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MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE HISTORY OF MATERIAL CULTURE: forty years later

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MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE HISTORY OF MATERIAL CULTURE: forty years later

Jean-Michel POISSON

Abstract

The notion of material culture used in various historical and anthropological disciplines was principally introduced into France in several articles written by Jean-Marie Pesez in the late 1970s, to be applied in the field of medieval archaeology. These works reviewed the origins and the circumstances surrounding the emergence of this field of reflection and research, and established an initial framework for putting into practice, in archaeology, the use of material data as a source in the historical approach. A re-examination of these propositions and of the context of their application can be useful in order to investigate the current meaning of the concept, its heuristic potential (which still appears to be too limited), and the role it can play in the convergence of several social sciences.

Keywords

Archaeology, Middle Ages, material culture.

It is useful to re-examine the concept of material culture (which today seems to us to be well accepted), which began in France principally within the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (EHESS) and which developed there, and to observe how it has evolved in today's research practice and scientific thinking. This theme appears to be well suited to such introspection, insofar as this concept has affected or stimulated part of the methodological and thematic approach of archaeologists such as J.-M. Pesez, J.-L. Gardin, J. Guilaine or P. Courbin, and of historians such as F. Braudel, J. Le Goff or J. Goy, to mention but a few names from within the EHESS. I will begin with the work of Jean-Marie Pesez, who was behind these propositions. A medieval historian by training, as well as a field archaeologist, he taught at the EHESS from 1965 to 1998, and published three articles on material culture which introduced the concept into France and formed the basis for a reflection on archaeology's issues, fields and methodologies. The first article "*Histoire de la culture matérielle*" ("History of material culture") appeared in the volume edited by J. Le Goff, *La Nouvelle histoire* (Pesez, 1978), which brought together contributions from the principal figures involved in the renewal of history which took place under the impetus of the *Annales* School. In the article, he put forward a historiography of the subject, which grew out of the evolution of scientific thought in the second half of the 19th century and, in particular, from the works of Boucher de Perthes, Darwin and historical materialism, which had been somewhat formalized by the creation of the Institute for the History of Material Culture in the USSR by Lenin in 1919. Encompassing from the outset the approach of the historian (through the study of the material conditions of life as a way of exploring means of production and economic history), that of the sociologist (by taking into account the conditions of existence as factors in social relations), and that of the archaeologist (whose focus shifted from

prestigious architecture and works of art towards material evidence in its totality). The emergence of this particular field of the humanities, linked mainly to history, evidently owed much to archaeology, as the principal supplier of data. Materiality, which had not yet been precisely defined, is the main characteristic of the sources which archaeological practice collects and analyses. It is therefore unsurprising that archaeology, in taking on the task of producing this type of information, aspired to be a driving force in the development of the concept. While lamenting the absence of a definition of material culture, Peséz nevertheless attempted to characterise the object, by initially outlining it within the general notion of culture. Having briefly explained what was, in his opinion, excluded from the category of material culture, namely, “that which culture expresses in an abstract way”, i.e. the domain of “mental representations, of law, of religious and philosophical thought, of language and the arts, but also of socio-economic structures, social relations and relations of production” – that is to say, a very large part of what one calls – or called – “civilisation”, he further restricts the domain of material culture, saying: “it expresses itself only in the concrete, in and through objects (...) in the relationship man has with objects”. Of course, the article devotes considerable space to the renewal of the traditional research questions and to the opening up of the domain of the historian by the *Annales* School to geography, archaeology, and anthropology, in a move towards a holistic history. It was in socialist Europe that the notion of material culture was most extensively used at that time, notably in its relationship with socio-economic facts, though the former was most often subordinate to the latter. K. Marx mentioned the “material conditions of life” which can be identified among human social practices and isolated as an aspect of people’s social being, sufficiently independent to form the subject of a distinct scientific discipline (Marx, 1963: 272). The study of the means of production is a good example of this as it clearly combines a history of techniques, the analysis of the material itself, and the distribution and consumption of products. In this domain, the approach of the historian and especially the archaeologist becomes technological, and must call on natural sciences which need not be listed here. Peséz also presented a bibliographical overview which showed the extent to which historians of the Middle Ages had already largely integrated the notion of material culture into their approaches and results: rural economy, history of consumption, etc. To illustrate the breadth of the field covered by the application of the concept of material culture to archaeology, despite the restrictive definition given (paradoxically) above, several examples of research projects taking place at the time were given by the author, taken for the most part from his own field practice, that is, the medieval domain, among which the rural house and artefacts were the favoured examples. As the chosen means of approach for the study of material culture, archaeology therefore made it its principal objective. This could not occur without raising some questions, however. One of these was the relationship with texts. Indeed, a proportion of material culture can be perceived by historians in textual sources, and archaeology cannot therefore claim a monopoly on the production of material data. This is particularly notable for historical periods such as the Middle Ages where documents are abundant and varied, especially the “pragmatic writings”, among which it is possible to cite collections as extensive as they are rich, such as accounts or inventories, for example. This first article established an overview, and put forward a number of propositions to promote this field of research, but also argued for it to be made a subject of conversation between social sciences, despite an unfortunate lack of definition.

