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Huguenot Identity in Post-Medieval London

by GREIG PARKER

The Huguenot refugees were a group of French Protestants who were forced into exile by religious persecution during the 16th to 18th centuries. Tens of thousands of Huguenot refugees came to England and established communities within several towns, including London. Their existence is well documented in historical texts and they have often been portrayed in literary fiction and the visual arts. The migration of the Huguenots has been credited with having had a profound social and economic impact on English society. However, despite contemporary portrayals of the communities as having being distinct in terms of dress, language, lifestyle, occupation, and geographical location, attempts to identify Huguenot occupation sites in London using standard archaeological methods have been largely unsuccessful. This paper discusses the characteristics of Huguenot identity and the problems faced by archaeologists in trying to identify Huguenot material culture. In addition, this paper discusses the wider implications for how archaeologists approach the subject of identity and suggests ideas for how these issues may be addressed.

Keywords: Huguenots, London, identity, migration

Introduction

This paper discusses some of the theoretical and methodological issues involved in the study of Huguenot refugee identity from an archaeological perspective. The Huguenot refugees were French-speaking Protestants who fled from religious persecution during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The paper begins by providing an overview of who the Huguenots were and how they have been studied by other archaeologists. A number of theoretical and methodological issues are then highlighted and discussed in relation to the specific area of study as well as to the discipline in general.

While this paper is concerned with the study of identity in the past, it does not provide an account of the development of identity theory within archaeology. For recent treatments of this subject, readers are pointed to Meskell (2001) and Díaz-Andreu et al. (2005). However, in the interests of clarity, it is perhaps worth briefly outlining the theoretical approach taken in this paper.

Theoretical Perspective

The fundamental concern of this research project is the relationship between the material environment and social identity: how identity is created, maintained, and modified, and the role played by the material environment in this process.

The material environment is a rather expansive term that includes landscape, architecture and material culture. Social identity is taken to incorporate attributes such as age, gender, class, ethnicity and status. The use of social identity in this way emphasises the inter-relationships that exist between different aspects of identity: their blurred boundaries, and the way in which multiple aspects of identity are often active at the same time (whether in conjunction or opposition). In addition, it tries to avoid reifying one aspect of identity at the expense of another.

The approach taken to understanding the relationship between social identity and the material environment is one that is based on practice theory. It draws upon the theories of practice proposed by Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984), and subsequently developed by authors such as Barrett (1988, 2000), Dietler and Herbich (1998), Lightfoot et al. (1998), and Silliman (2001). Social identity is seen as being created, maintained, and modified through practice. The material environment helps shape practice, and is itself modified through practice. The material environment can therefore be used to make inferences about practice and, as a result, identity.

To examine this relationship, this study looks at the Huguenot refugees in London during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The refugees can be best described as a diaspora community as their common bonds were religion, persecution and the desire to return to a

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homeland (Safran 2003: 13). Before discussing some of the issues that arise when studying the identity of the Huguenots from an archaeological perspective, it is necessary to provide some more details about who the Huguenots were.

Background: The Huguenots in France

The Huguenots were French Protestants during the 16th to 18th centuries. While the origin of the term "Huguenots" is unclear, it had gained common usage by the latter part of the sixteenth century (Scouloudi 1987: 53). The Protestant movement in France dates to the early 1520s but the movement lacked a widespread formal structure until the middle of the century under the influence of John Calvin (Gwynn 1985:10).

During the 1550s the Protestant faith gained widespread popularity in France reaching its highest concentrations in the south. In the north and east, the spread of the Reformed movement was less dramatic, and Protestantism remained a strictly minority faith. The majority of Huguenots lived in urban settings and were predominantly artisans, professionals and aristocrats (Benedict 2001: 60).

The expansion of Protestantism challenged the power of the Gallican Church and the movement became embroiled in the struggles for political power between aristocratic dynasties. This resulted in the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598). A fragile peace was agreed with the accession to the throne of the former Protestant Henry IV and the issuance of the Edict of Nantes. This provided some degree of protection for Protestants, although it still imposed numerous restrictions upon their activities. At the turn of the century it has been estimated that there were one million Protestants in France, representing around ten percent of the population (Benedict 2001: 93). New civil wars broke out in 1621 and they culminated in the siege of La Rochelle in 1628/9. Although the defeat of the Huguenot forces ended the religious warfare, the Catholic authorities continued in their attempts to convert Protestant worshipers and prevent the practice of their faith (Prestwich 1987).

