

Decolonizing the English Past: Readings in Medieval Archaeology and History

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Peasants as a Category

Historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and sociologists are accustomed to categorizing the inhabitants of the rural farming households of medieval England as peasants without questioning the disciplinary implications of imposing such a category on historical subjects.¹ Foundational categories, such as *the worker*, *the peasant*, *the woman*, become so familiar that they appear natural and divert us from studying the historical and power-charged processes involved in their constructions, past and present. The century-old debate over views of medieval English peasants as bound statically by custom, on the one hand, or as dynamically diverse or mobile, on the other, perhaps expresses embedded disciplinary tensions in the historic division of labor between anthropology (including archaeology) and history.² From their

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¹ Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 773–97.

² For perspective on the historical formation of problems posed about English medieval peasants and their village communities see Clive Dewey, "Images of the Village Community: A Study in Anglo-Indian Ideology," *Modern Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (1972): 291–328; J. W. Burrow, "'The Village Community' and the Uses of History in Late Nineteenth-Century England," in *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London, 1974), pp. 255–84; Peter Gatrell, "Historians and Peasants: Studies of Medieval English Society in Russian Context," *Past and Present*, no. 96 (1982), pp. 22–50; see also Tom Brass, "Peasant Essentialism and the

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disciplinary formation in the early modern period, anthropology and history together have constructed and guarded an imaginary but nevertheless potent boundary between the historical and the primitive, a boundary that divided the European colonizer from the non-European colonized and that within Europe divided the historical past from the traditional past.³ Who gets an anthropology and who gets a history therefore becomes a question of historic and power-charged disciplinary practices. As a foundational category, "peasant" straddles both disciplines and both divisions of the past, historical and traditional.

Agarian Question in the Colombian Andes," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 17, no. 3 (1990): 444–56. To take two recent studies by historians, contrast Léopold Genicot's *Rural Communities in the Medieval West* (Baltimore, 1990) (my review of Genicot appears in *Journal of Economic History* 50, no. 3 [1991]: 709–11) and Christopher Dyer, "The Past, the Present, and the Future of Medieval Rural History," *Rural History: Economy, Society, Culture* 1 (April 1990): 37–50. For a metahistory of medieval peasants that would link the origins of English capitalism to the formation of the English state in the ninth century, see the following study by the medieval archaeologist Richard Hodges: *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement: Archaeology and the Beginnings of English Society* (London, 1989). R. B. Goheen questions the category of "peasant" and the problems of agency in his article "Peasant Politics? Village Community and the Crown in Fifteenth-Century England," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 1 (1991): 42–62. The article remains moored, however, within an anthropological-historical division of labor.

³ Historians and archaeologists of rural England have been slow to engage in the postcolonial critique of history and anthropology. For example, the new journal *Rural History: Economy, Society, Culture*, although it claims a desire to overcome disciplinary boundaries by invoking approaches ranging from ethnography to women's history, makes no mention of how these disciplines are grappling with a postcolonial critique of their practices. This critique problematizes boundary crossings and appropriations. See the introductory article by Liz Bellamy, K. D. M. Snell, and Tom Williamson, "Rural History: The Prospect before Us," 1 (April 1990): 1–4; and the commissioned articles by a prehistorian, medieval archaeologist and medieval historian in the same volume: Andrew Fleming, "Landscape Archaeology, Prehistory and Rural Studies," pp. 5–16; Richard Hodges, "Rewriting the Rural History of Early Medieval Italy: Twenty-Five Years of Medieval Archaeology Reviewed," pp. 17–36; Christopher Dyer, "The Past, the Present and the Future of Medieval Rural History," pp. 37–50. The following references offer evocative and by no means exhaustive examples of the postcolonial critique occurring elsewhere, outside of English rural studies: Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990); Nicholas B. Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern," *Public Culture* 2 (Spring 1990): 25–32; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); R. Layton, ed., *Conflict in the Archaeology of Living Traditions* (London, 1989); Valery Pinsky and Alison Wylie, *Critical Traditions in Contemporary Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1989); Anna Maria Alonso, "The Effects of Truth: Re-presentation of the Past and the Imagining of Community," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1988): 33–57; see also *Inscriptions*, the journal published by the Group for the Critical Study of Colonial Discourse, University of California, Santa Cruz, no. 1 (December 1985), to current issues, esp. nos. 3/4, devoted to "Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse"; Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London, 1990). The writings of Michel de Certeau have also deeply influenced my own efforts to grapple with the postcolonial critique of modernist history: *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984), *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis, 1986), and *The Writing of History* (New York, 1988).

In this essay, I wish to examine the powerful yet unacknowledged ways in which these disciplinary practices inform medieval peasant studies. I shall focus especially on the study of the material culture of the medieval English peasantry. Both history and archaeology claim the medieval English peasant to justify disciplinary narratives. These disciplines have taught us much about medieval peasants, but the more we learn, the more unsatisfactory becomes the use of peasant as a universal, structural category. Hence, we need to untangle some of the disciplinary threads in our so-called interdisciplinary approaches to the study of these historical subjects we have labeled “peasants.” How does the use of *peasant* as a category serve to mark a contest over boundaries between medieval archaeology and history? If we rethink peasants as a category of analysis, will that exercise help us to redraw historic disciplinary boundaries mapped by colonizing disciplinary practices?⁴

Disciplinary Divisions of Labor

From their disciplinary formation in the seventeenth century, anthropology and history have divided the labor of controlling the past. Anthropology constructed and patrolled the “primitive,” located in the colonial world, inhabited by Indians, savages, natives, and that great invisible multitude, “the people who were never there.” It guarded the boundary between the primitive and the civilized and denied the possibility of their coequality. History produced the “civilized” world by crafting a place called the past, a past that could exist for the present but not in the present.⁵ Archaeology, devoted to the study of material culture, has existed uneasily on the boundaries of the primitive and the civilized.⁶ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

⁴ I am using “disciplines” in a Foucaultian sense and understand “objects” as described in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977). I am also indebted to the thoughts of Donna Haraway on objects and disciplinary boundaries found in her article, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99. The citation may be found on p. 595.

⁵ See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983), for a provocative analysis of how anthropology and history have collaborated to produce boundaries inscribing the primitive and the past.

