

# Monumental Architecture in Neolithic Britain: A Theoretical Revolution

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A change in the theory underpinning an activity will invariably produce a different pattern of physical or mental engagement with the world or a new ‘way of doing things’. Nowhere is this truer than within the field of archaeology where, over the course of the twentieth century, a number of theoretical revolutions have radically altered the way ancient material is studied, valued, and interpreted. This article draws together a multitude of theoretically distinct, often chronologically disparate, pieces of archaeological research that share a common focus in their interpretation of the Neolithic monumental architecture of the Orkney Islands. The Orkneys make an ideal geographical location for such an endeavour due to the more or less continuous study of the area since the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Here, the resulting corpus of material is critically analysed and used to illustrate how each developing branch of archaeological theory has contributed to ideas of exactly what Neolithic material culture is capable of revealing in terms of prehistoric collective and individual identity. In this article, the philosophies underpinning each school of thought are identified, explored and—where appropriate—their validity is discussed, albeit from the perspective of a distinctly unapologetic twenty-first century Eurocentric archaeologist.

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1. See for example J. Anderson, *Scotland in Pagan Times: The Bronze and Stone Ages* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1886).

## Square Pegs and Round Holes: A Normative Approach to the Archaeology of Neolithic Orkney

One of the earliest twentieth-century surveys of Orcadian Neolithic monuments was conducted by Vere Gordon Childe in 1925. Typologies based on detailed visual assessments were dutifully developed with strong parallels being drawn between the Maeshowe tomb and New Grange at County. Maeshowe was said to have surely been built by a ‘chieftain from the Boyne’ and we are reminded that, for Childe, the ‘megalithic’ tombs and associated Neolithic artefacts at either side of the Pentland Firth were products of ‘Pentland culture’.<sup>2</sup> Famously, it was further proposed that, rather than being an indigenously developed tradition, the notion of tomb construction was probably introduced to an already Neolithic Britain by European ‘megalithic missionaries’.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Stuart Piggott’s 1954 *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles* championed this culture-historical approach to Neolithic archaeology by maintaining the notion that distinct ‘cultures’ could be identified through recurrent material associations in the archaeological record, an idea that has since been rejected by a large number of scholars.<sup>4</sup> The primary typological material for Piggott’s ‘secondary Neolithic cultures’ was, in the first instance, flat-based Grooved Ware pottery. Yet over time, polished stone axes and a plethora of other stone tools, as well as domestic structures and monuments, were all added to the diagnostic repertoire.<sup>5</sup> It was then suggested that the ‘Rinyo-Clacton culture’ was in fact responsible for the vast

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2. See D. Fraser, *Land and society in Neolithic Orkney*, (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, British Series 117, 1983), p. 189.

3. See J.C. Barrett, *Fragments from Antiquity: An Archaeology of Social Life in Britain, 2900–1200BC* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 49.

4. Stuart Piggott, *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles* (Cambridge University Press, 1954); Fraser, *Land and Society*; C. Richards, *Dwelling among the Monuments: The Neolithic Village of Barnhouse, Maeshowe Passage Grave and Surrounding Monuments at Stenness, Orkney* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2005); J.S. Thomas, ‘The Politics of Vision and the Archaeologies of Landscape’ in B. Bender, ed., *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 19–48.

5. See J.S. Thomas, *Time, Culture and Identity: an Interpretive Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1996); J.S. Thomas, ‘The Return of the Rinyo-Clacton Folk? The Cultural Significance of the Grooved Ware Complex in Later Neolithic Britain’ *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 20, no. 1 (2010), 1–15.

majority of Orcadian Neolithic material culture. True to the idea of cultural diffusion, it naturally followed that the prehistoric indigenous inhabitants of the Orkneys must have assimilated traditionally Neolithic traits first brought to Britain by the ‘Windmill Hill culture’ of the south.<sup>6</sup> An affinity between Maeshowe and the nearby settlement sites of Rinyo and Skara Brae was also noted based on the similarity of artefacts excavated from both sites.

