SAME, SAME, BUT DIFFERENT?
MAKING SENSE OF THE SEEMINGLY SIMILAR

Fredrik Fahlander

In the movie, *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) a pyramidal complex is discovered deep under the ice in the Antarctic. When a team of scientists arrives they discover that the feature encompasses traits from all three major ancient pyramidal cultures of the world. The feature predates the Egyptian and Aztec pyramids and thus seems to be the original and first pyramid on earth. It turned out that the pyramid was built by an alien species (the Predators) that use the earth as a hunting ground to fight ritual battles with one of the universe most lethal creatures (the Aliens). As a coming of age ritual, young Predators have to hunt down a hive of Aliens and claim their skulls as trophies. From inscriptions on the pyramid, we learn that the ancient humans of the earth worshipped the Predators as gods and built additional pyramidal constructions for them around the world aided by their technology.

The idea that the pyramidal cultures of Egypt, Asia and the Americas share a common origin is not only found in popular culture and fringe-archaeology, but was once considered evident by many 19th and 20th century diffusionists (although without assuming any alien intervention). Cultural traits, such as mumification, monumental pyramidal architecture and an astronomical oriented religion, were advocated as indications of cultural interaction between the continents. Elliot Grafton-Smith is one of the early 20th century scholars who discussed diffusion of Egyptian culture to the Americas, which he claims started ‘some time around 800 BC’ (1916). Grafton-Smith delivers a long list of common cultural traits which, just to mention a few, includes the use of incense and libations, funerary bier and boats, making idols, megalithic constructions, the idea of a divine origin of kings, worship of the sun, mumification, metallurgic techniques, intensive agriculture (including terracing), beliefs regarding ‘the heavenly twins’, ‘a special aptitude for, and skill and daring in, maritime adventures’ and boat-building etc (1916:4f). These
shared cultural traits constituted a package which, Grafton-Smith argued, was spread by the Phoenicians, first to the East, then to China and finally via Oceania to the Americas (1916:2). The lack of evidence for proper sea faring vessels to facilitate such contact was obviously not considered an obstacle. In addition to the similarities in practice on both continents, Grafton-Smith’s main argument for diffusion was what he identified as gradual transformations of stylistic content and iconography (Fig. 1).

The pictorial representations in figure 1 may perhaps seem compelling at first glance, especially the two different representations of a man holding a smaller figure in his hands. There are certainly much poorer examples of similaries put forward by modern day archaeologists to demonstrate contact or acculturation. Nonetheless, today, very few would subscribe to Grafton-Smith’s proposed cultural relation between the continents. Why is that? What kinds, or level, of similarity is required as proper evidence for culture-contact? Grafton-Smith may be considered ‘fringe’ (he was actually professor in anatomy, not in archaeology), but his example is nonetheless a good illustration of the problems of properly discerning relevant similarities in style and iconography (indicating contact) from random coincidences. Indeed, it is hard to see how such a distinction can be made with confidence. Similarity is very much in the eye of the beholder if not substantiated with additional arguments or data. Still, similarity as phenomena and reality are cornerstones in archaeological reasoning, employed in typologies and chronologies as well as evidence for culture-contact. Being such important foundation for archaeological interpretations, the concept of similarity, and its relevance is surprisingly little discussed. I wish, therefore, to briefly examine the complexity and many dimensions within the broad concept of ‘similarity’ and its significance for comparative studies in archaeology.

Fig 1. Stylistic evidence for diffusion: Left row: (1) A winged disc from the lintel of a door of an Egyptian temple of the New Empire Period. (2) An Assyrian winged disc. (3) A winged disc from the lintel of a door of a temple at Ococingo in Chiapas. (4) A later and Americanized representation of the winged disc. Right row: (top) Bas-relief of Seti I presenting the figure of truth to Osiris, from the temple at Abydos. (below) A similar relief from the sanctuary of a temple of the sun in Palenque (modified from Grafton-Smith 1916: pl. 1 and fig 6 & 7).
**Making sense of the seemingly similar**

In a lexical sense, *similarity* can be defined as the quality of being similar or a Gestalt principle of organization holding that (other things being equal) parts of a stimulus field that are similar to each other tend to be perceived as belonging together as a unit (dictionary.com). *Resemblance*, in turn, refers to similarity in external or superficial details, and *affinity* concerns likeness deriving from kinship or from the possession of shared properties or sympathies. In archaeology, similarities generally work as evidence on two contradictory levels. On one hand, similarity in style and practice are a prime basis for identifying cultural or ethnic groups in time and space, but on the other, new or combinations of similar traits are also employed as evidence for contact between different groups.

