

Introduction: Singularization of History and Archaeological Framing

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Abstract Microhistory and historical archaeology are important comrades, even in the broad-scale analysis of the modern world. Two scholars in Iceland have been paying close attention to the theory of microhistory. This brief introduction to their papers provides my thoughts on the linkage between historical archaeology and microhistory.

Keywords Microhistory · Local/global analyses · Singularization

Introduction

It may seem strange for someone like me who has spent a considerable part of his career working to create an historical archaeology focused on the analysis of the metanarratives of the past 500 years to be interested in the singularization of history. Strange as it may seem, however, a major element of my effort has been to understand the relationships that exist between microhistory and archaeological practice. One of my most significant challenges has been to create ways to conceptualize the myriad linkages between various geo-temporal scales so that as archaeologists we can contribute to multiscale analyses that will enlighten our archaeological perspectives but extend beyond them. And, any attempt to understand human activity at the global level—at least for archaeologists—must necessarily begin with small units, and often these small units are minute indeed. The concept of singularization of history, developed by Magnússon (2003), offers fertile ground for developing a praxis about multiscale historical analysis that begins with what he describes as the “proper subjects in their proper logical and cultural context.”

Magnússon’s article “The Singularization of History,” provides significant insights into the theoretics of microhistory. The central issues for me as an anthropologically

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trained archaeologist interested in the social history of the past 500 years is to understand the ways in which the ideology of singularization can be refined by explicitly considering its archaeological relevance. In other words, to apply his ideas to archaeological contexts we must comprehend them in ways that make archaeological sense.

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Magnússon's argument centers around his understanding that social historians have failed to live up to their avowed commitment to write history "from the bottom up." The reasons for this failure are diverse but a major deficiency he identifies stems from the reliance of historians on what he calls "the 'manmade' ideological package of the metanarratives" (p. 721). He describes a metanarrative as "a continuous argumentation about a long-term social development, made up of arguments that are so tightly knit that they integrate events and phenomena into predefined molds designed to place them within a specified social context" (p. 704). He identifies modernization theory as one of these argumentations and observes that conventional social historians have typically relied on such ideas and so, rather than writing history from below, have actually written macrohistories.

This is a complex argument and my interest as an archaeologist is specifically piqued by his comments on the place of the metanarratives in microhistorical research. I want to use these ideas as my entry point into an attempt to tease out a better conceptualization of scale and structural orientation because it seems to me that these matters lie at the heart of Magnússon's argument. I think it is here that the promises and the challenges lie because the difficulties he identifies in microhistory also exist within archaeology.

The similarities between microhistory and archaeology are easy to discern. Both sets of scholars begin their research at the ground level—for archaeologists quite literally so and for historians more figuratively—and both begin with small units of analysis. Both scholars work with individual behavior enmeshed in social constructs and both rely on a wide collection of sources and employ diverse methodologies, which in varying degrees rest on textual sources of information. Both archaeologists and microhistorians produce histories on the small scale, and perhaps most important, both scholars struggle to interpret the past from the vantage point of the present. Within archaeology as a whole, the epistemological linkage between historical archaeology and microhistory is especially close because both historical archaeologists and microhistorians might actually consult the very same textual materials in the course of their research.

The intellectual connection between archaeologists and historians means that the singularization of history provides significant advantages for both sets of scholars. It offers a true bottom-up approach and it challenges us to discover how we might use the concept of singularization to interpret the human aspects of the metanarratives rather than to use the metanarratives to understand the human condition.

For Magnússon, much of the tension in microhistorical analysis stems from its practitioners' frequent association with the metanarratives. He equates the metanarratives with macrohistory and believes that this association weakens the presentation of history, especially where history at the micro-level is the stated focus. His criticism is apt because one of the historians whose work he critiques argues that "No

conclusion reached at the microlevel can be transferred whole to the macrolevel. So even the integration of all possible microhistories . . . would not allow us to capture the whole of historical reality” (see p. 719). What this historian is saying—and this is a serious charge—is that microhistories, on their own, will not tell us much about the past. They merely provide interesting collections of unrelated personal anecdotes and remembrances that have no wider significance. Another way to say this is that the many achievements of microhistorians on the micro-scale add nothing to our appreciation of life writ large.