Modern social interpretations of archaeological material are embedded within the archaeologist’s own perception of what a ‘society’ is.<sup>7</sup> As can be seen from the above case studies, implicit within normative archaeology is the idea that society itself is a ‘homogenous totality’, held together by shared and socially determined beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, such a belief system will—when practically applied or ‘acted out’—result in regular patterns of material association.<sup>9</sup> It follows that archaeological material, identifiably recurring across space and time, must represent the movement and survival of a population and its sustaining belief system in a reflective manner. The acceptance of this notion dominated early twentieth-century archaeological interpretative frameworks and motivated early investigators of Orcadian monuments to recognise *similarity over difference*. The increasingly rich diversity of British Neolithic material culture became rather inconvenient, with every novel artefact or monument demanding an explanation based on yet another invasive wave of cultural diffusion. Childe’s theory of so called pan-European ‘megalithic religion’ became the accepted wisdom concerning the enigmatic origins of the grand stone structures visible on the Orkneys.<sup>10</sup>

It has since been argued that culture-historians did in fact recognise the differences within Neolithic material but simply inhabited a discourse that would not allow these differences to be explicitly stated.<sup>11</sup> This highlights one of the major methodological criticisms of the cultural-historical approach to archaeology: its

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6. Thomas, ‘The Return of the Rinyo-Clacton Folk?’, pp. 1–15.

7. For full discussion of this see Thomas, *Time, Culture and Identity*.

8. See Barrett, *Fragments from Antiquity*, p. 157.

9. J.C. Barrett, R.J. Bradley and M. Green, *Landscape, Monuments and Society: the Prehistory of Cranborne Chase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

10. Fraser, *Land and Society*.

11. C. Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

normative basis. One is able to select *any* commonly recurring and variable piece of material culture as a means of drawing distinctions between ‘cultures’, but the choice of material, inevitably a decision entrenched in modern day preconceptions about what is or is not important, sometimes reveals more about the analyst than anything else.<sup>12</sup> To understand why this approach to understanding the past was maintained at all, we must look at its perceived value in explaining the present. Influenced by the late nineteenth-century Swedish archaeologist Oscar Montelius, Britain’s early-twentieth-century global pre-eminence was considered to be the result of an ongoing historical process of cultural diffusion from east to west. This narrative accepted the notion that the valuable ideas underpinning Britain’s technological and economic superiority were probably pioneered in the east, but were not used as creatively or innovatively until they had reached the west.<sup>13</sup>

There are seemingly indelible elements of the much-lamented normative approach still lurking within modern archaeological interpretations. However, when viewed in contrast to the purely quantitative methodology of New Archaeology, the culture-historian’s contextual perspective towards material as a historical rather than scientific resource, together with their philosophically unhindered emphasis on subjective experience as a useful interpretive tool, is of value within the ost-rocessual theoretical framework.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this may explain why some culture-historical nomenclature, for example the term ‘megalith’, is still frequently used throughout the modern discourse—though not without objection. A number of scholars argue that such careless use of inherited terminology carries with it unhelpful connotations of totalised entities founded upon outdated and unevaluated assumptions.<sup>15</sup>

### In Pursuit of Objectivity: New Archaeology

Whilst the culture-historical approach continued to be used throughout the early 1960s, during the latter half of the decade a number of Anglo-American

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12. Thomas, *Time, Culture and Identity*.

13. B.G Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

14. I. Hodder, *Reading the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

15. Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture*; Richards, *Dwelling among the Monuments*; Thomas, *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*.

archaeologists, anthropologists, and social scientists sowed the seeds of what was to become a short-lived but nevertheless significant revolution within archaeological theory. Dissatisfied with the normative, descriptive, speculative, and inadequate excesses of normative archaeology, the self-proclaimed New Archaeology was based solidly on the notion of scientific positivism: that facts are separate and objective and theories subjective. On this basis it was argued that empirical, methodologically grounded, and hypothesis-led enquiry alone would produce the unquestionably neutral and valuable data which one must use to interpret the past.<sup>16</sup>

Fleming's 1973 study of British Neolithic monuments, *Tombs for the Living*, attempted to explore the motivation behind the construction of Neolithic 'tombs', including those in Orkney. It was concluded that these structures were designed to be big and impressive, whilst the central chambers present in many of them were purpose-built for storing the dead. Therefore, monuments that combined maximum internal space with minimum, yet still impressive, mound size represented the 'most effective ever devised'.<sup>17</sup> On the Orkneys, the older, simpler round mound and passage graves fell out of favour over the course of the Neolithic period, a trend argued to be the result of the unsustainably intensive labour requirements needed to increase the interior chamber size whilst maintaining an impressive profile mound view.<sup>18</sup> In order to resolve this issue, later Neolithic tombs, such as Maeshowe and Midhowe, were designed as long mounds or modified round mounds with side chambers. The impressive aesthetic was maintained—essential for focusing attention and reinforcing leadership patterns—and the problem of storing an ever-growing number of the deceased elite was rather neatly solved.<sup>19</sup>

Despite its use of a rigorous and objective scientific methodology to record neutral data concerning the dimensions of the 'tombs', the above interpretation relies upon a subjective appraisal of what is impressive, so could be argued to represent something of a movement away from Processual archaeology. However, it is certainly a means of *explaining* material culture with reference to the needs of a

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16. See Hodder, *Reading the Past*, p. 104.

