SHERLOCK AGAINST LESTRADE: A STUDY IN SCALE

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Abstract: It is commonly argued that if you study societies on the small-scale level you tend to emphasize particularities and may fail to realize the importance of outside events for local development. The grand scenario, on the other hand, often tends to reduce social complexity in favour of deterministic and simple explanations as a driving force for particular events. This text stresses that no matter what preferences one might have concerning level of scale, going deeper into details is generally a rewarding route, and when using a bottom-up perspective, detailed small-scale analysis may turn out to be as informative on the general level as it may be on the particular.

Keywords: Scale, event, large-scale process, materiality, Bronze Age, rock art

‘It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.’

A Case of Missing Identity (Conan Doyle 1892)

Particular and general perspectives in archaeology

A social event is generally caught up in nested relations between the past, present and possible futures and are not simply constituted by the local setting but also in various ways with the ‘world outside’ (Koselleck 1985:110). Traditionally, this complexity is formulated as a binary opposition, or a continuum, between small-scale analysis on the one hand and large-scale synthesis on the other: e.g. micro-macro, agency-structure, individual-society, local-global, particular-general, etc. (cf. Earle & Kristiansen 2010:7). The choice of one or the other level is often based on common-sense ratifications such as: ‘if you only study the local you don’t see the forest because of the trees’, or with too wide a perspective one runs the risk of ‘... not understand[ing] any of the trees very well, and simply wander[ing] around the forest making claims that can never be falsified.’ (Stafford 2008:139). This apparent paradox has spawned a somewhat tedious debate on the pros and cons of one level above the other as well as a

A quite important facet of Sherlock’s successful ‘science of deduction’ concerns the point of perspective. Sherlock’s deductions proceed from the ‘bottom-up’; that is, he starts from the details and advances gradually towards greater issues. Archaeology has often been associated with a similar line of reasoning, i.e. the reconstruction of events based upon small fragmented traces of action. At closer inspection, however, many interpretations of the past do not follow Sherlock’s course of logic, but rather use a ‘top-down’ approach; that is, they work from a general frame of reference through which particular excavated materials are interpreted. Such an approach better resembles the way of Holmes’ antagonist, Inspector Lestrade, who is always hasty to neglect details and irregularities in favour of common-sense ratifications and/or universal generalizations. Translated to archaeological practice, ‘Lestradian’ interpretations of individual sites rely too much on ‘contemporary analogies’ (regional comparisons) or various external analogies at the expense of the local, situated material data. In contrast to such a ‘Lestradian’ perspective, I argue for a ‘Sherlockian’ inspired, bottom-up perspective, that advances from detailed analyses of materialities in their local setting – with similarly bold aspirations that archaeology actually is able to tell something about the past ‘not seen or heard of before’ (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 A schematic illustration of the ‘Lestradian’ top-down perspective and the ‘Sherlockian’ bottom-up approach. Left: The dotted arrows refer to the lesser impact of particular sites on the general idea of a culture, time period or region. Right: general and particular information from individual sites are equally important for the continuous reconstruction of a general perspective (i.e. image, idea or preconception) of a time-space section.
number of compromise approaches (cf. Fahlander 2003:18f). It is, however, quite evident that relations between the local and the global cannot satisfactorily be viewed as a mere dichotomy or a continuum. The social matrix comprises too many complex relations and intersections in time and space: the level of scale may convey issues of the individual and the personal, the subjective and the objective, quality and quantity, phenomenology and embodiment, practice and materiality, etc. The question of scope also suffers from ideological bias from the point of research appeals. Advocates of the small-scale perspective tend to focus on differences and heterogeneity while those who promote the large-scale approach tend to emphasize similarities and parallels (Arthursson 2009:18; cf. Latour 2005:180). But, of course, such preferences have nothing to do with scale; you can as easily find heterogeneity on the grand scale as you can find consistencies between different locales.