The full accession to the throne of Louis XIV in 1661 led to renewed persecution of the Huguenots. Louis enacted a number of oppressive laws that included the exclusion of Protestants from a variety of professions and the prohibition of inter-faith marriages. In 1681 wealthy Huguenot families were required to billet French soldiers. This became known as the *dragonnades*, and forced many Protestants to either renounce their faith or flee to neighbouring countries (Gwynn 1985: 22).

Huguenot refugees had migrated in small numbers to neighbouring countries since the middle of the sixteenth century. The renewed levels of persecution that began in the 1660s increased this migration to perhaps a few hundred per year (Benedict 2001: 69). The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 effectively prohibited Protestant worship and required Protestants to convert to Catholicism. Ministers who refused to convert were banished, while Huguenot lay-people were prohibited from attempting to leave the country (Gwynn 1985: 24).

Following the Revocation, and despite the restrictions on emigration, approximately 200-250,000 refugees fled to neighbouring Protestant territories (Murdoch 1985: 51). Approximately 40,000 of these arrived in England (Gwynn 1985: 24). The majority of Huguenots, however, remained in France. Many converted, while others were either imprisoned or condemned to the galleys. Some attempted to continue their worship in secret, and these Protestant gatherings became known as *Les Déserts* in reference to the stories of the Israelites in the Old Testament. *Les Déserts* continued throughout the eighteenth century despite intermittent periods of increased persecution by the authorities (Murdoch 1985: 42, 44). Increased toleration of Protestantism did not arrive until the late eighteenth century, and its recognition as a state religion was not achieved until the nineteenth century.

The Huguenots of London

The first French Stranger church in England was established in London in 1550 and was based in Threadneedle Street (Murdoch 1985: 58). It was jointly founded with the Dutch Stranger church and these early Calvinist organisations were seen by some as a model for the Church of England (Strohm 2001: 27). They were granted autonomy from the Anglican Church and funded directly by the monarchy. During this period, the majority of French-speaking refugees were Walloons escaping persecution by the Spanish occupation of the southern Low Countries (Gwynn 1998: 4). Following the reign of Mary I, during which Protestant worship was prohibited, the churches were restored under

Elizabeth I with less autonomy and status (Gwynn 1998: 9).

The numbers of French-speaking immigrants fluctuated in relation to the levels of persecution in their homelands. A second French church was established at the Savoy in Westminster in 1661. The new church was required to use a French translation of the Anglican liturgy, and so was considered Conformist. Contacts between the church at the Savoy and the non-Conformist French Church in Threadneedle Street were close, despite the differences in the form of worship and disputes over who had authority over the French refugee congregations (Gwynn 1998: 13).

The Huguenot refugees who arrived in London became concentrated in two main suburbs: Spitalfields in the east and Soho in the west (Gwynn 1985: 36). French-speaking weavers had begun to settle in the Spitalfields area in the late sixteenth century (Molleson and Cox 1993: 114) and it soon became the centre of textile manufacturing in England. The large influx of refugees after the Revocation dramatically increased the density of French speakers to such an extent that there were complaints about the lack of English spoken in the streets (Gwynn 1998: 15). Amongst the refugees were silk weavers who brought skills and manufacturing techniques previously unused outside of France. In so doing they helped transform the English silk-weaving industry (Gwynn 1998: 35). The church of the Savoy had established a satellite church *des Grecs* in Soho in 1681 and this became the focal point for those refugees who settled in the western suburbs. They followed a range of occupations, primarily focused upon the production and sale of luxury items. They included goldsmiths, tailors, clock makers, and furniture-makers (Gwynn 1985). Items were produced primarily for the aristocracy and wealthy middle classes.

Figure 1: *Noon* William Hogarth circa 1738 (Source: courtesy of the City of London, London Metropolitan Archives).

