey and Sabloff 1974). If beliefs and ideas are once again to be given a central role in studies of past socio-cultural systems,
theoretical consideration must be given to the individual and his daily practices in the lived world. Cultural patterning is not produced by a set of static fixed norms but is the framework within which action and adaptation have meaning; at the same time it is reproduced in those actions and in the adaptive responses that are made. There is no dichotomy between an interest in culture and meaning and a concern with adaptive variability.

Thus, in studies of ranking it is necessary to examine how hierarchisation works and functions, but it is also necessary to examine the meaningful context of that functioning. It is necessary to consider how the ranking is represented and presented to the individual, how beliefs are manipulated and negotiated in the changing relationships between and practices of groups within societies. There is a need to be concerned with aspects of legitimation which relate to the definition and justification of the social order. Examination must be made of forms of ideology whereby structures of signification are mobilised to legitimate specific instances of domination. While the debate over the nature of ideology in the writings of, for example, Habermas (1971) and Althusser (1969) cannot be described here, an attempt will be made to examine the implications of a concern with beliefs and ideologies for the analysis and interpretation of ranking.

A contextual approach

An archaeology in which an emphasis is placed on the particular way, in each spatial and historical context, that general symbolic and structural principles are assembled into coherent sets and integrated into social and ecological strategies can be called a 'contextual' archaeology. Such an approach incorporates at least two areas of interest. The first concerns the formal analysis of sets and the notion that culture is meaningfully constituted in the sense that each material trait is produced in relation to a set of symbolic schemes and has a meaning dependent on its place within those schemes. So the same material thing may have different meanings in different contexts. The second component of a contextual approach concerns the implementation and reconstitution of beliefs in practices, the ideological manipulation of beliefs as part of social and economic strategies, and the development of models concerning such interrelationships.

These two aspects of a contextual approach have a direct bearing on both the analytical identification of ranking in prehistory and the explanation of that ranking. Analyses of social hierarchisation, especially in its incipient stages, have been heavily dependent on burial data. From analyses of mortuary remains it is suggested that, for example, degrees of ranking in a particular society can be identified, and that the relative wealth and status of women and men can be assessed. But if it is accepted that artefacts have different meanings in different contexts, a number of difficulties emerge. For example, Pader (1980) has shown that different sections within the same Anglo-Saxon cemetery use the same artefacts in very different ways. A formal analysis of the placing of artefacts in the graves and on the bodies showed that in any one spatial segment of the cemetery an artefact type might be placed according to strict rules, but that these rules differed from area to area within the cemetery. The artefact types meant different things amongst different subgroups of the society buried within the cemetery, and any overall assessment of ranking which was based on artefact assemblages without reference to the local context and structure of use would be misleading. Similarly, things may have different meanings when associated with males as opposed to females, and it is difficult to see how the wealth or status of the one can be compared with that of the other without reference to context.

Additional problems derive from the facts that the burial context itself is different from non-burial activities and that the same material item may have a different meaning in each of the two contexts. Burial ritual may be used as part of an ideology which faithfully represents and mirrors aspects of a living society, but it is equally possible that the ideology may be concerned with distorting, obscuring, hiding or inverting particular forms of social relationships. The patterning of material remains in graves must be understood as specific to a burial and ritual context, while the relationship between patterns in life and patterns in death must itself be seen as specific to a wider cultural context. Models and generalisations about the nature of ritual activity must be examined (Turner 1969), and ethnoraphic studies of attitudes to death and their effects on mortuary remains must be studied and extended in ethnoarchaeology (Bloch 1971; Okely 1979; Hodder 1982). The degree of organisation and role differentiation in death does not relate directly to patterns in life. Rather there is a symbolic and ideological basis which must itself be understood. A lack of patterned role differentiation in death does not, as has been suggested by Rathje (1973) and others, necessarily imply a 'mobile' society or one that is relatively egalitarian, since in the context of the mortuary ritual distinct social differentiations may be denied or obscured (as in the case of modern Church of England burial: Parker Pearson, pers. comm.).

The general importance of examining beliefs and principles of meaning in studies of ranking in burial can be demonstrated by considering three ways in which domination might become accepted ideologically (Giddens 1979). (1) An ideology might be used to deny the conflict within society. It is normally in the interests of dominant groups if the existence of contradictions is denied or their real locus is obscured. (2) An ideology may represent the sectional interests of one group as the universal interests of the total society. So the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling ideas. (3) Naturalisation occurs in an ideology when the arbitrary existing system of relations appears immutable and fixed, as if they are natural laws.