In archaeology the level of scale has traditionally focused on long term processes. Culture historical archaeology did depart from the cultural frame, defining and differing cultural entities in time and space. Despite an almost Sherlockian enthusiasm for details, the processual archaeologists took even broader view of the past. The long temporal scale of archaeology and the accumulated nature of the archaeological record, it was argued, suggested that it is primarily the general traits that can be reached with some degree of scientific confidence (Binford 1983; Sherratt 1995). Post-processual, or interpretative, archaeologies have been more ambivalent on the question of scale. Hodder suggests that archaeology should indeed focus on diversity rather than a general history. Particular events, he stresses, can constitute ‘narrative windows’ that will function as keys to understanding the ‘larger flows’. Such small-scale histories may not always be commensurable but the approach is still preferred in order to avoid generalized grand narratives of the past (Hodder 1999:137, 147, 176; but see also 2003:88, 91). Despite an outspoken interest in the local and individual, the scope is thus nonetheless set on the generalized grand narratives of the past (Hodder 1999:137, 147, 176; but see also 2003:88, 91). Despite an outspoken interest in the local and individual, the scope is thus nonetheless set on the particular and local seems to be addressed mainly to provide a sense of intimacy and detail (cf. Hodder 2003:91).

In later decades various proponents of postmodern archaeologies have rather one-sidedly emphasized the particular as a means of criticizing grand narratives, making queer and heterogeneity the norm. It is perhaps due to this background that the pendulum once again seems to swing towards a renewed interest in grand syntheses and the large, even global, scope. In archaeology this trend is not yet fully manifested, but is perhaps notable in the revival of evolutionary perspectives. Although hitherto many archaeologists have been reluctant (e.g. Kristiansen 2004a; Fahlander 2011; Hodder 2011), there is little doubt that other general perspectives are gaining ground in contemporary archaeology (Jones 2009:104; Andrén 2009).

The key question here, however, is not to put a general perspective against a particular one, but rather to elaborate on how, where and in what material forms the outside is articulated in the local. Such intersections in time and space can indeed be studied from a top-down general point of view, searching material support for a particular type of general hypothesis, but also from below, from the local and material point of view. It is thus important not to confuse detail with having a narrow perspective or big questions with the grand scale.

Large issues and local events

Clifford Geertz once noted that if you settle in a village to study the particular ways of an ‘other’ culture you often end up with a narrative of village life in general (Geertz 1973:22). But Geertz has also shown how local events, such as the case of a young boy’s burial, are intimately nested within general political, religious and economic issues on a national – and in the long run – global scale (Geertz 1973:146ff). Geertz’s own method on how to ‘read’ small-scale events (i.e. a cock fight) to infer Culture itself is not that different from Sherlock’s proclaimed ability to infer an ocean from a drop of water. Such a move from the particular to the general is indeed possible, although the soft post-structural textual analogy Geertz uses is less convincing as an argument (cf. Olsen 2010:39ff).

Another way of illustrating the relation between the small and the big is provided by Bruno Latour who over the years repeatedly returned to the issue when elaborating his actor-network theory (ANT henceforth) (Latour 1991, 2005). To Latour, micro and macro are not two levels with an internal logic of their own. Macro structures, he writes, do not enclose the local like the case of a Russian Matryoshka doll, ‘the outside is rather related, connected, attached and associated with local practice’ (Latour 2005:177). Latour argues that the social generally is ‘flat’ and is best analysed in the form of networks of human and material actants. However, despite the fact that the ANT perspective is probably quite an accurate portrayal of how the social works; it is still not very helpful. Any small network of related actions, events and materialities will soon rapidly expand into a large web deprived of meaning (contra Geertz). Another objection against ANT is that networks, precisely as in the case of Giddens’ structuration theory, do not fully take into account that some nodes/actants or agents/structures are guaranteed to be more powerful and influential than others in any given situation. Events and processes are also often dynamic, allowing a certain kind of abrupt shifts and displacement in power relations between the involved actants that can be difficult to anticipate (Fahlander 2001:21f; cf. Žižek 2007:241). Latour’s solution to this problem is to dodge the question by advocating an ‘ethnographical’ approach which primarily aims to describe the way networks work under certain circumstances (Latour 2005:136f, 156f, 184). In this sense ANT is not that different from strands of microhistory that write ‘singularized histories’, that is, individual local narratives rather than general synthesising histories (e.g. Magnússon 2003). ANT and structuration theory, like most other attempts to overcome the conceptual divide between scales, thus only provide generic models and not operational methods ready to be applied.