⁶ Archaeologists have begun to theorize their border crossings with history. See some preliminary work: Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (London, 1986); see also Ian Hodder, ed., *Archaeology as Long-Term History* (Cambridge, 1987); and Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (New York, 1992).

classical civilizations, extinct peoples in colonized regions, and the so-called barbarian predecessors of European nation-states had archaeologies. No archaeology, however, existed for more recent European “past” peoples.⁷

The changing disciplinary status of a social group, whether and when it has an archaeology, an anthropology, or a history, records the power-charged shifts in disciplinary boundaries as colonial and postcolonial worlds have recomposed themselves geographically and imaginatively over the twentieth century. India, for example, became an anthropological subject for Europeans in the nineteenth century: “To understand and rule India, the British no longer felt the need to ask historical questions; instead, they thought about India anthropologically. Indians were known by their caste, their character, their custom. And due to a whole complex of conjunctures, Indians lost their history and their historicity simultaneously; their failure to have history was all their own fault.”⁸

In recent years, however, Indian historians have asked what it means to find their lost history. Their struggles have particularly demonstrated the methodological difficulties of negotiating swaps between anthropology (custom) and history (change). These swaps require an acknowledgment of and respect for the silences and silencing of colonized peoples (especially colonized women) carried out in the name of anthropology and a resistance to neo-imperialist attempts to speak for those silenced in the name of history. Gayatri Spivak has described this theoretical conundrum as the problem of traversing “the violence of the rift” that historically inheres in colonialism. In other words, historians of India (or other historians of previously “anthropologized peoples”) are teaching historians to recognize the limits of history; their work becomes, paradoxically, a study of the conditions that made such silencing possible and a critical reading of imperial archives with the realization that in imperial histories and anthropologies “invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’; that a void may be empty, but it is not a vacuum.”⁹

⁷ See, e.g., Martin Thom, “Tribes within Nations: The Ancient Germans and the History of Modern France,” in Bhabha, ed., pp. 23–44; Allen J. Frantzen, “Prologue: Documents and Monuments: Difference in Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Medieval Culture,” in *Speaking Two Languages*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (New York, 1991), pp. 1–33.

⁸ Dirks, p. 27.

⁹ For a recent restatement of this problem of silence, see Guyan Prakash, “Can the Subaltern Ride? A Reply to O’Hanlon and Washbrook,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (1992): 175; Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts,” *Representations* 37 (1992): 1–26; and Jenni-

Just as anthropology and history carved out rifts between colonizing and colonized societies, these disciplines also mapped differences within the societies and social groups forming the narrative past of European nations. For the colonizing nation-state, the past could offer a tradition for a historical present, just as the colonized societies served as a customary complement to historical imperial power. As just such a structural marker, medieval peasants punctuate descriptions and redescriptions of the English past. The refigurations of medieval English peasants as either anthropological or historical subjects over the past century are worthy of a book-length study; this article limits itself to an illustration. The work of Richard Hodges—who, among medieval archaeologists, has made the strongest arguments for medieval peasants as boundary projects in medieval archaeology—and pieces of my own work serve as my sources. In drawing attention to the boundary practices of the disciplines, I hope to interrupt them and to open some space for agonistic ways of imagining the study of medieval material culture, a method more attentive to the construction of its past objects in the *present*.

Reading Richard Hodges

Richard Hodges and I interpret continuity and transformation in early medieval development in England differently.¹⁰ Our contrasting

fer Terry, "Theorizing Deviant Historiography," *Differences* 3 (Summer 1991): 55–74. The problem of silence points to one of the most difficult problems in postcolonial history. The concluding citation is taken from an essay by Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (1989): 11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses some contemporary problems of writing Indian history in "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in her collection of essays, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988), pp. 197–221, and her essay "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72, where she discusses the "violence of the rift" (p. 253); see the debate in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*: Guyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," 32, no. 2 (1990): 333–408; Rosalind O'Hanlon, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World," 34, no. 1 (1992): 141–67; Prakash, "Can the 'Subaltern' Ride?" See also Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville, Va., 1989); references in Dirks; and Timothy Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power," *Theory and Society* 19 (1990): 545–77. I am grateful to Lisa Rofel for drawing my attention to the last reference. Historians of women also grapple with this problem of silence; for a searching discussion of "epistemic humility," see Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), pp. 79–106. I am grateful to Judith M. Bennett for pointing out the relevance of this essay.

¹⁰ This reading concentrates on the following article by Hodges, "Parachutists and

interpretations emerge from different ways in which we use the archaeological and historical records as objects, differences that profoundly influence our concepts of the relationship between human agency and material culture. Hodges, although he eschews Whiggish history, posits a more or less unbroken line of economic development from Bede to the Industrial Revolution. Peasants are crucial to this development, and Hodges believes that archaeology, in contrast to historical documents with their elite bias, provides a fuller, purer, indeed, a natural, record of evidence for peasants. My work argues for economic ruptures and discontinuities in English regional economies and a reconfiguration of rural farmers and settlement in the twelfth century. I further contend that both material culture and written records of that period literally produce peasants as a foundational category. Both archaeologists and historians, therefore, need to exercise caution in their excavation and archival research to work against the category of peasant. Otherwise, as I shall argue in this article, they provide ongoing authorization of a twelfth-century project of categorizing historical subjects.

A close reading of our work shows the different ways in which Hodges and I craft the objects of our study. My reading of Hodges concentrates on his article entitled “Parachutists and Truffle Hunters: At the Frontiers of Archaeology and History,” which appeared in a 1989 festschrift for Maurice Beresford and John Hurst, an economic historian and an archaeologist, respectively, who pioneered excavations at the deserted medieval village site of Wharram Percy, Yorkshire, in 1952, excavations which continued through to 1990. In this article, Hodges describes three archaeological sampling exercises. The first involved a regional survey (fifty kilometers square) to detect settlement around the early medieval monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno, Molise, Italy. Archaeologists conducted that survey by sampling along a transect, that is, a line gridded to run across the grain of the landscape from valley to hilltop. Their sampling made it possible to reconstruct two types of village development in two broad ecological zones of the region between the period of the tenth and twelfth centuries. Archaeologists also sampled settlements, and in the case of