The large numbers of refugees put great strain on the church organisation and led to the establishment of several new congregations. By 1700 there were nine congregations in Spitalfields and fourteen in Soho. Congregations were also established in other nearby settlements such as in Wandsworth and Chelsea. The congregations in Spitalfields were all non-Conformist, whereas those in Soho were an even mix of Conformist and non-

Conformist. At the turn of the eighteenth century, it has been estimated that there were approximately 15,000 refugees in the City and eastern suburbs, and 8,000 in Westminster (Gwynn 1985: 36).

Contemporary portraits of the Huguenots indicate that they were recognised as being a distinct social group. In 1738, fifty years after the Revocation, Hogarth portrayed them in his painting *Noon* leaving *des Grecs* church in Soho (Figure 1). They are characterised with dour expressions, dressed in conservative attire, and are contrasted with other social groups in London. In the same year, the 4th Earl of Chesterfield, Philip Stanhope, described the refugees as speaking French and having a distinctive style of dress and manner (Maty 1777 in Murdoch 1985: IX). Contemporary accounts also comment upon the diet of the refugees, often in rather negative terms, and oxtail soup is purported to have originally been a Huguenot creation (Jeffries 2001: 62).

To summarise, from the end of the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries, the Huguenots were recognised as being a distinct social group that at its height made up five percent of the population of London (Gwynn 1985: 36). They were seen as having a specific language, style of dress, diet, and religion, of following specific occupations, and of living in specific areas.

In the middle of the 18th century it appears that the community began to lose its cohesiveness. Church records show a decline in numbers and increased levels of intermarriage with the host community. Use of the French language declined and rather than identifying themselves as Huguenots, people began to identify themselves as 'Huguenot descendants'.

The Huguenot refugees are considered to be historically important for several reasons. The Huguenot exodus represents one of the largest mass migrations in Early Modern European history. It has also been cited as having had a significant influence on the development of several European societies and their industries (Gwynn 1985: 3). For England, Huguenot influence has been seen as influential in a variety of ways, from the establishment of the Bank of England to the transformation of the silk-weaving industry (Gwynn 1998).

In addition, the Huguenot migration is seen as having had important political consequences. Gwynn (1994: 3) has argued that they played a vital role in the Glorious Revolution, both as an example of the evils of Catholicism and as a significant contingent in William of Orange's army. In addition, the presence of the refugees was also seen as an example of England's self-proclaimed position as protector of the worldwide Protestant movement (Olson 2001).

Huguenot Archaeology

Compared to the work done by historians, there has been relatively little archaeological research on the Huguenots. In Britain in particular, research has primarily been conducted as part of compliance projects and as such has been limited in scope. Perhaps the most significant work undertaken so far relating to the London Huguenot community is the Spitalfields Project. This documented the excavations of the crypt at Christ Church, Spitalfields (see Molleson and Cox 1993; Reeve and Adams 1993).

The Spitalfields Project sample consists primarily of successful, middle-class individuals. This segment of the refugee population, along with the upper classes, is already the most visible through historical texts and images. The people we know least about are those refugees who were unable to afford crypt burial, did not leave extensive wills and testimonies, and did not maintain personal diaries or written correspondence. In addition, the crypt sample provides us with little direct information about the daily lives of the majority of the Huguenot community. Recent work by Jeffries (2001) has attempted to fill this gap. Jeffries analysed the ceramic assemblage at three locations in London in an attempt to identify Huguenot occupation sites. He was unable to identify Huguenot presence based solely on frequencies of imported wares and suggested that without historical documents Huguenot occupation sites may be invisible.

If valid, this claim is potentially troubling for archaeology in a wider context: the inability for archaeologists to identify such a large and influential migration of people during this period, clearly casts doubt on our ability to identify other migrations in the prehistoric past – a topic of considerable debate within the discipline (see for example, Anthony 1990; Burmeister 2000). In addition, it returns us to the underlying question regarding the nature of the relationship between the material environment and social identity.

Research Issues

The study by Jeffries (2001) highlights some of the difficulties in studying the Huguenot refugees archaeologically. These can be divided into two main areas: the nature of the archaeological material, and our understanding of social identity.

Archaeological Evidence

One of the main difficulties is the lack of archaeological evidence from well-excavated Huguenot occupation sites. The majority of archaeological evidence comes from shared cess-pits and backyards (Jeffries 2001). While this evidence is often informative, it is difficult to distinguish Huguenot from non-Huguenot households by this evidence alone. Assuming that sufficient quantities of data from Huguenot occupation sites can be located, additional problems arise. The majority of refugees arrived with few belongings and were destitute. They relied upon assistance from charitable donations, which meant that they occupied existing buildings and used items of material culture over which they had little choice.

