clearly designated, high status individuals, or even of lovers (Hall 1978: 248). Each of the proposed functions is supported by a body of ethnographic references to the use of pan-pipes in different cultural groups. Yet, in the end, we still find no clear consensus among researchers about the uses of meanings of Hopewell pan-pipes. How do we choose among these interpretations?

The common appearance of dogs in Prehistoric Mexico and in Classical Greece is a second instructive example. Dogs were the messengers of the gods of death and were guardians of the entrance to the underworld (Hunt 1977: 80). Where these animals are recovered in human burials outside these two culture areas, such as in the Southeastern United States at the Late Archaic age (ca. 2500 B.C.) site of Indian Knoll, may we also interpret their presence as symbolic of message-carrying and guardianship? Dogs are rarer in later Adena and Hopewell contexts, but cut wolf jaws are occasionally associated with burials. Can we here logically make a transformation from Dogs to Canines as a general class of morphologically similar species and then back again to Wolves in order to suggest that, in this cosmology, wolves, rather than dogs, functioned as the messenger-guardians? To further underscore the complexity inherent in this particular example, in contemporary Western culture dogs have their primary symbolic value as members of the family (Sahlins 1976: 171–172).

Interpreting archaeological evidence through ethnographic information is clearly a dangerous and difficult procedure. Several points need to be emphasized. First, symbolic meaning is initially arbitrary, and one cannot proceed directly from the *form* of the specific item to its underlying value. Second, the method requires that the object be removed from its cultural context, the very social framework in which it had any meaning. Thus, the investigator must begin with the assumption that the symbols were, and are, free floating entities; but they are not, and could not have been. Symbols are culture bound whether they are dogs or pan-pipes. Even so powerful a ritual as the Sun Dance no longer includes all of the symbolic elements that it did during the height of Plains culture during the nineteenth century, nor does it function today to solve all the same problems (Jorgenson 1972). New symbols have emerged within the environmental context of white cultural domination, and many of the old symbols have been reinterpreted under the impact of this Western conquest.

Third, this approach can alone only provide interpretations of symbols which are (were) meaningful in their contemporary (ethnohistoric) contexts (Hunt 1977: 37–38). Material objects or design elements with important symbolic values do not necessarily disappear when these values are lost or altered. The items may be incorporated into new ideologies, even as they continue to be used in identical ways by the same people (see, e.g., Hunt 1977 on the Hummingbird in Mesoamerica). The symbolic value and meaning of an item in one culture system is, at best, an ambiguous guide to its value and meaning within another symbolic structure. In short, if history may erase the dynamics of structure, we must also concede that prehistory may obscure the social context of these same symbols. Our analysis must begin with context rather than objects, *qua* symbols.

2. The Environmental Context

If there are inherent difficulties in correlating material items with proposed standard symbolic values, how may we enter into these prehistoric systems? Let us begin with a single assumption: culture is, first of all, a symbolic structure (Sahlins 1976). From this, two premises logically follow. First, a culture defines its own natural environment; thus, the principal articulation between culture and nature is not technology, but the system of symbols. Culture does not meet the environment on the latter's terms, but filters its experience of the environment through its unique symbolic system. Thus, only certain plants, animals, and geographical features are recognized as meaningful. Culture, then, is the active modifier.

Second, by defining its own environmental context, at the same time a culture also sets the natural limits within which it can continue to operate. An environmental change, in order to