Truffle-Hunters: At the Frontiers of Archaeology and History,” in *Rural Settlements of Medieval England: Studies Dedicated to Maurice Beresford and John Hurst*, ed. Michael Aston, David Austen, and Christopher Dyer (Oxford, 1989), pp. 287–306; the following references include some of Hodges’s chief publications: *Dark Age Economics* (London, 1982), *Primitive and Peasant Markets* (Oxford, 1988), *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement: Archaeology and the Beginnings of English Society*; with David Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe* (London, 1983); with J. Mitchell, eds., *San Vincenzo al Volturno* (Oxford, 1985).

the medieval Tuscan community settlement of Montarrenti, the ruins of which are still visible on the surface, they used “judgment sampling,” or informed sampling of test pits based on educated guesses guided by standing remains of the village. This so-called unscientific sampling, since it is not rigidly defined by a grid of pits randomly generated, illuminated an important sequence of changes in the development of the village and the market activity of the inhabitants. Hodges describes an exercise in off-site sampling of a hill farm at Roystone Grange, Derbyshire, as the third example of archaeological sampling. Archaeologists use test pits to sample the landscape beyond the defined archaeological edge of the settlement under excavation.

Hodges discusses these different techniques of sampling to show that sampling at different scales can provide the archaeologist with ways of linking specific context with large-scale patterns, thus making it possible to write history, a history which, Hodges believes, documentary historians cannot write, limited as they are by the elite and restricted nature of their evidence. Hodges endeavors to write a history of “those who made Europe.” (“Europe” for Hodges means the Industrial Revolution, agrarian capitalism, and the modern world). Sampling also enables Hodges to apply economic models broadly. Such models have formed an important part of his monographs, especially his book *Primitive and Peasant Markets*.

As a contributor to the festschrift, Hodges positions himself within a complex genealogy of medieval English archaeologists. Beresford and Hurst struck up their interdisciplinary partnership at Wharram Percy the year Richard Hodges was born, and in that same year they founded the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group. Enthusiasm for the Wharram Percy project provided an important impetus for founding yet another society, the Society for Medieval Archaeology, the first professional group for medieval archaeology in Europe. The society’s journal, *Medieval Archaeology*, also a pioneering effort, appeared in 1957.

For Beresford and Hurst, archaeological and historical evidence existed on a continuum unproblematically marked off by the written and the unwritten. The text of the constitution of the Society for Medieval Archaeology (published in the journal) stated that the society was founded for the “furtherance of the study of unwritten evidence of British history since the Roman period.” In the formative moments of medieval archaeology its relations to history followed a neat division of labor which did not overtly contest theoretical or methodological issues about the nature of archaeological and historical evidence. To this day the society has kept to its practice of recruiting its presidents

from among both medieval archaeologists and historians. Implicitly, the archaeological record served as a kind of backup to the historical record, and historiographical narratives played a strong role in shaping and interpreting the archaeological record.¹¹

In the early 1970s, just as Richard Hodges went up to university, developments then occurring in British archaeology would profoundly change how many archaeologists viewed their evidence and, consequently, how they would envision a division of labor between archaeology and history. Material culture was transformed from a historical object into a scientific one. In 1973 the Cambridge archaeologist David Clarke published his controversial essay "Archaeology: The Loss of Innocence" in *Antiquity*.¹² This essay announced the turn of archaeology toward systems theory and a positivist scientific paradigm based on the hypothetical-deductive method. The Society for Medieval Archaeology remained largely insulated from such shifts. A disciplinary gap developed between young medieval archaeologists trained at university in the so-called new archaeology of the 1970s and the older generation. Part of this younger generation, Hodges would come to regard as "truffle hunters" those archaeologists who perceived the archaeological record as some backup to the documentary archive.¹³

It is hardly surprising that Hodges appears not to have shaped his professional identity in the Society for Medieval Archaeology. Apart from his serving two years of a three-year term on the society's general council in 1982 and 1983, he has held no governing positions. He has not used its journal to publish his research, relying instead on different and diverse venues, especially on the synthetic monograph. He has also distinguished himself from many of his English colleagues by working frequently outside of England, mainly in Italy and Scandinavia.

It is within this institutional context that we find Hodges contributing to the 1989 festschrift for Beresford and Hurst. The frontiers between archaeology and history form the subject of his article. That frontier is as problematic as his genealogical relationship to the fathers of medieval archaeology. Hodges seeks "to forswear the divide that

¹¹ See Frantzen, "Prologue: Documents and Monuments"; and Allen J. Frantzen and Charles L. Vengoni, "The Desire for Origins: An Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon Studies," *Style* 20, no. 2 (1986): 142–56.

¹² David L. Clarke, "Archaeology: The Loss of Innocence," *Antiquity* 47 (1973): 6–18.

¹³ Hodges writes in "Parachutists and Truffle-Hunters": "Sampling horrifies truffle-hunters, as Kent Flannery illustrated most amusingly, and as medieval archaeologists in dinosaur-like mood confirm at annual meetings of the Society for Medieval Archaeology" (p. 290).

separates archaeology and history.”¹⁴ But what does Hodges mean by forswear? His intentional meaning seems to be “to reject,” for he clearly seeks to traverse the frontiers between archaeology and history. Yet forswear also connotes a false swearing or perjury, a perhaps unintentional meaning laden with significance. For as I read Hodges’s article, I see that it does contain a divided orthodoxy. There are two archaeological records present in his witness stand; a contradiction the author cannot acknowledge. Hence, in using the word forswear, Hodges inadvertently draws our attention to problems in conceptualizing archaeology and history.

Hodges uses archaeological evidence as both text and fossil record. He thus builds the opposition nature/culture into his analysis. He passionately believes that the archaeological record is a text in which we can read the history of medieval peasants. Documentary history for Hodges is elite history by the elite for the elite. By restricting themselves to this highly contrived source of evidence, historians have collaborated in denying history to the medieval peasant. Hodges thus recasts the difference between archaeology and history not so much as one of written and unwritten since, as he rightly claims, written documents are themselves material artifacts, but as a difference between elite evidence and a fuller, purer range of elite and peasant evidence available to the archaeologist. He opposes the selective subjectivity of documents against a purported material objectivity in the archaeological record. The archaeological record is a better text because it is a natural one, like the fossil record of the geologist.