This historians’ charge may also be leveled at archaeologists because the base level of our research rests on the micro-level. The implication of the charge takes on added significance in our present world because so much archaeology is today a commoditized tool linked to the development schemes of corporate institutions. The uninformed may easily claim that the creation of highly contextualized site-specific analyses—and the descriptive site report having very limited, corporate distribution fits the bill perfectly—will tell us nothing about the human condition. Another way to say this is that archeological research, seen from this angle, is simply informed antiquarianism. The concern of the archaeologist with tiny things, small sites, and individual households and communities cannot tell us about humanity with a capital H. Like microhistories, archaeological site reports may be perceived as mere curiosities with little greater importance.

Magnússon’s vision, however, charts a different course because he seeks to circumvent the macro-level by beginning with the data themselves. For microhistorians, the data are comprised of textual sources from and about individuals or small social groups and for archaeologists the data are the information extracted from an excavated site. As Magnússon states, “singularization places its emphasis on the small units and is conceived as a counter to research that no longer serves to throw light on the enigma of life and tries to cast all life, in whatever form it manifests itself, in one and the same end” (p. 723). The idea of singularization is to move away from the tyranny of meta-frameworks and all conceptual structures developed outside the small contexts of study.

Singularization might begin with a single individual, as in Ginzburg’s (1980) well-read study of Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller, or with Magnússon’s own Niels Jonsson, the nineteenth-century farm laborer. For the archaeologist, the smallest unit might be a hearth, a floorplan, or even a single artifact. Despite this difference in material, I see no major conflict between microhistory and micro-archaeology because the artifact, hearth, or floorplan may constitute a surrogate for the individual or the small social group. In some cases, the people who once lived in an excavated household might be as historically identifiable as anyone who might figure into a microhistorical narrative. Thus, Magnússon’s concept of allowing the research to be completely data driven is profoundly applicable to archaeological research. As he observes:

[the singularization of history] consists in investigating with great precision each and every fragment connected with the matter at hand and for which there are sources and in bringing up for consideration all possible means of interpretation that bear directly upon the material (p. 720).

Magnússon’s point about avoiding the straightjacket of the metanarratives is well conceptualized and sensible. But even so, an important conundrum remains because he

does not completely reject them either. In a key statement, he notes that the singularization of history:

most certainly does not preclude the possibility that one possible means of interpretation is through the metanarratives; on the contrary, one must assume that they are tied in with material of all kinds in one way or another. Each piece of micro research builds upon an intellectual frame of reference that takes account of the scholarly context (p. 720).

In this quote, I am specifically interested in the phrase that the metanarratives “are tied in with material of all kinds on one way or another.” As he continues, “Even if the scale is reduced . . . one must still expect some structural orientation within the frame of reference. But this structure must always be subject to laws other than those imposed by the traditional metanarratives and, because of their scope, must be much more malleable—that is, the frames must be more limited and more easily controlled” (p. 720). This statement is particularly relevant to an archaeology of the past 500 years because it is in this period, which includes the present, when we experience the significant impact of globalization.

This to me is one of the most significant challenges posed by singularization, but also a site of great promise. If I understand this correctly, Magnússon is saying that we need not necessarily abandon the metanarratives because they may provide one means of understanding a singular social context; they may in fact constitute “a frame of reference.” This is important because the salient point is that we should not allow the structures of the metanarratives to confine our intellectualism. This is a fair point. We should perceive the structures of the metanarratives to be more flexible than many researchers may allow, and we should allow the sociohistorical context under study to set the parameters of the narrative. The parameters should not be placed in an epistemological straightjacket by the metanarratives. Another way to say this is that we should be able to learn more about the past from the micro-units of analysis—presented by the sociohistorical context itself—than we can from the overarching influence of the metanarratives presented as macrohistory. As Magnússon notes, every person’s life includes so many contradictions and situations of pure happenstance that any slavish commitment to the metanarratives will only work to mask these small but potentially significant micro-events. This all makes perfect sense for archaeologists because micro-analysis constitutes a foundational piece of basic archaeological research. Thus, we might equally use the phrase “the singularization of history” to describe much archaeological research.