At the same time in Turin, the same author published, with R. Bucaille, another encyclopaedia article, “*Cultura materiale*” (Bucaille, Peséz, 1978). In this text, the authors developed the historiographical context in which material culture came about and evolved, and the political and intellectual influences which contributed to it. By insisting on the specificity of archaeology regarding access to material data and on the evolution which this discipline had undergone and was still undergoing, precisely under the impetus of these new research questions, they put forward an assessment of medieval archaeology in Europe which was still a young discipline, having emerged approximately

fifteen years before the article was published. They advocated a somewhat exclusive approach, claiming that the archaeological approach played a preeminent role in accessing material culture. The issue of the definition, which had been left unresolved in the previous article, was addressed here with a degree of caution. Having observed that the field covered by the concept was wider than that designated by the name (“material culture is in part, but not only, composed of material forms of culture”), Peséz assigned four characteristics to it:

1. It is about the culture of a group of people and, as such, is opposed to individuality. However, the text is somewhat ambiguous at this point: although it seems clear that Peséz means the totality of the population being considered, he speaks of a “huge majority”, which suggests, wrongly, that it could concern only majority social groups. Nevertheless, the group taken into account can comprise just one part of a larger group, defined in theory (though in some cases with difficulty) according to criteria which may ultimately be geographical, cultural, ethnic, social, etc. Here, there is a risk of confinement, since it is often material culture itself which ends up characterising the group in question.
2. It is about consistent or repetitive facts, with the exception of “events”, whether accidental or exceptional. The influence of anthropology is noticeable here, as this gives a value of characterisation to that which is stable and consistent.
3. It is about facts considered as meaningful in their materiality, in line with Marxist theory; the involvement of sociocultural facts therefore favours the material elements over superstructural systems (legal, symbolic, moral, etc.). Although it moved gradually away from Marxism, which gave infrastructures a vital role in the social relationships which drove historical evolution, the study of material culture claims a preeminent role in the demonstration and explanation of human activities.
4. Finally, the materiality of these facts takes on extremely varied appearances, which go from the nature of the material itself, their form and function, the ultimately extreme complexity of their development, or, on the contrary, the extreme subtlety of their appearance, such as the negative traces or even the absence of traces (one example is the use which was made of the presence or absence of ochre on the ground in order to reconstruct the Magdalenian domestic space at Pincevent [Leroi-Gourhan, Brézillon, 1972]), to the fact that they can be the material basis for superstructural elements: religion, tradition, aesthetics, status of the owner, language, etc. On this subject, the article could be suggesting, by the use of the word “object”, a restriction to a limited category of material facts, but clearly we must not misunderstand it, and be reassured that the field is in fact extremely broad, comprising, for example, everything related to construction and planning – from the cabin to the whole town, from the tomb to the cathedral, from the plough furrow to the plot of land – to the extent that it is a vast field, whose outline has not been fully (or definitively) settled upon.