In time, many refugees gained a greater ability to choose their dwelling and material culture. However, it is unclear the extent to which they wanted to acquire French-produced goods (Cottret 1991: 147) or the availability of such items. During this period, England was either at war with France or imposed high tariffs upon French goods. Although French styles were seen as the height of fashion in many spheres of society, Jeffries (2001: 60) argues that this was not the case for ceramics. The popularity of French styles in England also means that there is no marked disjuncture in the archaeological record as is often used to indicate the arrival of an immigrant group. Many of the refugees were the same artisans who had been producing the imported goods prior to their exile.

The refugees began to produce large quantities of material culture soon after their arrival. However, these items were primarily produced for consumption by non-Huguenots. The presence of these items on sites cannot therefore be used as evidence of Huguenot occupation. Some items of material culture were produced by Huguenots for their own use. These included tokens known as *méreau* that allowed the bearer to attend communion. Clearly, however, as they were portable, and frequently exchanged hands, their presence on a site cannot usually be considered as an indicator of Huguenot occupation.

The physical anthropological evidence from Christ Church, Spitalfields provides important information concerning the health and lifestyle of some members of the Spitalfields community. However, caution is needed in extrapolating this data to a wider context. The sample comes from crypt burials, which were an expensive and relatively unusual form of interment (Reeve and Adams 1993: 66). They cannot therefore be considered to typify Huguenot burial customs or to consist of a representative sample of the Huguenot community (Molleson and Cox 1993: 103). The burials date to 1729 – 1852 and the vast majority represent descendants of Huguenot refugees rather than the refugees themselves (Molleson and Cox 1993: 94). Over this period, the Spitalfields community underwent dramatic changes and care must be taken not to impose upon it a uniform character and identity. Perhaps significantly, the burials also come from an Anglican, rather than a Huguenot church. Molleson and Cox (1993: 103-11) note that the contributing individuals were often not from the immediate area, and speculate upon the reasons for their burial at Christ Church. Official Calvinist theology discouraged ostentatious funerals, especially those which allowed social distinction (Luria 2001: 194). The degree to which members of the Huguenot congregations conformed to this is unclear. The sample at Christ Church may represent the typical burial customs of wealthy middle-class Huguenots or may reflect the decline in the importance of Calvinist worship and the disintegration of the community.

Both Jeffries (2001) and Molleson and Cox (1993) demonstrate the degree to which our knowledge of the Huguenot communities in London relies upon historical texts and imagery. There is a range of issues involved in the interpretation of such evidence. These can perhaps be summarised by acknowledging that these materials were intentionally produced by fallible individuals from a particular point of view. Hogarth's *Noon* (Figure 1) provides a classic example of these issues. It is clearly produced as a statement about London society and contains a variety of symbolism and caricature to convey its message. It is perhaps the most commonly reproduced image by researchers when discussing the London Huguenot community. Yet the degree to which Hogarth's representation is caricature, and the extent to which it can be used to represent Huguenot communities over space and time, is open to question.

This discussion leads to a number of other issues related to our understandings of identity.

Identity Issues

Despite the wealth of scholarly research that has been undertaken on the Huguenots, there is still no clear agreement on who should be classified as a Huguenot and who should not. It is also unclear the extent to which the Huguenots referred to themselves as such (Scouloudi 1987: 45). Authors such as Gwynn (1998: 3-4) define all French-speaking immigrants from the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries as Huguenots. This includes French Calvinists, Protestants from the Principality of Orange, Walloons, and Swiss. No distinction is made between those fleeing from religious persecution, and those who were primarily economic migrants. Gwynn's main argument for this stance is based on pragmatism: he argues that it is impossible to distinguish between these groups through historical research. Further, he argues that contemporary observers were unable to differentiate between these groups, and that the administrative authorities grouped all French-speaking Calvinists together.