17. See A. Fleming, 'Tombs for the Living', *Man* 8 (1973), 177-93 (p. 180).

18. A. S. Henshall, *The Chambered Tombs of Scotland: Vol. I* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963).

19. Fleming, 'Tombs for the Living'.

society as a ‘culture system’. Followers of structural-functionalism, in contrast, regard material culture as the passive by-product of social institutions but make little progress in identifying the processes that created these institutions.<sup>20</sup> It therefore becomes necessary to explain their genesis with reference to an internal need or external environmental pressure, and any associated artefacts of material culture are regarded as preserved fragments of extrasomatic adaptations.<sup>21</sup> The process that created these structures is largely deterministic: a fertile environment allows the population to thrive and agricultural surpluses to be generated; inevitably, a social hierarchy forms which appropriates the tombs as an institutional means of signalling its authority. In its explanation of Neolithic monuments, *Tombs for the Living* assigns them a distinctly one-dimensional functionality. Though it is argued that the monuments were probably not built to a blueprint, and were in fact added to over time, more recent thinking recognises the dialectical relationship between humans and things. In accepting material culture as an active force within the landscape, more pluralistic interpretations of the monuments become possible.<sup>22</sup>

Within both of the above case studies we can see material culture playing a part in archaeologists’ attempted reconstructions of British Neolithic social identity, but, at the very most, the *specifics* of the material are assigned a cursory role subservient to that of internal economic or external environmental processes. However, in some cases New Archaeology has been accused of ignoring material culture altogether.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, it is difficult to accept Processual assertions about British Neolithic material culture and social identity, as they appear to deny the personalities of objects and the social constitution of place that, according to more

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20. Barrett, Bradley and Green, *Landscape, Monuments and Society*.

21. Hodder, *Reading the Past*; Thomas, *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*; D.S. Whitley, *Reader in Archaeological Theory: Post-Processual and Cognitive Approaches*. (London: Routledge, 1998).

22. C. Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Thomas, J.S., *Time, Culture and Identity*. For an examination of problems with the notion of external symbolic storage, and the case of Neolithic Material Culture in Britain, see C. Renrew and C. Scarre, eds., *Cognition and Material Culture. The Archaeology of Symbolic Storage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

23. See M.P. Leone, ‘Symbolic, Structural and Critical Archaeology’, in D. Whitley, ed., *Reader in Archaeological Theory: Post-Processual and Cognitive Approaches*.

recent thinking, constitutes identity itself.<sup>24</sup> The shift from normative to Processual archaeology represented the rewriting of history as a natural science and the dehumanization of the past. Meaningful social objects and places were reduced to tabulated numerical entries; ambitions and beliefs became inescapable and predestined, designed solely to meet the needs of an evolving societal organism.<sup>25</sup>

### Inhabitation through Active Mediation: A Phenomenological Experience of Neolithic Orkney

Looking at the broader picture, Processual archaeology was indeed revolutionary in its hitherto unseen ability to embed archaeological theory within a cross-disciplinary discourse. Its inception during the 1960s was coloured by the (soon to be redundant) positivist American anthropological view of a totalised society, as described above, yet over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, academics from a number of disciplines adopted a more moderate relativistic philosophy of science: that facts and theory are interrelated due to the necessity of a universal theory of reality on which to base facts as true.<sup>26</sup> This challenged the idea that facts can ever be 'theory-free' and therefore that science could ever be truly objective. For archaeology it challenged the notion that the material record was an objective resource about the past, capable of being 'read' by an objective scientist. Work such as Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* of 1973 revolted against the old, functionalist, and totalising interpretations of human behaviour, and called for a more pluralistic, interpretive and open-ended approach to understanding the past.<sup>27</sup>

It is certainly possible to argue that Colin Richards' *Dwelling among the Monuments* of 2005 was one such revolutionary approach. This work explored the relationship between everyday life and the various forms of Neolithic material culture on Orkney. Maeshowe is noted as an important, omnipresent aspect of the worked and lived landscape due to its visibility from the Barnhouse settlement.

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24. Thomas, *Time, Culture and Identity*; T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

25. Hodder, *Reading the Past*; Thomas, 'The Politics of Vision'.

26. Whitley, *Reader in Archaeological Theory*.

27. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (London: Sage, 1998).