At the end of the article, Peséz included a few considerations which must also contribute to the definition. The first of these was a dynamic element which concerned the spatial or temporal factors that introduce variations in the material culture of a given group, based on external inputs or internal processes. The second was an element of internal differentiation (called “levels of material culture”) introduced by a social dimension within a human group. This last point is probably worth being discussed.

Peséz’s third article “*Culture matérielle et archéologie médiévale*” (“Material culture and medieval archaeology”) was published in the proceedings of a conference which had taken place in Krems (Austria) on the theme of ‘Man and the object’ (Peséz, 1990a). Though written more than ten years after the previous work, he discusses more or less the same issues, writing, “nothing that I have read since has led me to modify my propositions” (p. 37). He returns to the issue of the definition,

making use of propositions made by Polish historians and archaeologists. In my opinion, these definitions give rise to a clarification, but also a certain restriction of the field assigned to the concept:

- The means of production taken from nature, the natural conditions of life, the changes made by man to the environment;
- The forces of production: tools, people and their practice, organisation of work;
- The products: the tools for production and the goods to be consumed.

This focus on rather strictly defined themes has the merit, according to the author, of homogenising the concept's field of application, by excluding areas where social organisation or cultural practices contribute to the shaping of certain material elements. Moreover, defining the notional field in this way would allow it to gain greater independence in relation to economic and social history, and would enable material culture to avoid finding itself in a position of inferiority with regards to other concepts which contribute to historical knowledge. This appears to be a sort of withdrawal, even though it was justified by the strategic necessity of putting forward an efficient framework to stimulate the increase in research in this field of study which was still explored very little. We can nevertheless lament that Pesez appeared to close the door on collaborations with other disciplines, with phrases such as "the development of material culture will gain nothing from being led by questions which the social sciences may ask it" (p. 40). Typical of this period, when the concept was constructed based on diverse intellectual influences, Pesez's reflections highlight a risk created directly by the restriction of the field which he had advised. Indeed, there is a real danger of the reification of culture within this confinement, and a history of material culture built upon solely archaeological data would probably be taking a considerable risk. Pottery offers an obvious example of this.

Pesez's reflection and propositions regarding the concept of material culture of course fit into the favourable context of the 1970s. Fernand Braudel's 1967 book *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme* ("Material civilisation and capitalism"), which was reworked to produce *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* ("Material civilisation, economy and capitalism") (1979) was an important first among historical syntheses (Braudel, 1979). The concept of "material civilisation" does not appear to have been theorised, but was at least explained as follows: "A zone of obscurity, often difficult to observe in the absence of sufficient historical documentation, spreads underneath the market; it is the basic elementary activity which one encounters everywhere and whose volume is simply extraordinary. For want of a better term, I have called this zone, which is thick and at ground level, *material life* or *material civilisation*" (t. 1: 8). There is no doubt that it is Braudel's interest in material culture, however imperfectly delimited and very much subordinate to economic history, which is at the root of his encouragement – as president of the 6th section of the *École pratique des hautes études* (EPHE) – of medieval archaeology, notably through a major study of deserted villages (*Villages*, 1965). Conditions were also favourable because of a collaboration which took place with Polish medieval archaeologists from the Institute of Material Culture at the Polish Academy of Sciences (Wąsowicz, 1962). To the young French team (P. Courbin, J.-M. Pesez, F. Piponnier), these brought not only technical expertise and field experience on sites with modest rural settlements – which previously had virtually never been the focus of excavations – but also the conceptual tools which enabled the material facts in general and the objects in particular to be granted the role of cultural witnesses. It is of course necessary at this point to mention the names of Witold Hensel, Andrzej Nadolski and Tadeusz Poklewski (Poisson, 2013; Poklewski, 2002).