In singularization, the analytical frames are situationally determined rather than predetermined. The difference between the contextually determined and the predetermined can have a huge impact on the interpretation. As an example, an urban archaeologist investigating the nineteenth century might use a predetermined socio-spatial framework composed of the following levels: individual – household – neighborhood – ward (or other administrative unit) and – city. This political arrangement, however, is completely artificial. It references an artificial hierarchy that forces research into an ideological straightjacket that may have had little if any past reality. For example, in early nineteenth-century New York City, Irish street gangs, like many gangs today, created familial associations that had nothing whatsoever to do with the

traditional nuclear family. In this instance, the concept of the household is distinctly not the middle-class ideal, nor is the neighborhood. Gangs carved up administrative units by identifying with their counties of origin in Ireland and along ethnic lines. As a result, any attempt to straightjacket this past into artificial categories does violence to the past.

Magnússon's counter-view provides for a much richer interpretation of past social history because it opens up new avenues of inquiry, including those involving the conceptualization of space. And the act of opening up can have significant archaeological relevance. For example, when I studied the seventeenth-century maroon community of Palmares in northeast Brazil, I learned that the community's social network reached all the way to Angola because the Palmaristas had essentially established an African kingdom in the Brazilian backlands (Orser 1996). This connection meant that the concept of space had to be re-imagined. The community's boundaries no longer terminated at the limits of the site itself. Instead, they were trans-continental.

But I think for archaeologists, and perhaps for microhistorians too, a significant problem presents itself if the research remains focused on just one level; meaning if the presentation remains on the micro-level alone. If we really are to work at one level, then it becomes difficult to defend ourselves against the charge of anecdotal antiquarianism, as much as we may wish to protect the integrity and intrinsic value of our intellectual labors. Magnússon and his microhistorian colleagues are well acquainted with the charge of triviality. If each individual historical narrative is completely unique, then all that microhistory can give us—as the dissenting historians allege—is a collection of accounts that are completely unattached to anything else beyond the extremely localized setting. But Magnússon specifically argues against trivialization by challenging his colleagues to use their talents to “throw light on the enigma of life” (p. 723).

To interrogate the question of framing further, I want to return to Magnússon's statement that “one must still expect some structural orientation within the frame of reference” (p. 720) because I want to question where this structure originates. This is significant because even he proposes that the metanarratives remain. They may be flexible, but they remain. For me, the challenge archaeologists examining the past 500 years face rests with what I term the metaproceses of modernity, which I identify as colonialism, capitalism, Eurocentrism, and racialization. We may term these metanarratives if we wish because each has been used that way, but they are also very real sociohistorical processes with major ramifications for the recent history of the human family. The issues of structural orientation and frame of reference are significant because they lead to two questions: first, does singularization mean that we must only work at one level—within the context of the individual alone (however we wish to characterize “individual”—a person, family, a site, a small group of site)? and second, if we are not to confine ourselves only to the micro—as Magnússon's mention of structural orientation and frame of reference seem to imply—then at what point should we expect to encounter the metaproceses as we move up into larger frames of analysis? In other words, if we figure that the metanarratives should remain invisible at the micro-level, but still suppose that they remain, at what point do we encounter them as we move up into larger social units? To turn this question around, if we begin our analysis with the metanarratives (where the micro doesn't exist) and work downward toward the micro, at what point should the metanarratives disappear? As we work downward, can we identify a point when the metanarratives stop exerting influence on the micro?

I believe that the on-going enigma of life that Magússon recognizes as a key point of investigation can never exist only within one frame of reference. We only need to think about the realities of human life to comprehend the truth of this conclusion. All individuals are enmeshed within complex webs of social networks, experiencing what early anarchist thinkers termed “mutualism.” Neuroscientists are now confirming the reality of mutualism and are promoting the idea that the human brain is hardwired to interact with other humans. They are discovering that the human brain is designed to assume embeddedness within social networks. This does not mean, of course, that human history is not replete with struggle and conflict, but only that people must be attached to other people in concrete webs of interaction, even if the relations are characterized by conflict.