Furthermore, the frequent coastal location of Orcadian monuments guaranteed their visual prominence as part of a skyline when approached from the sea—a highly probable scenario for the Neolithic inhabitants of the Orkney Islands. The chosen location of Maeshowe was thought to have been influenced by an earlier Neolithic building, suggested to be a house, which occupied the same place. If material culture cannot exist outside the social world, then it must always be engaged in a process of quotation and reference that reaches through space and time. The reuse of a construction site over time therefore might represent a draw on the memories of the place, constituted by the activities that have taken place there in the past.<sup>28</sup>

To take as an example the spatial structuring of the domestic dwellings at Barnhouse, ash spreads indicate that debris from the hearth was often swept to the left, and internal furniture on the right was often larger and different to that found on the left. Recurrent spatial structuring of material resources means that the inhabitants of Neolithic Stenness had to adjust to engaging in certain activities in certain spaces and, most likely, at certain times. Material culture is therefore *lived through* and from it the dwellers learn certain bodily practices or a ways of ‘getting on’ which, in turn, ensure individuals (re)produce new materials embedded within and embodying those same principles. By this logic, the Neolithic monuments at Orkney are regarded as just one expression of an underlying principle which permeated the lives, both mentally and physically, of the inhabitants of Stenness.<sup>29</sup>

The hearth was at the heart of the Neolithic day-to-day ‘lived’ world, the dwelling. Its central position dictated where important activities could take place; cooking and the firing of clay are represented archaeologically; however light heat from the flames would have enabled many more. The basic concentric shape and internal ‘cruciform’ layout of Maeshowe is also said to echo the dwellings at Barnhouse, with one crucial exception: the omission of a central hearth. It is argued

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28. A. Jones and C. Richards, ‘The Villagers of Barnhouse’ in C. Richards, ed., *Dwelling among the Monuments: The Neolithic Village of Barnhouse, Maeshowe Passage Grave and Surrounding Monuments at Stenness, Orkney* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2005); A. Jones, ‘Where Eagles Dare: Landscape, Animals and the Neolithic of Orkney’, *Journal of Material Culture* 3 (1998), pp. 301-24; Thomas Time, *Culture and Identity*; Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*.

29. See Jones and Richards, ‘The Villagers of Barnhouse’, p. 197.



that the lack of the life-giving hearth in the central chamber of Maeshowe makes it a place of the dead, especially when considered together with the possibility that fragments of human skull may also have been discovered there. Chambered monuments like Maeshowe were perhaps considered to be ancestral places during the Neolithic period and, as evidenced by disturbed depositions, may have been visited from time to time in order for individuals to curate, remove, or add to their contents—an intriguing notion when considering that Maeshowe’s chamber entrance is also aligned with the setting midwinter solstice. The architecture of Maeshowe therefore gifts the place with a temporal significance; there has always been a time and a place to remember the dead, and it would appear that this may have been at the moment when the setting sun symbolised the ‘death’ of the old year and the ‘rebirth’ of the new one.<sup>30</sup>

It has been suggested that during the Neolithic period human and animal remains, along with other material culture, was ‘on the move’, circulating between Neolithic communities, but perhaps also being stored in the monuments. The objects of exchange could have been ‘vehicles for a range of messages about personal relations and group dynamics’.<sup>31</sup> Neolithic artefacts themselves have personalities derived from the origins of their creation, their exchange, and subsequent engagement with specific places. The circulation of artefacts may then constitute a form of social mediation between and within non-capitalist communities, based on indebtedness and obligation.<sup>32</sup>

In order to assess the validity of social identity constructed by the above case study, we must surely turn to the theory on which it is based. Theory, after all, will ‘structure observation and control interpretation’.<sup>33</sup> The departure from pure positivism by many social scientists during the 1980s brought with it a profound reassessment of sociological theory. In anthropology, it challenged the totalised view

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30. R. Hingley, ‘Ancestors and Identity in the Later Prehistory of Atlantic Scotland: the Reuse and Reinvention of Neolithic Monuments and Material Culture’, *World Archaeology* 28, pp. 231-43; Jones and Richards, ‘The Villagers of Barnhouse’.

31. See C. Fowler, ‘Personhood and Social Relations in the British Neolithic with a Study from the Isle of Man’, *Journal of Material Culture* 6 (2001), pp. 137-63 (p. 144).