The formulation of archaeology as peasant text not only marks disciplinary difference for Hodges, it also provides him with a claim to kinship with the founding fathers of medieval archaeology. Although he criticizes the archaeology of Beresford and Hurst, he is able to endorse the claims of John Hurst who wrote in 1971 that the excavation of deserted medieval villages “would provide the kind of evidence which was needed if we were to understand how the ordinary people lived in the countryside.”¹⁵ Such affiliation is important to Hodges, even though his article is a critique of what he considers to be the truffle-hunting archaeology of Wharram Percy. Indeed, he dedicated his first edited monograph, *Ceramics and Trade*, to G. Dunning and John Hurst as “founding fathers.” Hodges can continue to endorse such affiliations by embracing the metaphor of archaeology as peasant

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁵ Maurice W. Beresford and John G. Hurst, *Deserted Medieval Village Studies* (London, 1971), p. 78.

text. Can this metaphor bear the pressure of divided and ambivalent attitudes about technique and affiliation?

Hodges believes that his peasant text is transparent, meaning that the processes that denied certain groups in medieval society access to literary practices and resources are not at work in the archaeological record. For Hodges the archaeological record is not only a more popular but also a more “honest” record than the documentary one used by historians.¹⁶ As Hodges constructs this opposition between elite written texts and peasant archaeological record, he forecloses consideration of the processes of power and control at work in the production and consumption of material culture. The archaeologist can become a redeemer of sorts for the people without history, a morally superior position to the historian who can only act as a ventriloquist for them.¹⁷

Hodges’s belief that the archaeological peasant text is transparent and therefore easy to read is deeply contingent on his theoretical view of the archaeological record. Trained in the new archaeology, he views the archaeological record as if it were a fossil record. In the words of Lewis Binford, an American archaeologist cited by Hodges, the archaeological record as fossil record means that “the loss, breakage, and abandonment of implements and facilities at different locations, where groups of variable structures performed different tasks, leaves a ‘fossil’ of an extinct society.”¹⁸ Once archaeologists assume this causal connection between the record and what it records, it becomes possible to test correlations by probabilistic laws. Sampling strategies come to play a prominent methodological role, as they certainly do in Hodges’ article. The methodology assumes cross-cultural laws which make it possible for Hodges to compare the material culture of the inhabitants of nineteenth-century Derbyshire with the Montarrenti peasants of nearly a millennium earlier. These cross-cultural laws are

¹⁶ Such a fallacy of transparency has also troubled efforts to formulate an archaeology of gender. By analogy, if we assume that the archaeological record is transparent, then we will believe that archaeological evidence will somehow render visible women, who have remained invisible in written documents. For a recent critical reworking of some of the premises of an archaeology of gender, see J. Gero and M. Conkey, *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (New York, 1991).

¹⁷ Eric Wolf’s study, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1982), has profoundly influenced the historical vision of Richard Hodges. For a recent critique of Wolf’s book, see Michael Taussig, “History as Commodity in Some Recent American (Anthropological) Literature,” *Critique of Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (1989): 7–23; see also the reply by Sidney W. Mintz and Eric R. Wolf, “Reply to Michael Taussig,” in the same issue, pp. 25–31.

¹⁸ My reading of Hodges’s concept of the archaeological record is deeply influenced by a brilliant article by Linda E. Patrik, “Is There an Archaeological Record?” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 8 (1985): 34.

also the media used by Hodges to link archaeology with so-called transformative moments in European history such as the formation of the modern world system and the agricultural revolution. Regarding the findings of nineteenth-century Roystone Grange, he writes, “Interestingly, the test-pits seem to reveal that the integration of town and country described by Adam Smith, and recently analysed by Anthony Wrigley, can be traced even in an upland landscape. . . . In short, the wall-builders, wall-repairers, shepherds, farmhands as well as Royston’s household could afford to be as careless with their material culture as the inhabitants of Montarrenti had been five centuries before.”¹⁹ The cross-cultural laws thus enable Hodges to splice his probabilistic archaeological samples into a historical metanarrative. Even though Hodges might overtly eschew Whiggish history and its notions of progress, his methods entrap him into just such treatment of his evidence: “A more or less unbroken line connects the age of Bede with the Industrial Revolution, and thence with us.”²⁰

Hodges conflates a probabilistic model based on objectivity with the archaeological record itself and then arrives at the conclusion that the archaeological record can correct and rewrite history. His good intentions have unintended consequences. Instead of rewriting history, Hodges rewrites a very different text, that of a philosophy of history. He implicitly adheres to a nineteenth-century philosophy that there could be a historical benchmark that would provide a test of truth in the human sciences. Few historians in the late twentieth century overtly profess such positivism; few claim that history still reigns as monarch of the human sciences.²¹ The unintended consequences of Hodges’ work are to fill that empty throne with archaeology. His efforts at rewriting history thus reproduce many of the disciplinary practices that he fights against or forswears.

¹⁹ Hodges, “Parachutists and Truffle-Hunters,” p. 304.

²⁰ Hodges, *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement* (n. 2 above), p. 1.

²¹ Public discourse about history does still make this claim, however: Lynn Cheney, head of the National Endowment of the Humanities, claims that there are timeless truths “transcending accidents of class, race and gender, [that] speak to us all,” as quoted in Joan Scott, “History in Crisis? The Others’ Side of the Story,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (1989): 683. Hodges is not alone in an uneasiness about the empty throne of the humanities and the desire to fill that throne with something, archaeology or science. See a recent dialogue between Patty Jo Watson and Michael Fotiadis, “The Razor’s Edge: Symbolic-Structuralist Archaeology and the Expansion of Archaeological Inference,” *American Anthropologist* 92, no. 3 (1990): 613–29. For an example of concerns among historians over the empty throne, see Mark Cousins, “The Practice of Historical Investigation,” in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (London, 1987), pp. 126–36; Peter De Bolla, “Disfiguring History,” *Diacritics* 16 (Winter 1986): 49–58.