As a result, then, one of our primary tasks it seems to me, even within singularization, is to understand the social networks that operated within specific past historical contexts. I see nothing in singularization that disputes this; in fact, I believe the micro approach only strengthens the need for an understanding that rests on social connectivity.

Our first step to moving beyond the micro-level will come from acknowledging that social networks exist on vertical as well as horizontal planes. Horizontally they extend contemporaneously through space, connecting diverse individuals and social groups (beginning with the micro), but also vertically into the pasts as custom, tradition, and history, and into the present (and the future) as research methodology, perspective, and interpretation. In his social history of Iceland, Magnússon does a beautiful job of demonstrating the contextual interconnections between three vertical planes, or frames of reference: antiquity, the historical context under study, and the present. These different planes constitute structural frames. Thus, what becomes central, it seems to me, is the issue of the frames themselves. What are they and where do they originate?

Of course, the most obvious answer is that culture constitutes the most basic frame and without question the archaeological interpretation of culture is a mainstay of what we all do. I would never dispute this. But for me, working as I do in the history of the past 500 years, my interest lies in using archaeology to critique modernity, with special emphasis on the metaprocesses, which I view—in keeping with Bourdieu—as structuring structures. And, because I view these in this way, I understand their structural orientation as extending throughout the social networks, both horizontally and vertically. To me, this is the way the metanarratives are, as Magnússon says, are “tied in with material of all kinds” (p. 720).

One of the problems with using culture as a framing structure is that it allows us too easily to mask the impacts of the metaprocesses on daily life. As cultural relativists, we’ve learned that all cultures have equally validity and that each must be encountered on its own terms—which, as I understand it, is entirely consistent with singularization. Thus, any reliance on cultural explanations must be non-judgmental by definition; they cannot in good conscience be a critique. The archaeology of collaboration is built upon this notion. But the stance of non-judgment can do significant violence to lived history when it makes domination and oppression disappear. In other words, the sole reliance on cultural interpretation makes the structuring structures of the trans-temporal forces like colonialism, capitalism, Eurocentrism, and racialization invisible behind a mask of simple cultural imperatives.

Based on this understanding, it seems to me that singularization only constitutes the first frame of analysis and that the study of other frames must extend from there, both

upward toward the present and downward into the deeper past. Singularization provides the starting point for analysis, but the analysis—to avoid the charge of antiquarianism—must be multidimensional. In other words, it cannot rest only with a single context, if it is to constitute critique. My goal, then, is to find ways to use the theoretical advances within the singularization of history to work upward from the single plane without reducing the analysis to macrohistory.

Conclusion

To conclude, archaeology and micro-history are perfectly and uniquely suited to interpreting the enigmas of life. Magnússon observes that the singularization of history represents “a direct challenge to conventional historical research” (p. 723). I completely agree because I see archaeological research—particularly as it pertains to the past 500 years—as providing many direct challenges to conventional history. This makes the archaeology of post-Columbian history dangerous to the point that many archaeologists seek to ignore the metaprocesses, which I believe is a huge mistake and one that has the potential to lead to trivialization. The trick, it seem to me, is to use the strengths of singularization to permit us to understand, as Magnússon says, that the structuring structures exist, but they need not constrict or define our analyses. Rather, the concept of singularization can be expanded to the point where its intensive form of examination can be employed to larger social networks and still not violate Magnússon’s concept of the “manageable unit.”

Singularization, as a bottom-up approach is perfectly suited to archaeological research. I am only arguing that we should create ways to expand the perspective upward in such a manner that the analysis of each frame of reference can be singularized. I do not believe we can ignore the metaprocesses of modernity because I think they are unavoidable, even for scholars. Their insidious nature is such that they impact us even when we are convinced we are judiciously avoiding them.

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