32. Thomas *Time, Culture and Identity*; Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*.

33. See A.W.R. Whittle, *Problems in Neolithic Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 6.

of society inherent within the New Archaeology: that of individuals as ‘cultural dopes’, acting in a predetermined manner, unaware of the social institutions they are creating and reproducing. Instead, it was proposed that human agents are conscious of the instituted practices which create the material world and that the material itself actively enhances these practices.<sup>34</sup>

For early Post-Processual archaeologists, such a revised view of society had significant implications for understanding prehistoric material culture based on the idea that ‘societies are not purposive, but individual agents are’.<sup>35</sup> Far from being the passive by-product of a social institution, material culture became an all-important medium for empowered individuals and groups to express, redefine, or deny their identities.<sup>36</sup> Cognitive-Processual archaeology had focused on so-called ‘ritualistic’ material and operated on the premise that non-functional aspects of material symbolically represented meaningful information about the past. Regrettably, this approach renders all but the most obscure material socially sterile. This theory dictated that the domestic debris at Barnhouse discussed above is devoid of symbolism and is merely functional. Post-Processual symbolic archaeology asserts that objects and buildings can be understood as singular ‘words’ that together comprise a larger ‘language’ of material culture. This implies that one can only understand these fragmented words with a deep, vocabulary-like knowledge of an ancient culture’s material language, and since the majority of this ‘language’ may have been lost or destroyed forever, this theoretical framework limits somewhat the scope of archaeological interpretations.

Neither of the above theoretical approaches appears to validate the interpretation of Maeshowe as a place of the dead intrinsically linked to the Barnhouse settlement, or that the spatial structuring of the domestic dwelling structures would have imbued the inhabitants with a particular way of being-in-the-world. Symbolic and early cognitive approaches were in fact unable to facilitate the kind of phenomenological interpretation of Neolithic Orkney given above, primarily because of the stance taken on the primacy of individual agency as a force for

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34. A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (London; Barrett, 1982).

35. See in M. Shanks and C. Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.124.

36. Hodder, *Reading the Past*.

historical change and the belief that the world was knowable only as relationships between conceptual categories: the practical/functional on one hand and the communicative/symbolic on the other.<sup>37</sup> Within this dualistic framework, the simple dwelling activities of Barnhouse are non-symbolic and therefore non-meaningful. Yet to polarise an activity as functional or symbolic is to perpetuate the Cartesian dualisms between thinking and doing which run counter to more recent ideas of what it means to be-in-the-world.<sup>38</sup>

Inspired by the works of Husserl and Heidegger, many European archaeologists have increasingly implemented phenomenological approaches to interpretation, arguing that ‘bodily engagement with the material world is constitutive of existence’.<sup>39</sup> The subject-object divide is questioned on the basis that there is no neutral space which one can occupy whilst ‘waiting’ for perception; being-in-the-world *is* perceiving. All knowledge is learnt from practical experience, including knowledge of how to ‘get on in the world’ or what Bourdieu refers to as a *habitus*.<sup>40</sup> Experience is sensation, reliant upon the human senses grounded within the body. A place gains its character



Fig. 1: The author in an example of ‘bodily engagement’ with the world (University of Sheffield Department of Archaeology Newsletter, 2010).

37. See in J.C. Barrett and I. Ko, ‘A Phenomenology of Landscape: A Crisis in British Landscape Archaeology?’ *Journal of Social Archaeology* 3, no. 9 (2009), pp. 275-95 (p. 290); see also in Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture*, p. 8.

38. Ibid.

39. See J. Bruck, ‘Experiencing the Past? The Development of a Phenomenological Archaeology in British Prehistory’, *Archaeological Dialogues* 12, no. 1 (2005), pp. 45–72 (p. 46).

40. E. Casey, ‘How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena’ in S. Feld and K.H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), pp. 13–46.

from the sensations one is able to experience there: sights, smells, and sounds when taken together *are* a specific atmosphere and are of course highly dependent on the kinds of activities undertaken by the inhabitants of that place.<sup>41</sup>

This means the body is the immediate point of reference for our understanding of the world; the movement and orientation of the self in relation to the other provides a tangible reality and a means of answering fundamental questions about one's own existence. The physicality of material culture—no matter how mundane it may appear—has the ability to restrict our movement, channel our vision, and alter our hearing. It can modify references between the position of self and other and can therefore control individual experience knowledge of the world and how to act within it. Therefore, by asking how the Neolithic material culture of Orkney created conditions which made it possible to walk, talk, and act in one way and not another, we are asking how it was possible for certain 'bodily practices' and associated principles to be carried forward through time.<sup>42</sup>

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41. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*.

42. See Barrett, *Fragments from Antiquity*, p. 5.