In parallel, and at around the same time, very similar issues were being explored in Italy. Andrea Carandini's book *Archeologia e cultura materiale* (Carandini, 1975) had a large impact and a considerable influence on the rebuilding of Classical archaeology and the birth of medieval archaeology in Italy. The author, a Romanist archaeologist, severely criticised an archaeology which had been preoccupied with monumental architecture and artistic production, still in

the tradition of early “antiquarians”, and suggested a thorough reworking of field methods (such as also collecting coarse ware pottery, for example...) and of the conceptual tools of research. Clearly influenced by Marxism, he wanted particular attention to be paid to the material elements associated with inferior social categories, from a perspective of the history of social relations. He also proposed that all material evidence be analysed with the same rigour, from the most remarkable work of art to the most modest object, because “the most humble objects provide as much information about Rome’s economic and social history as the works of art” (p. 8). Finally, to limit myself to a few examples from this small yet rich book, he stated the need for a close relationship with other human and social sciences, in particular anthropology and cultural history. He added that the notion of material culture needed to play a fundamental role in this new archaeology, “provided that, on one hand, the adjective ‘material’ is not taken too literally [i.e. the term also covers certain intangible elements, such as gestures] and on the other hand, that the word ‘culture’ is not understood in a selective way, and that it takes all processes of production into account” (p. 84-85). A parallel intellectual process – and most likely mutually influenced – led to the declaration of intent presented in the editorial of the first edition of the journal *Archeologia medievale* (October 1974). Featured in the journal’s subtitle, *Cultura materiale, insediamenti, territorio* (*Material culture, settlements, territory*), the issue of material culture as object and question was highlighted. One of the aims was “to contribute to going beyond the separation between material and daily life, and history” (“Editoriale”: 7-9), which means integrating the consideration of material data into social history. Clear reference is also made to the “Polish School”, as we find a definition of material culture already mentioned above: “the material aspects of activities aimed at the production, distribution and consumption of goods, and the conditions of these activities in their evolution and the connections with the historical process” (p. 8). The following year (1976), an initial illustration was given in Volume 31 of the history journal *Quaderni storici*, which was dedicated to *Cultura materiale* (*Cultura materiale*, 1976). Diego Moreno and Massimo Quaini developed their propositions in the editorial of *Archeologia medievale* mentioned above, and the volume contained contributions from archaeologists and ethnologists.

Since these pioneering works, the concept of material culture has become a key feature in many works by archaeologists, historians and anthropologists. While bearing in mind Joseph Goy’s statement that material culture is “an area of research which belongs to archaeologists, ethnologists and historians” (Goy, 1979), it can be noted that the three disciplines make use of the concept to varying degrees and in doing so take courses which are parallel and at times somewhat divergent. If we accept that material culture is archaeology’s almost exclusive domain, while being just one of the domains of history, anthropology or sociology, we must nevertheless note that the most convincing and most substantial reflections, methodologies and results on this subject often come from anthropology, as the work of Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Construire la culture matérielle* (Warnier, 1999), attests. Archaeology has perhaps not sufficiently evaluated the issues which, in this domain, concern it directly, as well as its relationships with the other social sciences. In playing a leading role in the consideration of material facts, archaeology is also required to integrate into its field of investigation elements which do not necessarily take material form, but which concern data that is material in nature, provided, for example, by texts, ethnographic observations, etc. According to Jean-Claude Gardin, “As a result, all work or writings about the material remains of an activity exercised by people in the past, in a given geohistorical context, shall be considered as archaeological” (Gardin, 1979: 15). The restriction of the concept’s field of application which can be observed in archaeological publications is representative of this “lateness” compared with other disciplines and with the reflection conducted – or begun – forty years ago. In several cases, alongside the analysis of stratigraphy or even built structures, the attention