Despite its great importance for archaeology, there is little explicit discussion about the different processes behind similarity in prehistory. In the recent years, Kristiansen and Larsson (2005) are one of the few that address these questions in greater detail. In their discussion on the development of the Bronze Age in Europe, they try to go beyond random similarities in materialities by employing an ‘intercontextual methodology’ (2005:11). In short, they argue that the scattered and different fragments of information from different areas need to be recontextualised in order to facilitate relations between elements of one type of object to properties of another. Thus, it is not a question of finding equivalents in style and materialities but rather of analysing how ideological packages are transmitted and transformed over time and space. The problem is, of course, to determine which elements are relevant and comparable. There is obviously a great degree of interpretation and assumption involved, and some of their examples are also less convincing than others. The risk of producing ‘false’ intercontextual links between areas that obviously never had contact, like in the case of Grafton-Smith, is an apparent predicament in all studies of culture-contact. Consider, for instance, the dolmens in Java that are almost identical to European megaliths (Oppenheimer 1999: 88ff, fig 15). There are many other apparent similarities in the archaeological record, but because of great distance in time and space we cannot consider them as other than strange coincidences (cf., Moberg 1969:123ff). In order to enhance arguments based on similarity there is a need for a careful discussion about the different processes that may result in seemingly similar expressions and practices.

Perhaps the most simple process is when artefacts simply are *copied*, like in a semi-industrial workshop that from a given original form produces copy after copy, such as terra sigillata of the Roman Empire. The copy differs from *replicas* and *imitations*, which are categories that are more problematic. Several aspects of materialities, such as form, style, and material, can be imitated for various reasons, but are not necessarily an intentional result. The
form or shape of an object may simply be determined because it is a good way of solving a general problem or to facilitate a certain practice. The material in question and the techniques available also limit the array of possible shapes. Similarities in iconography or stylistic elements are often argued to signify ethnicity, individuality, or social status. But, of course, the same motif on two separate vessels is not necessarily a case of imitation. The portraying of animals, people, gestures, or practices may simply originate from a common milieu, but, of course, the choice of what is to become portrayed may constitute a link although not necessarily with the same meaning and social content. The distinction between representation and the icon is important here. An elk carved during the Neolithic at Nämforsen in the midst of Sweden may in many ways (form, size, style etc) look much like an elk carved by natives several thousand years later in America, but they obviously do not share any relational links besides an independently founded idea of portraying elks on stone. A special aspect of representations, which they to some extent share with symbols and metaphors, is that they do not necessarily need to resemble what they represent. An image may be a fully functional substitute for a real object in the same manner as symbol can be a simplification of what it symbolises. In some cases, the representation may even become more important than the original (Ginsburg 2002). A final category of similarities are skeuomorphs, which seek to imitate shape, texture, material or decoration of natural objects or artifacts, like, for instance, the Middle Minoan ceramic bowls that are made to look like metallic dittos (Knappet 2002:109). There are many more different aspects of similarities in the archaeological record, like that awkward issue of similarities between written and material data, but the examples mentioned are sufficient. The issue at stake here is that, although these distinctions are common knowledge for most archaeologists, their implications are seldom sufficiently adhered to or probed. For instance, there is an over-all patronising attitude towards the seemingly similar as mainly low-rate imitations, suggesting adoption by less developed groups in a one-dimensional way. It is obvious that we cannot approach all different kinds of similarities only by generalising concepts of diffusion, exchange, and acculturation. Homi Bhabha (2004), for example, has pointed out that situations of inter-social contact are complex processes; often involving a number of differently empowered individuals and groups, and the effects and consequences may impute a quite great variety of possible strategies and responses (misunderstandings, ambivalence, negotiation, tension and confusion). Moreover, inter-societal interaction does not necessarily need to result in hybrids or creolisation. It may actually result in new kinds of material expressions and practices that cannot be traced back to any original elements from the involved cultural groups (Fahlander 2007). One especially
interesting aspect of imitation discussed by Bhabha is the subversive element of *mimicry*, which may prove quite interesting to develop in archaeology.