Reading Some of My Own Work

My reading of Hodges's work helped me to detect some of the contradictions about the nature of the archaeological and historical record and their relation to foundational categories in my own research.²² In an article on early development of the medieval English economy, I attempted to argue for discontinuities between the proliferation of forms of material culture and economic development in the twelfth century. The disavowal of my article comes not from the witness stand, the legal world of forswearing, but from the representational world of mirrors—the metaphor I apply to the archaeological record, or as I call it in the article, the “mirror of material culture.” The metaphor helps to suggest that the record of material culture cannot be objectified in a positivist way. In using that metaphor I was drawing deliberately on Jean Baudrillard's critique of political economy in his book, *The Mirror of Production*.²³ Baudrillard criticizes nineteenth-century political economists, especially Marx, for focusing on production as the only intelligible social process, to the exclusion of consumption and the interactions between consumption and production practices. The mirror metaphor, I now see, creates problems in the article. When I looked into this mirror on rereading, I began to trace how my argument also falls into disavowals. They, too, point to interesting disciplinary problems in negotiating the boundaries between archaeology and history.

The institutional formation of my work in archaeology and history can shed light on its conceptual tensions. I began my graduate study of medieval history in 1972 at a time when interdisciplinary studies were in their heyday at North American universities. It was as if humanists rushed to fill the void left by the death of a positivist history by accumulating as many disciplines as possible at the now-empty shrine of truth. Accumulation of enough partial knowledge from different disciplines could perhaps magically ground a whole that could still provide a measure for truth in the humanities. And at the same time, the development of quantitative methods seemed to promise that it also could provide some scientific basis for the study of the past. By studying everything and quantifying it wherever possible, I and my colleagues hoped to recapture a true Middle Ages.²⁴

²² Kathleen Biddick, “People and Things: Power in Early English Development,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 1 (1990): 3–23.

²³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis, 1975).

²⁴ See the following article for a reflection on uses of quantitative methods in history:

My interdisciplinary combination of choice was archaeology and history. Since I wished to study long-term processes in the practice of pastoral husbandry and the production and consumption of pastoral resources, I realized that the nature and sparseness of early medieval written sources would severely limit my study. Archaeology seemed to me to be the only means for writing a history of the long *durée*. I unconsciously used the division of labor between archaeology and history employed by Beresford and Hurst, a division between the two records that was simply one of written and unwritten. Yet my training in the unwritten record involved the positivist principles of the new archaeology.

The new archaeology had already influenced the teaching of archaeology at the University of Toronto in the mid 1970s, where I learned statistics and quantitative techniques as part of my studies in faunal archaeology. Somehow my historian's training subverted and interrupted my enthusiastic efforts to manipulate the archaeological record as a fossil record. I found myself compelled to try to invent ways to link changes uncovered in my analysis of faunal remains with changes in political organization in specific, contextualized ways. From the first days of my dissertation research, I was some kind of strange hybrid creature, a cyborg, but an early model without speech capabilities, since I could not articulate as boundary negotiations, the contradictions of natural record and historical record with which I grappled in my interdisciplinary work.

The medieval focus of my work caused me to suffer some institutional isolation. It was difficult to work in medieval archaeology out of a North American university with no transcontinental ties to the field. Although I had established early cordial contacts with John Hurst, my training in the new archaeology rendered the Society for Medieval Archaeology somewhat alien to me. To some British economic historians steeped in a tradition of empiricist archival research I appeared alien because of my mix of excavational and archival research. My position as an American at a Canadian university also introduced difficult issues of colonialism and gender into both North American and British perceptions of my scholarly identity and subtly influenced access to research projects.

To overcome such isolation, I attempted to shape some kind of dialogue by following the advice of my college mentor, Suzanne Wem-

Nancy Fitch, "Statistical Fantasies and Historical Facts: History in Crisis," *Historical Methods* 17, no. 4 (1984): 239–54.

ple, who wisely told me to go out and invent a North American audience for my work. In 1981 I organized a conference, "Archaeological Approaches to Medieval Europe," held at the sixteenth International Conference on Medieval Studies.²⁵ In my editorial introduction to the conference volume, I sidestepped my burgeoning uneasiness about interdisciplinary studies in this field by calling the contributions "fragments," marking a first effort toward negotiating a common language. I assumed that a dialogue across disciplines would somehow magically produce a common language. Although I did not then know how to explore the problems, gaps, and uncertainties in which such a dialogue might involve us, I now think the concept of a common language is a naive one which talks past the power and history of inter-disciplines.

The gaps that interdisciplinary work simply smoothed over made me increasingly uneasy. When Richard Hodges's *Dark Age Economics* appeared in 1982, I thought that my uneasiness about this bold and brilliant book came from its use of economic models. I already had deep reservations about the way economic historians used Marxist and neoclassical models to interpret preindustrial economies and regretted the reappearance of these models in archaeology, "making capitalism the foundational theme amounts to homogenizing the histories that remain heterogeneous within it."²⁶ I thought if we could somehow address the problems of these economic models, my uneasiness about the relations between archaeology and history would ease.

Logically enough, I then tackled these economic models in two articles that considered the market involvement of medieval peasants. I tried to argue that medieval English peasants were indeed deeply involved in regional markets at the end of the thirteenth century, but that market activity did not necessarily entail individualism and other subjectivities and behaviors, that neoclassical models associate ahistorically with markets.²⁷ My work suggested the importance of differentiated strategies of consumption, strategies heterogeneous to capitalism, that classical Marxist theory does not adequately theorize.

²⁵ I remain indebted to Otto Gründler and Thomas Seiler, Western Michigan University, for their unflagging support of the archaeological conference and publication of the conference volume *Archaeological Approaches to Medieval Europe*, ed. Kathleen Biddick, in *Studies in Medieval Culture*, vol. 18 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1984).

²⁶ For a critical meditation on capitalism and the writing of history, see Prakash, "Can the 'Subaltern' Ride?" (n. 9 above), pp. 175–79.

²⁷ Kathleen Biddick, "Medieval English Peasants and Market Involvement: A Case Study," *Journal of Economic History* 45, no. 4 (1985): 823–31, and "Missing Links: Taxable Wealth, Markets and Accumulation among Medieval English Peasants," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 2 (1987): 277–98.