The acceptance of such a broad definition, however, poses archaeologists with a number of problems. Gwynn acknowledges that the groups did distinguish themselves from each other, citing the minister of the French church in Threadneedle Street in 1591 (Gwynn 1998: 4). In addition, the minutes of the consistory of the French church at Threadneedle Street (Gwynn 1994) document the efforts made by church authorities to distinguish between religious migrants and economic migrants. The latter were disapproved of and not considered to be part of the community. To accept Gwynn's definition runs counter to the current trends within the social sciences that emphasise the importance of self-definition in understanding social identities.

It is also questionable whether or not such a group ever existed in a meaningful form. For if the French-speaking groups are historiographically indistinguishable, as Gwynn claims, and unless all French-speakers were acting in the same way, there is a clear risk of attributing characteristics of one group onto another. The result is a hybridized identity that never actually existed.

An alternative is to use a more restrictive definition of the term 'Huguenot', such as French Calvinists, and to use a more descriptive term such as 'French-speaking immigrants' where required. However, in using this more restricted definition, difficulties are again encountered in determining who should be included and whether or not the groups so defined are analytically meaningful. For example, French Calvinist religious refugees would include individuals from a two hundred year period whose experiences and material culture differed widely. How useful is it to discuss this group as a homogenous entity and how realistic is it to assume that they shared a common, and distinct, material culture?

During the seventeenth century the Protestants in the northern part of France had made attempts to distance themselves politically and culturally from those in the south, due to perceptions that the latter were too militant (Benedict 2001: 60). Upon their arrival in London, many attempted to recreate their former congregations and established charitable institutions for the assistance of refugees solely from a particular area (Murdoch 1985: XIII). Gwynn (1998: 14-21) contrasts the two London communities of Spitalfields and Soho, highlighting the differences in religion, occupation, and lifestyle. This demonstrates that it cannot be assumed that because the refugees shared the same religion and had been subject to persecution they also shared other cultural similarities.

Perhaps the difficulty in defining the term Huguenot lies not with the definition itself, but the way in which it is being used. This is based on traditional archaeological approaches to identity that have a normative understanding of culture: members of a social group behave in the same way and produce identifiable patterns in the archaeological record. This view has been gradually dismantled over the past thirty years as the complexities of social identity have become apparent (Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005: 93). Members of a social group frequently behave in a variety of different ways. Individuals are also often able to maintain multiple, and sometimes mutually inconsistent, identities. The boundaries of some social groups have also been recognised as being permeable and negotiable (Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005: 2). The Huguenot refugee identity can be best described as a diaspora (Safran 2003: 12). The common bonds of the refugee community were their religion and their attachment to a common homeland. Within this there existed a wide range of individuals from different

backgrounds and from geographically dispersed regions.

Some of the difficulties are perhaps also tied to a modern perception of the inherent nature of nationalism. People from the same country are assumed to share the same culture. The origin of nationalism is an area of debate, but many scholars argue that it developed during the nineteenth century (Kumar 2001: 44-5). Prior to this people identified each other in terms of regional identities and royal allegiance. It should also be remembered that modern political boundaries differ from those in the past. The first Huguenot refugees arrived in London at a time when Calais was still part of the Kingdom of England and Wales. Contact between France and England was perhaps more common in the past than is often thought.

The changes that have occurred in understandings of national identity are perhaps illustrated by the change in meaning of the terms 'foreigner' and 'stranger'. In the seventeenth century, a foreigner was someone who came from outside of the region. A stranger was someone from a different kingdom (Cottrett 1991: 1). In this way, it can be said that seventeenth century London was full of foreigners, only some of whom were strangers. Due to the low life expectancy in the capital, the city relied upon a constant replenishment of its population from the provinces (Gwynn 1998: 1). It has been estimated that approximately 10,000 economic migrants per year arrived in the capital towards the end of the seventeenth century (Spence 2000: 2). This suggests that attempts to identify the archaeological signature of a uniform host society are as misplaced as attempts to identify a uniform Huguenot culture.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that attempts to identify a Huguenot-type assemblage are fraught with methodological and conceptual difficulties. The Huguenots of London can be best described as a diaspora community that consisted of individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds following diverse ways of life. Although they did share common cultural elements, it seems unlikely that it is possible to identify a single Huguenot-type of assemblage in any meaningful form. An alternative approach is perhaps to acknowledge the diversity of the refugee community and to try to understand how changes in their material environment are likely to have affected the various aspects of their identity.

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