In small things excavated

Although the stratified topography of micro, meso, and macro levels provides a less suitable way of grasping the social, and mediating, ‘flat’, approaches too generic, the question of scale and scope - no matter how grand or small - always needs to consider empirical data at some stage. For archaeology that means making sense of excavated fragmented materialities and vague, often superimposed, traces of action. These silent witnesses of the past are, however, only rarely considered sufficient. It is a rather common practice to fill any blind spots with the aid of cross cultural analogies or general models of small-scale social practice (Fahlander 2008:144ff). The crux of the matter is that being too quick to employ external sources may result in a failure to explore the full potential of the material record. Sometimes we just need to dig a little deeper instead. An illustrating example...
is Le Roy Ladurie’s fascinating study of the medieval village of Montaillou, which he compares to ‘a drop of water in a puddle’, which when magnified ‘forms a small universe for world history’ (Le Roy Ladurie 1976:418). Ladurie’s way of tackling the problem of scale and scope is thus not comparative or to seek confirmation or additional information outside the local setting of Montaillou, but rather to reach greater issues by going even deeper into details. Perhaps archaeology, too, would benefit by having a little more faith in the information that can be retrieved from the material record?

Indeed, analogic reasoning and some level of generalization about human practice is unavoidable to some extent, but also contemporary analogies can considerably lessen the prospects of revealing something ‘not seen or heard of before’. Take, for instance, the remains of the Iron Age boat found in the Hjortspring bog in Denmark which was first believed to originate from the Bronze Age and thus to some extent was reconstructed with inspiration from rock carvings (Fredsjö, Janson & Möberg 1956:16). Interestingly, the excavated boats that actually can be dated to the Bronze Age look quite different to the Bronze Age ‘ships’ that are carved (e.g. Clark 2004). The opposite way of reasoning, turning single finds into the norm, are likewise common. One example is the famous Danish oak-coffin burials, which due to the favourable preservation circumstances constitute an extraordinary source to North European dress and hair fashion of the Bronze Age (see e.g. Bergerbrant 2007). Because of these conditions, the Danish oak coffin graves have for many years been iconic for – if not the whole Scandinavian Bronze Age - at least the early part of the period. However, when studied in detail they seem to represent a quite marginal and queer type of burial. The dendrochronology of eighteen of the coffins reveals that they were constructed within a short period of 150 years (1268-1396 BC), and fifteen of the burials fall into a 50-year period (Christiansen 2006). In this case a particular short-term burial practice has thus been ‘upscaled’ to signify a whole era of several hundred years, and as such has affected a range of subsequent interpretations of e.g. power, religion, social organization and gender structures.

Another case from the same period that illustrates the differences between a bottom-up and a top-down perspective is the recent analysis of the bone material from the Bronze Age cairn of Kivik in the Swedish province of Scania (Goldhahn 2009). The cairn is by size, location and content (carved cist slabs) an oddity, but it has still managed to fit into many great schemes of the Bronze Age, ranging from Sven Nilsson’s (1862) Phoenician chief to Kristiansen’s (2004b) Scandinavian Odysseus. The analysis of the bones, however, tells a rather different story. Instead of being a monument for a single great individual, apparently the cairn was reused over a longer time period for the burial of several quite young individuals. What makes the Kivik cairn particularly interesting in this case is the way a general idea of a cairn ‘ought to be’ was superimposed on the actual materialities excavated. It is retrospectively interesting how archaeologists have struggled to fit the contradictory data from the cairn (mismatching dendrochronology, bronzes from different periods, etc.) without questioning the general idea of ‘one monument, one event, and one individual’.

It is noteworthy how closer examinations of details always seem rewarding - whether it concerns complex features or sites such as the Kivik cairn, the Ice Man Ötzi, or singular objects such as the reinterpretation of the Balkåkra gong from a shaman’s drum to a chiefly throne (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005:202; cf. Kristiansen 2002). Consider, for instance, the ‘micro-excavations’ of burial pots from the Late Bronze Age at Cottbus, Germany (Gramsch 2007). In this case, the pots themselves were excavated in layers, revealing that the cremated bones were placed in an anatomically correct order, that is, foot bones at the bottom, followed by pelvis fragments, and topped off with bones from the skull. Whether one wishes to interpret this phenomenon as a rite de passage where the body is reassembled within a new ceramic ‘skin’, or if it has something to do with ritualized practice when choosing bone fragments (always begin at the foot end of the pyre) is up for discussion. The main point here is, of course, that the extra level of detail gives us more solid information for our interpretations of the cremation ritual at this particular time and place than any contemporary analogy could have delivered. As such, these cases remind us that we (like Lestrade) are often too hasty and conform to general schemes to the extent that we neglect or do not bother asking other questions, or digging a little deeper into detail. The more in detail we go, the more something unexpected and interesting tends to emerge that challenges our preconceptions; the things talk back to us, argue with us and even resist our ideas about them.