Although I was trying to redefine the models, I failed to realize that the framework of such models, a homogenizing discourse of markets and capitalist development, had to be brought into question. Without transforming such a theoretical framework, my work within it left many openings for reappropriation into paradigms of linear development. When Richard Hodges used my findings on peasant marketing in his book *Primitive and Peasant Markets* to underpin his link between early evidence for peasant market involvement and the Macfarlane thesis on the early development of English individualism, it finally became clear to me that the problem did not restrict itself to economic models, however problematic they are. My criticism of economic models failed in its narrowness; it left a larger theoretical framework, a paradigm of European capitalist development, untouched.²⁸

I next tried to set my critique of economic models within a broader epistemological debate about structuralism, power, and human agency in the article "People and Things: Power in Early English Development." That article uses the problem of planned village reorganization in the Northern European countryside as a way of understanding the convergence of different technologies, juridical, fiscal, and textual, to produce unfree peasants as a category inscribed in the landscape, in bureaucratic surveys, and in legal processes. Before the enclosure and partitioning of time and space in the twelfth century in England, personhood and status did not operate as compartmentalized juridical categories. It is possible to think of configurations of such persons as homologies or analogies, but not as hierarchies.²⁹ To produce out of polymorphous persons, individual persons possessing status as an object, required some kind of resource. Enclosure and partitioning in the landscape created spatial grids that could serve as such a resource. These practices partitioned status out as an enclosed space or property, an object. Social space was separated from the persons who composed it and became something that an individual could possess.

²⁸ See n. 10 above, for the references to Richard Hodges publications. The following work of Alan Macfarlane has deeply influenced Hodges: *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford, 1978).

²⁹ In order to have individualism, there must be individuals. It is very difficult for Western epistemological and ontological systems to imagine persons as other than individuals. There is an urgent need for grappling with this problem, in order to think about personhood in the past and the future, but we must also take care not to construct alternative epistemologies as "golden ages," that is not the point of my discussion here. I wish to mark differences but not to judge them. For compelling reflections on this subject, see the following articles to which this section is indebted: Marilyn Strathern, "Localism Displaced: A 'Vanishing Village' in Rural England," *Ethnos* 49, nos. 1/2 (1984): 43–61; Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, 1988).

Lords, the state, the courts thus conjoined disciplinary practices to grid the English landscape and create places where individuals supposedly could be produced. The fiscal, the juridical, the spatial, and the textual superimposed and overlapped in a palimpsest of disciplinary practices in twelfth-century England.³⁰

Although this argument showed the construction of the category of subjugated peasants to be an effect of complex technologies, the article still stops short of abandoning a structuralist framework, which would entail questioning peasants as a foundational category. The study leaves implicit the problems of foundational categories and their methodological relations to the record of material culture and the issue of agency in a nonfoundational history which would not simply reinscribe peasants as a category.

My metaphor, “the mirror of material culture” can be analyzed for what it leaves implicit about the conceptualization of the archaeological record in this article. I used that metaphor in two ways. First, I imagined the technologies of enclosure and partitioning used by the state, by merchants, and by legal courts to manipulate time and space in new ways in twelfth-century England as mirrored or reflected in material culture. These disciplinary practices inscribed themselves on the landscape to produce the grids of enclosed and partitioned tenements across the countryside. Changes in pottery forms and decorations also mirrored or reflected practices of enclosure and partitioning. At the end of the twelfth century, a consumer could enclose and partition different cooking and eating practices through more differentiated use-specific wares. These wares also bore new forms of decoration which suggest that one defined status not only through practices of enclosure and partition in food preparation but also in food display and in rituals of consumption. In all these cases I seemed to be implying by my metaphor that material culture reflects social practices. Left at that, one could easily draw the inference from my article that social practices exist prior to material culture, and that material culture bears the effects of social practices. The metaphor of the mirror raises, then,

³⁰ This note rehearses debates more relevant to the “People and Things” essay, but it is important to note here that I do not expect these practices to converge at all times and all places in medieval Europe. I argue that they do in a specific moment in twelfth-century England. Such practices of survey, textuality, and inscription on the landscape do not converge for Carolingian polyptyques, for instance. They might be better regarded along with barbarian law codes as symbolic instruments which have not yet aligned orality, textuality, and literacy: for the argument about early medieval law codes and their disjuncture with juridical processes, see Patrick Wormald, “*Lex Scripta and Verbum Regis*: Legislation and Germanic Kingship, from Euric to Cnut,” in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds, 1977), pp. 105–38.

a problem of temporality. Where does one begin, with the object or its reflection? Does mirroring imply causality?³¹

I also use the “mirror of material culture” in the sense of diffraction, a fun house of mirrors, which refuses the possibility of reading material culture in a linear way, particularly in relation to economics. I claim that the proliferation of forms of material culture and their elaboration through decoration does not necessarily imply economic development, as is often assumed. I argue for discontinuities between material culture and economics. My disavowal, then, comes from the wish to say that material culture reflects social practices but that it cannot organize a linear image by which we can directly measure productivity, degree of market involvement, and so forth.³²

The metaphor of the mirror cannot, however, get at the problem of a structuralist framework. It can only help the historian or archaeologist to reflect and diffract categories in interesting ways. In order to question the framework itself, I am searching now for a metaphor that will help us to imagine how human agents constitute themselves through making and then recontextualize themselves and these objects through the contested, creative, and amazing ways in which they use things, such that these so-called things are not objects but agents in themselves as well. By locating agents within and between subjects and objects, such a metaphor would resist a conflation of individual, subject, and power.³³ Such a metaphor also needs to account for the violence of categorization and essentializing that attempts to deprive agents of the opportunity to make their worlds.³⁴

My first step toward recrafting a metaphor came with the realization that material culture is neither a fossil record nor a “text,” but a

³¹ The problem of specularity embedded in the metaphor “mirror of material culture” is profoundly vexing in many registers. For a provocative deconstruction, see Jane Gallop, “Where to Begin,” in her essays *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), pp. 74–92.

³² There exists a wonderful image for this—the famous scene in the film *The Circus* (1928), in which Charlie Chaplin gets lost in the funhouse of mirrors.

³³ I am struggling here with Gayatri Spivak’s critique of totalizing concepts of power and desire in the work of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari and their potential for reintroducing the sovereign subject under the category of agent: see Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Laurence Grossberg (Champaign-Urbana, Ill., 1988), pp. 271–313.