given to artefacts, whatever the material used (pottery, glass, metal, bone, etc.) is contained in a “material culture” section, as if the concept could be reduced to this category of archaeological facts, even when – and this is not always the case – the analysis of the artefacts does not restrict itself to a simple catalogue, and takes into account the manufacturing techniques and the functions of the objects. We can of course congratulate ourselves on the growing space occupied by artefact analysis, especially non-ceramic, in the publications of medieval archaeological excavations, following a long period of great scarcity. By way of example, evidence of this can be found in the recent publication of the excavation of the Andone *castrum* by Luc Bourgeois, where over half of the five hundred pages of the work are devoted to the artefacts (Bourgeois, 2009). It is now therefore necessary to explore in greater depth the methodological reflection begun by Peséz, particularly in order to broaden the concept of material culture in archaeology and to alter the trend whereby it is used as a simple adjective encompassing all artefacts. This evolution is indeed probably dangerous, as it reinforces to a certain extent, in archaeological practice, “the elimination of scientific perspectives in the face of heritage priorities” (Peséz, 1996). Indeed, this field, based on the archaeological data, is in fact very extensive. It covers not only artefacts in all their variety, but goes far beyond this category, and also includes, for example:

- The human body itself in its materiality: a body shaped, constrained, bruised, repaired or modified by repetitive behaviours or positions;
- Traces: of visits, use, reflections of the gestures of production or usage, decorations (Bruneau, 1992);
- Religious, social, political uses of objects: reuse, diversion, transfer;
- Contexts, too: objects thrown out, lost, deposited, hidden, or randomly located.

In other words, it involves taking into account that which we can call the “reason of objects”, in direct reference to Jean-Claude Schmitt’s work of historical anthropology, *La raison des gestes* (“the reason of gestures”), which can also be read through the lens of material culture (Schmitt, 1990). Alain Guerreau was right to admonish archaeologists: “The use of an object according to a concrete, determined method only makes sense in relation to all of the alternative or complimentary practices which would have taken place in the society in question, at the time when the object was in use: the meaning refers, by definition, to the characteristics of a specific social practice, considered in their relationship with those of other practices, whereby the whole forms a structure” (Guerreau, 2001: 143). On this subject, it is also unfortunate that medieval archaeology does not yet call often enough upon ethnology, which can, as we know, provide interpretative models, even though the notion of ethnoarchaeology, which enables us to go beyond a simple description of facts, is used in certain fieldwork approaches (Bazzana, Delaigue, 1995).

It is also in the domain of material culture that the combining of approaches from archaeology and medieval history can be among the most fertile, provided, of course, that we seek to go beyond a simple “history of everyday life”, even understood in the Braudelien sense of the relationship between people and objects (“material life is people and things, things and people”), because material culture as dealt with by textual sources is indeed also a vast field, at times somewhat left aside in favour of a “history of ways of thinking”, which is equally important. To reduce the field of material culture in archaeology to only the artefacts also runs the risk of compromising the necessary partnership with the historical approach, of which Peséz was also one of the promoters (Peséz, 1990b; Dufal, 2010). Moreover, it would also be unfortunate considering that archaeology has succeeded in increasing part of the area assigned to material culture. Having given particular attention to the culture of the masses rather than that of the elites (Mazzi, 1991), in keeping with Marxist theory, this attitude is currently in the process of evolving. It is worth noting that social differentiation is a domain explored in recent research, which focuses on the material culture of the elites, by abandoning a discrimination which is not relevant, and which also allows for a better approach, in particular to questions of identity or gender (Julien, Rosselin, 2005).

Having long been considered an “unworthy subject” of research, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s expression (Bourdieu, 2002), material culture has become the heuristic framework for a rather vast scientific field within which archaeology holds a central place through its object and means of acquisition. It appears that there is still space for progress, so that it can aspire to become the nodal point of methodological and conceptual exchanges within the social sciences.

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