Theoretical Archaeology Seminars in Athens

Anachronistic Identities?

“Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact... we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” (Hall, S. 1990, 232)

The purpose of this seminar is to examine the way in which cultural critics, archaeologists and historians think about questions of identity. Although the imposition of outdated models of identity onto the ancient world has been discussed in areas as diverse as gender, colonialism and age, the manner in which group identity is variously conceived and the applicability or otherwise of (modern) notions, such as ethnicity and culture, remains highly contentious throughout all areas of archaeological enquiry. It is now somewhat commonplace that scholarship on the ancient world reflects modern interests and concerns - not least a concern for identity itself. Post-colonial approaches to antiquity are now increasingly prevalent - as demonstrated by the recent concern for subaltern voices and hybridized identities. We are ultimately faced with something of a conundrum, however, since it is often unclear how such terms of reference/models of understanding can best applied to the study of antiquity. In addition to wider concerns regarding the most appropriate means of reconciling the nuanced complexity of archaeological theory with the practical imperatives of material culture analysis, the influence of concepts such as ethnicity can at times seem excessive, skewing debate in favour of one particular ‘type’ of identity. During the course of this seminar participants will be asked to reflect upon the prevailing trends and assumptions within their area of study in the light of a series of set texts. The latter adopt positions that either challenge or qualify the way in which identities are ‘imagined/constructed within a variety of fields: culture theory, archaeology and classics. Their intellectual bases and wider applicability will be open to debate along with questions of a more general nature, e.g. to what extent and for what reasons does scholarship on Neolithic, Classical or Bronze Age identities differ according to historical period or ‘national’ tradition - Anglophone versus Francophone scholarship etc. The discussion will be chaired by Dr Naoise Mac Sweeney (Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge) and Dr Joseph Skinner (BSA).

Questions for discussion will include:

Is ‘identity’ itself a modern, rather than an ancient, concept?

Ethnicity, nationality, colonial – how far can these words be satisfactorily applied to ancient societies?

Do we need to revise the way in which we study past events and peoples or is the gap between theory and practice one to which we should be reconciled?

Would a different ‘take’ on identities have changed the way in which elements of the material and/or historic record were selectively interpreted?

If interested in participating please email the IIHSA to request the recommended reading

6.30pm Friday 17th December 2009 at the Irish Institute of Hellenic Studies (51a Odos Notara).
Please RSVP as spaces are limited.

Contact: iihsa@hol.gr