

The Role of Aesthetics in Archaeological Explanation

Abstract

Gregory Currie

There are two ways to think about the role of aesthetics in archaeological thinking, and in particular in the project of explaining the artefacts that archaeology reveals. One is to think of aesthetic ideas as something we project onto the archaeological record. On this conception, aesthetics is a theory, or at least a set of ideas, perhaps loosely connected; it's the product of someone's thinking about the world rather than something we find in the world. The other way is to think of aesthetics as an aspect of the world itself—something we find “out there”.

The strong tendency in archaeological writing has been to treat aesthetics in the first way, and not in the second: to see appeal to aesthetics in explaining what needs to be explained in archaeology as appeals to a theory. This theory is often said to be relatively modern—a product of the eighteenth century, say—and to be highly tuned to a particular cultural history, that of modern western Europe with its self-conscious roots in Greco-Roman culture and the Renaissance. Naturally, the idea that one can approach the artefacts of the very distant past (or even those of classical Greece and Rome) from this perspective looks questionable, and likely to lead to distortions rather than to a real understanding.

I argue that we should see the role of the aesthetic in archaeological explanation in the second way and not in the first way. We should see it as an attempt—not always successful and always subject to critical scrutiny—to explain what we find in terms of a tendency in the human mind, for which we find abundant evidence wherever we look, to be fascinated by the appearances of things—a tendency I'll say more about in a moment. On this view, the aesthetic is a natural category; it is a category of things we find in the world. It is not a category we—we western academics—impose on the world.

References

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