**Mimicry: Almost the Same But Not Quite**
The concept of mimicry generally refers to certain strategies employed by animals in their struggle for survival. An insect or animal can, for instance, camouflage itself by mimicking the background, or imitate poisonous plants in order to avoid being eaten. But, also people sometimes make use of mimic strategies in social life to achieve certain goals. Homi Bhabha has emphasised a special kind of ‘mocking mimicry’ that can be found in colonial settings (2004:122ff, 128, 172, Aching 2002). In their quest to assimilate and ‘civilize’ the colonised peoples, colonial administrations often encouraged colonial subjects to look and behave European. Bhabha’s point is that adopting a colonizer’s culture, assumptions, institutions, ideology, and values, by imitation or reproduction generally is impossible to achieve. Such a ‘colonial mimesis’ is never in perfect concordance with the hybrid ‘original’. It is something ‘almost the same but not quite’. Mimic behaviour always contains misreading, inabilities or adjustments and thus border to pastiche and irony, which means that mimicry can be quite a safe, subversive strategy (Bhabha 2004:123). Assimilation by mimicry is thus a risky strategy in many ways. While the subaltern superficially seems to adjust and assimilate to a dominant discourse (e.g., behaving and looking European) it gives a false impression that the colonised is pacified and harmless, while actually open a space for hidden agendas. (Bhabha 2004:126, Aching 2002).

One example that illustrates a typical subversive use of similarity is found during the German occupation of Denmark in the 1940s. Some civilians used the colours of the RAF symbol to mock the Germans (Lundbak 2005). White, red, and blue circles were applied to a variety of mundane objects such as hats, buttons, paper clips etc as a subtle protest against the occupation. They never reproduced the RAF symbol exactly, but varied the order of the coloured rings. The message was clear to most people, but yet subtle enough to avoid repercussions from the Germans. Therefore, ironic mimicry can strengthen solidarity in ways that authorities will find difficult to ban (cf. Bhabha 2004:122, Fahlander 2007). Mimicry performed in this way may thus turn traditional interpretations of similarities and imitation upside down. Instead of simply viewing similarities as indications of diffusion, exchange, or acculturation, we may be able to identify more complex processes of intersocietal relations. An interesting example of how such ambivalence can be materially manifested is the curious practice employed by some Aboriginal people who knap traditional artifacts using modern day materials such as metal, glass, and ceramics. The knapped spear points and other items they manufacture out of broken glass bottles and insulation ceramics look similar to
traditional Aboriginal stone artefacts, but are of little practical use (Harrison 2002, 2003). It is thus not simply a case of appropriating or assimilating new materials from the Other as additions or substitutes for the traditional, but rather a teasing practice that involves both mockery and resistance.

There are an almost endless range of materialities that are ‘almost the same but not quite’ in the archaeological record. One example is the elaborated flint items of Southern Scandinavian Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. The flint daggers are clearly similar to bronze dittos in shape and are commonly believed to be substitutes manufactured in flint by individuals and groups that lack metal (Stensköld 2004:66ff, 84f, Varberg 2007). However, as Varberg and Stensköld point out, the extraordinary craftsmanship that these items represent, the great quantity and special context implies a more complex story. Indeed, this category of flint objects can be seen as representing mocking mimicry by individuals and groups might want to distance themselves from others that uses bronze tools by making delicate, but yet more or less unusable items in flint, such as fragile swords and fishing hooks (Fig. 2).

The ranges of different ways in which mimicry may work in social practice and in material expression are plentiful and there can be little doubt that the concept of mimicry can help us to discuss similarities in materialities and practice above simplifying concepts such as imitation and reproduction.

SAME, SAME, BUT DIFFERENT?
In this text, I have briefly approached the issue of similarities in archaeological interpretations. I have pointed out some general categories and distinctions between, e.g., representations, mimicry, copies, and imitations. Despite the quite significant implications between these categories, there is a curious gap between the frequent use of arguments of similarity in archaeological interpretation and the lack of proper discussion of what they actually indicate. It should be obvious that people do not simply copy or adopt things and styles without reasons, and when it occurs, we need to provide an argument why, and how this was made. The various ways in which inter-social relation may

Fig 2. Swords and a fishing hook made of flint from the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (National Museum of Denmark, photograph by the author).
occur is, however, seldom recognised. A one-dimensional power perspective is still persistent in archaeology whereas superior cultures are assumed to ‘inspire’ inferior dittos to passively adopt their ideology, styles, materials, or practices. But, as many postcolonial examples indicate, contact situations are normally quite complex issues, which can involve a series of different effects such as brutal persuasion, misunderstandings, resistance and even retardation and renewed interest in a ‘traditional’ past etc. (Fahlander 2004, 2007). Consequently, discussions regarding similarity and culture-contact may benefit from pursuing a wider range of processes that may be apparent in a given case. I have suggested that the potential subversive concept of mimicry is one aspect to develop further in our interpretations of the seemingly similar. The brief example of the Late Neolithic flint knapping discussed here is just but one illustration of how the concept can make us to look quite differently at old and familiar fictions of the past.

REFERENCES