³⁴ Elaine Scarry has brilliantly explored the deprivation of making in her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985). My thoughts here are also indebted to other sources: de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (n. 3 above); Teresa de Lauretis, “The Technology of Gender,” in her essays *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), pp. 1–30; Haraway (n. 4 above); Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, 1987).

relation between materials and actors, past and present. Donna Haraway, a historian of science, has already invented a term, *material-semiotic actor*, in her critique of representation in science that can help historians and archaeologists to think about dynamic relations between subjects and objects in their records. Her notion of material-semiotic actor makes it possible to think about materiality and communication in tension, as both already interpreted and in need of interpretation, without producing an opposition between nature and culture, subject and object, language and experience.³⁵ What would it mean to redescribe peasants not as objects, or structural categories, marking power-charged boundaries between disciplines, but rather as material-semiotic actors? How would such a redescription help us to understand the power at stake in the swaps between custom and change?

Material-Semiotic Actors and Spatial Stories

As modern researchers, we have been led astray by this twelfth-century English project of emplacement. By excavating within this grid, the toft and croft, constructed by those very medieval emplacing practices, we simply reproduce the material culture of peasants as the objects produced by such placing. The archaeology fails to question this material culture as a desired representation of powerful, historical, disciplinary practices. Alternatively, we need to consider how the uses of such a material culture by the objects of its discipline might be heterogeneous to the desired, dominant representation of material culture. What if the place of emplacement were not smooth and linear? Could these places have other shapes constructed by the counteruse of space by historical subjects? Michel de Certeau, a historian and ethnologist who has written on cultural resistance, has drawn out distinctions between places and spaces useful to the questions posed here: "The law of the 'proper' rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements."³⁶

For de Certeau, then, a peasant woman might have lived in places

³⁵ See Haraway, esp. p. 595; and also Scott (n. 1 above). Haraway's ideas about situated knowledges converge on a very different kind of critique of representation in Mitchell (n. 9 above).

³⁶ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 117.

set out by church (her parish), state (her village), and lord (her manor), but women in the countryside, depending on their age and socio-economic status, spent their days in spaces defined very differently. They might work as servants in the households of nonkin, travel back and forth between villages to engage in casual agricultural work, make trips to local markets, marry, and move away to another village. They thus traversed spaces between hearths, villages, fields, pastures, and markets.³⁷

The tendency of archaeology and history to work with the place means that they only consider dominant historic representations of peasants. To develop a counterarchaeology and a counterhistory we need first to develop tools to interrogate these representations, and we then need to develop tools to study spaces, the “vectors of direction, velocities and time variables” used by emplaced peasants to negotiate such representations of place. The problems of representation faced in medieval peasant studies, which involve the problems of using a structural category *the* peasant, can be analogized in interesting ways to the category of *the* woman theorized in critical feminist theories of representation. Feminist critics of representation can provide us with important theoretical tools for the study of peasants. In her brilliant article, “The Technology of Gender,” Teresa de Lauretis reminds us that “most of the available theories of reading, writing sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender, whether oedipal, anti-oedipal, bound by the heterosexual contract; narratives which persistently tend to re-produce themselves in feminist theories. They *tend to*, and will do so unless one constantly resists, suspicious of their drift.”³⁸ De Lauretis urges us to look for points of resistance in “the margins of hegemonic discourse, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus.”³⁹

To engage with twelfth-century peasants as material-semiotic actors we need to work against the grain of the twelfth-century ideology of peasants; we need to find the chinks and cracks they created as they traversed the disciplinary places of emplacement. If disciplinary practices sought to emplace subjects in grids, if the production of places by powerful practices was a key weapon in the contest over subjectivity in the twelfth century, then we must consider how persons

³⁷ For an introduction to a growing body of literature that will enable the rereading of “place” for “space,” see Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside* (New York, 1987).

³⁸ de Lauretis, “The Technology of Gender,” p. 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

in the twelfth-century countryside might have counterposed the use of time and space to offset such power. Michel de Certeau thinks of such offsetting practices as tactics, as “spatial stories.” To contest proper places, disempowered persons will create spaces: “Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.”⁴⁰

The critical tools provided by Haraway, de Lauretis, and de Certeau can help us craft countermethods for studying medieval peasants which are more resistant to operationalizing twelfth-century ideologies of the peasantry. Since enclosure and partitioning involve contests over space and time, we can begin by asking how we may have accepted as natural certain ideological representations of rural space and rural time. What would happen if archaeologists spent more time on excavating the boundaries between tenements, the boundaries between settlements and fields, two aspects of rural settlement which have received virtually no attention? Archaeologists have tended to excavate places and not spaces.

What if we grew suspicious of our notions of the endurance and resilience of ridge and furrow and began to entertain more rigorously the suggestion that considerable development and modification occurred in ridge and furrow fields through time?⁴¹ What are the implications of the new interpretations of peasant housing that claim that peasant houses of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were built to last, and that we are mistaken in our notions of considering them in need of rebuilding every generation?⁴² Did peasants produce in their houses their own place to counteract the precariousness of their emplacement by juridical procedures?

Archaeologists can change excavational strategies and reevaluate published evidence to question the natural emplacement of peasants in rural space and time. We can also draw on much excellent historical research into peasants to extend our insights into the tactics peasants used to tell spatial stories and to use memory tactically. We can overlay what we know about patterns of peasant migration, inter- and intravillage marriages, crime, cooperation, debt, and marketing with studies of the range of forms of ceramics, for instance, to see what

⁴⁰ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 117.

⁴¹ D. R. Wilson, “Alterations to Ridge and Furrow: Some Examples Illustrated,” in Aston, Austen, and Dyer, eds. (n. 10 above), pp. 287–306.

⁴² Stuart Wrathmell, “Peasant Houses, Farmsteads and Villages in Northeast England,” in *ibid.*, pp. 247–68.

grids of spatial intensities are generated by economic, gender, and material culture relations.⁴³

We can extend our understanding of rural manipulation of time by extending our cultural studies of peasant uses of courts and legal procedures. How did peasants draw on different courts to create spatial strategies in the legal process, and how do they use memory or forgetting as tactics among each other and with their lords? We can also work with literary and art historians to excavate peasant culture from so-called high-culture texts.⁴⁴ Intriguing interrogations of elite visual representations of peasants have already begun. Michael Camille cautions us about accepting too readily the manuscript illuminations of the agrarian calendar in which peasants seem so intimately associated with so-called natural seasonal rhythms.⁴⁵ His study of peasant images in relation to text and manuscript has shown how images mark the contested contact of different social discourses, which also change over the medieval centuries. Other archival and archaeological sources interrupt this notion of natural rural time. For instance, many of the practices of peasant livestock rearing correlated with market time and not some romantic notion of the seasonal calendar.⁴⁶ As we abandon natural notions of peasant space and time, we will be on the way to deconstructing the ideologies of peasant space and time produced in the twelfth century. In reading against the grids of emplacement, we will discover, I hope, the traces of a set of silent itineraries and scattered practices of material-semiotic actors.⁴⁷

⁴³ I refer to this historiographic literature in a review essay: Kathleen Biddick, "Malthus in a Straitjacket? Analyzing Agrarian Change in Medieval England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20, no. 4 (1990): 623–35.