**What would Sherlock do?**

Although detailed individual examples may be informative, they will not solve the difficult question of how a particular practice relates to a greater picture. There is no simple solution at hand applicable for each and every situation. One possible way to bridge the particular and the general is to identify and focus on ‘structuring situations’, that is, formative events where a number of local and regional structurating principles are forced to intersect in new ways, for example Latour’s notion of the oligopticon and Geertz’s cock-fight. One typical setting of a structurating situation can be found in periods of contact; in the encounter between people of different traditions and ways of thinking – or encounters with new material or materialities. In such circumstances the normative is often articulated and moves from the semiconscious to the discursive, which may result in different types of effects, such as creolization and hybrids (but also in greater conservatism and formalization). In recent discussions, social encounters are typically understood in terms of intricate layers of confusion and misunderstandings on the one hand, and the creativity of the individuals involved in their struggle for power on the other (Fahlander 2007).

Such a perspective might apply for one of the most iconic features of the Nordic Bronze Age, the rock carvings. The imagery of the Other is always tricky to handle because it ‘talks back’ to us in a quite direct tone, perhaps even surpassing the rhetoric power of a written text. Traditionally, the rock carvings have primarily been discussed in terms of what they represent, mean or symbolize. They have been closely tied to a general Bronze Age cosmology of which the rock imagery seems to be both cause and effect (see e.g. Bradley 2009:125ff). Seen principally as symbols, the imagery thus seems more or less bound to be interpreted from the top-down. However, a bottom-up perspective may help to avoid some of the implicit circle-reasoning and help to explore new ways of understanding the practice of pecking images in stone. The case when Sherlock encountered a question concerning a strange series of stick figures in The Adventure of the Dancing Men may prove to be a source of inspiration here (Conan Doyle 1903). When faced with drawings of men in different positions Sherlock did not concern himself with what the images were supposed to represent (Fig. 2). Instead his interest was sparked by the particular circumstances in which they appeared, which also turned out to be the key to the mystery. If a similar Sherlockian approach was to
be employed to rock carvings it would turn the focus away from meaning and symbolism towards issues of relative chronologies, variation of motifs or elements, and their spatial distribution. If approached as articulations of an encounter, they can be studied in terms of structurating situations, where the focus is set on the practices that surround them; what happened before, parallel to and after the introduction of certain motifs or combinations of pictorial elements. As such, the carvings are thus less likely directly to represent any certain social collective or general cosmology, but rather a material articulation of a series of encounters between e.g. marine-terrestrial, north-south, stone-bronze, or simply between different ‘ways of doing things’ (Fahlander 2012a; 2012b).

Summary

The issue of scale and scope is perhaps one of the most complicated perceptual issues in social studies. There are a number of varying scales that sometimes intersect and sometimes run parallel to each other in unpredictable ways. For instance, studies on long term processes do not necessarily imply a grand scope precisely as detailed studies of certain artefacts (e.g. typologies) may indeed be quite general in scope. In principle it all comes down to levels of generalization over time, space, and between different groups. We may never completely be able to avoid a certain amount of comparative and analogic reasoning in our interpretations, but the running question is to what extent are such ‘added’ aspects really necessary in relation to what can be gained through further detailed archaeological analyses? In this text I have argued for a Sherlockian approach, which examines a problem from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down. It may in some cases lead to particularistic and local, ‘singularized histories’, but its promise of greater prospects for being able to tell something new about the past ‘not seen or heard of before’ is but one chief reason that outweighs such objections. Another argument, which I have tried to illustrate by the examples in the text, is that detailed and small-scale studies generally seem to fit the archaeological data better. In contrast to sociology, and sometimes anthropology and history too, the only hard-core evidence we have are the small detailed archaeological analyses? In this text I have argued for comparative and analogic reasoning in our interpretations, but We may never completely be able to avoid a certain amount of generalization over time, space, and between different groups.

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