Depending on the ideology, material symbols in burial could be used and could relate to ranking in different ways.
If there was an ideology of denial, we might find that the burial pattern denied the social differentiation. What goes in the graves and the associated ritual can be used as part of an ideology which makes domination acceptable by denying it. The same pattern might occur in burial when sectional interests are presented as universal — the second type of ideology. But with the third type, naturalisation, we might find that burial differentiation accurately reflects social differentiation. Indeed, all aspects of material culture under such an ideology might reinforce social differentiation and make it appear natural by endlessly repeating the same organisation in all spheres, down to the trivia of cooking pots, stools and hair combs. So how material culture relates to society depends on the ideological structures and symbolic codes. The archaeologist cannot disregard meaning and symbolism in analysing ranking, because behind the social system is a structure of meaning which determines the relationship between material culture and society.

It might be expected that the various archaeological studies of ranking which appear to be influenced, however slightly, by French structural-Marxism (Friedman and Rowlands 1977; Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978; Bender 1978: see also Haselgrove and Gledhill and Rowlands in this volume) might give a more adequate consideration to ideologies and beliefs. Unfortunately there is so far in these writings little discussion of the specifically archaeological problems of the identification of ranking which are posed by the realisation of the importance of ideology and legitimisation. In addition there is little emphasis on formal analyses and the structure of ideas. Material culture items remain in their treatment largely utilitarian, and the emphasis is still on functional relationships.

If a contextual approach has implications for the analysis and identification of ranking, it also has significance for the explanation of changes in hierarchical differentiation. It has already been suggested that traditional explanations concern regulation and management. An evolutionary framework has been adopted in archaeology according to which it is suggested that the best adapted society is selected for survival, and survives. Some notion of 'progress' underlies all such studies in that the goal of increased ranking is to achieve some 'better' harmonisation or regulation of competing social demands and physical constraints. A contextual archaeology emphasises the importance of the historical context in that the meaning of an artefact is dependent on its history of use and in that a particular organisation of social relationships can be understood only in terms of a structural transformation from a previous phase, manipulated as part of social and ecological strategies. The nature of a change to or in ranking cannot, therefore, be predicted as a part of changing functional relationships, since it also depends on the particular cultural framework out of which the new phase is meaningfully transformed. So, while it is necessary to emphasise the particular historical context, the evolutionary analogy with the natural sciences is misleading.

The long prevalence of the evolutionary model in archaeology has allowed social change to be viewed as the empirical rearrangement of objective variables. But an adequate explanation of incipient ranking in prehistoric Europe must be concerned with more than regulation, adaptation and survival. The hierarchisation must also be seen as a development from a particular integration of actions and beliefs in a preexisting context. It is not a question of the survival of the fittest but of contextually appropriate manipulations of symbolism and conceptual schemes as part of social and ecological strategies.

Conclusion
Martins (1974, 246) describes the critique of functionalism as an initiation _rite de passage_ into sociological adulthood, and I have elsewhere suggested (1981) that for archaeology to reach maturity the wider debate needs to be opened concerning the various critiques of and alternatives to the ecological functionalism which dominates prehistoric archaeology. In this paper I have indicated that any discussion of ranking should incorporate a broader perspective which includes not only functional relationships but also the structure of ideas, legitimisation, beliefs and ideologies.

But there are many alternatives to a strict ecological functionalism, and it needs to be emphasised that the viewpoint put forward here is not structuralist. A contextual approach as defined above is not concerned with abstract formulations, with intuitive speculations about universals of the human mind, or with purely formal analyses. Rather, the aim is to examine analytical techniques and to develop usable models and analogies for studies of the integration of beliefs and practices. The concern is with particular historical contexts and with the meaningful production of material items within cultural 'wholes'. Ranking is one aspect of social systems which could benefit from studies concerned with social structure. But structure is part of a total context in which a cultural meaning is both given to ecological relationships and reproduced by them.

It has not been possible within the space of a short paper to provide numerous detailed examples of the type of analyses and models that might be involved in a contextual approach to ranking. It is apparent that any restriction of analyses to one class of data, such as mortuary remains, is to be avoided because the relationship between patterns in life and patterns in death depends on the cultural context. The rules used in generating burial practices must be analysed in relation to other spheres of activity; other 'ritual' sites, settlement organisation, types and distributions of artefacts, the organisation of prestige exchange, and so on. Transformations between the different spheres can be identified. An example of a model which might be used to interpret such transformational rules concerns societies which emphasise group purity and personal body boundaries. In certain cases, concepts of purity and pollution involve complex ritual at the life/death boundary and an emphasis on the
material display of social roles in burial. In other societies without strong beliefs of this form, social differentiation at death may be less marked than in life. Models must be developed — and this will involve ethnoarchaeology to a great extent — about the way such aspects of belief are manipulated ideologically in social change and are at the same time the currency according to which such change occurs.

References


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