⁴⁴ Theorists such as Peter Stallybrass and Aron Gurevich warn us against simple dichotomies of those with history and those without: Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge, 1988); Peter Stallybrass and Alon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986). For an example of this kind of literary excavation, see the essays collected in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley, 1990).

⁴⁵ Michael Camille, "The *Très Riches Heures*: An Illuminated Manuscript in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 72–107, and "Labouring for the Lord: The Ploughman and the Social Order in the Luttrell Psalter," *Art History* 10, no. 4 (1987): 423–54.

⁴⁶ The intersections of rural time with urban time require more study—see Biddick, "Medieval English Peasants and Market Involvement," "Missing Links: Taxable Wealth, Markets, and Accumulation among Medieval English Peasants" (both n. 27 above); Bruce Campbell and John P. Power, "Mapping the Agricultural Geography of Medieval England," *Journal of Historical Geography* 15 (1989): 24–39; Bruce Campbell, *The Agricultural Geography of Medieval England* (Cambridge, in press); interim reports of the project, *Feeding the City: London's Impact on the Agrarian Economy of Southern England, c. 1250–1350*, available from the Centre for Metropolitan History, University of London, Institute for Historical Research.

⁴⁷ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (n. 3 above), pp. 48–49.

Peasants and Civilized Europe

The strong tensions this article describes between the rich and heterogeneous evidence gathered by both historians and archaeologists over the past decades and the homogenizing categories and narrative frameworks in which we set this evidence will heighten, unless we question our stakes in retaining these narrative frameworks. I conclude with neither a solution nor a research agenda but with the question about the nature of nature in historical narratives of European formation. In the recent (1990) reissue of Georges Duby's *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West* and in the English translation (1974) of *The Early Growth of the European Economy*, Duby describes the natural world against which peasants fought as ecological warriors. "Throughout the length of the period covered by this book the level of material civilization remained so low that the main point of economic life is to be found in the struggle that man waged against natural forces day by day in order to survive. The fight was arduous, for he wielded ineffectual weapons and the power of nature overawed him. The prime concern of the historian must be to measure this power and consequently to try to reconstruct the appearance of the natural environment."⁴⁸

The measure of Europe's uncivilization (Duby's rhetoric) can be read in the pollen diagram which Duby includes in both his books on rural economy, a diagram which reappears unaltered in the 1990 reissue. He adapted the pollen diagram from a publication by Wilhelm Abel. It plots the variations in proportion of different species of vegetation as reconstructed from the identification of pollens of those species preserved in the soil. Abel's work, entitled *Die Wuestungen des ausgehenden Mittelalters*, has retained the same illustration through the third edition of 1976.⁴⁹ Duby reads this emblematic pollen diagram, taken from Roten Moor in the Rhineland, as evidence of a climatic warming that facilitated agricultural progress in medieval Europe. The repetition of this pollen diagram (and similar emblematic use of other pollen diagrams in general textbooks) not only suggests a version of

⁴⁸ Cited from Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974), p. 5. The pollen diagram of Rotes Moor appears on p. 9. See also Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, trans. Cynthia Postan (1st English trans., Columbia, S.C., 1962; 1st paperback ed., 1976; 2d ed., 1981; 3d ed., 1990)—the pollen diagram of Roten Moor (the different spellings of the moor are Duby's) appears on p. 392.

⁴⁹ Wilhelm Abel, *Die Wuestungen des ausgehenden Mittelalters* (Stuttgart, 1976; the 3d ed., 1976, contains the foreword to the 1943 and 1955 eds.). The pollen diagram appears on p. 56 of the 1976 edition.

environmental determinism but also reasserts the fairy tale of the deep, dark woodland out of which progressive Europe sprang.⁵⁰ It uses a natural record to write a cultural record.

It is no longer possible to truncate the history of the northern European countryside to fit the needs of national myths that transform barbarians into ecological warriors opening Europe to progress. This sublime story, however, dies hard. We take pleasure in reading and assigning such romantic textbooks in our classrooms. I conclude with a citation from a much-beloved textbook and ask, to what voice, to what gaze, to what desire does this passage refer? Our self-critical answers to this question can provide an excellent starting point to a nonfoundational history of medieval material-semiotic actors: “though most English villages had made their appearance by the time of the Norman Conquest vast areas remained in their natural state awaiting the sound of a human voice. In many regions like the extensive forest of Andredeswald or of the great midland forest, the primeval woods were still shedding and renewing their leaves with no eye to notice and no human heart to regret or welcome the change.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Genicot uses a pollen diagram in a similar way in his narrative; see *Rural Communities in the Medieval West* (n. 2 above), p. 8; Recent work in environmental archaeology has asserted the relational, interactive process of so-called natural and cultural processes. In so doing, they locate their studies not in nature or in culture and thus deterritorialize both as categories. As M. L. Parry has argued, “Space time coincides between climatic change and economic change do not necessarily indicate a causal connection.” See M. L. Parry, *Climate Change, Agriculture and Settlement* (Folkestone, 1978); Martin Bell, “Environmental Archaeology as an Index of Continuity and Change in the Medieval Landscape,” in Aston, Austen, and Dyer, eds., pp. 268–86; W. Groenman-van Waateringe and L. H. van Wijngaarden-Bakker, “Medieval Archaeology and Environmental Research in the Netherlands,” in *Medieval Archaeology in the Netherlands*, ed. J. C. Besteman, J. M. Bos, and H. A. Heidinga (Maastricht, 1990), pp. 283–98.

⁵¹ W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (Harmondsworth, 1955), p. 76. For a different history of the English woodland, see Oliver Rackham, *Ancient Woodland* (London, 1980).