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Article in *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* · March 2016

DOI: 10.1007/s10816-016-9282-2

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No compensation needed: On archaeology and the archaeological

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Abstract

The archaeological is regularly perceived in negative terms as lacking and deficient. It is fragmented, static and crude, a residue of past living societies. Accordingly, much of archaeologists' efforts are directed towards the amendment of these flaws. The present paper, however, argues that these so-called deficiencies are in fact constitutive absences. Whatever the archaeological lacks, it lacks by definition. It thus follows that working to render the archaeological "complete" is in fact an effort to undo it, to convert it into something else. For the sake of discovering the past, archaeological practice is a sustained effort to rid itself of the very phenomenon that defines it, consequently setting in motion self-perpetuating circularity predicated on deficiency and compensation. The reason for this, it is suggested, is the otherness of the archaeological, being at one and the same time a cultural phenomenon and a fossil record, a social construct and a geological deposit. This condition is so baffling that it is approached by transforming it into something familiar. The paper argues that understanding the archaeological should be archaeology's first priority. Insofar as it is also the study of the past, this should be predicated on the understanding of the archaeological present.

Keywords

Absence; Loss; Circularity; Ontological turn; Description

Acknowledgements

The paper began with a colloquial talk, held in the Martin Buber Society of Fellows, Jerusalem. It benefited much from the informed opinions of friends and colleagues, to whom I am indebted: Ron Shimelmitz, Sarit Paz, Lutz Greisiger and Raphael Greenberg. I am particularly grateful to Nitzan Rothen for introducing me to LaCapra. Lastly, thanks are due to three anonymous reviewers for their perceptive and constructive comments.

Introduction

In this paper, I wish to argue for the singularity of the archaeological. While this may sound trivial or easily endorsed, the paper will contend that it is incompatible with the premises that underlie most of archaeological practice. In fact, these practices, it will be asserted, actively work to deny archaeological singularity and strive to transform it into something else. I argue that, for the most part, archaeologists are trapped in a vicious circle, rooted in a conception of the archaeological as lacking and deficient, which in turn perpetuates patterns of compensation (for lacks) and reliance (on other disciplines).

The heart of the matter is that the archaeological is too quickly and too readily made to serve purposes that are far removed from its concrete conditions. It is immediately put into the grinder of reverse engineering that seeks to discover what it once was, but in the process neglects to consider what it is. If the archaeological is Other, it is not because of its origin in a strange and unfamiliar culture, but because it is in-itself foreign. It is located in the gray zone between geology and paleontology, on the one hand, and history, sociology and anthropology, on the other. It flirts with both sides, but neither of them can truly capture it. This should be the task of archaeology.

The paper begins by unpacking the various ways in which the archaeological is considered deficient, setting in motion a self-perpetuating cycle of lack and compensation. Next, some of the less fortunate implications of this condition are presented, followed by an argument that these “deficiencies” are in fact constitutive of the archaeological, making way for the observations that efforts at compensation work to undo the archaeological. Drawing on Dominick LaCapra, I suggest that much of these patterns are due to a confusion of absence with loss, two conditions that should elicit distinct responses. At this point a recapitulation of the argument is offered and the singularity of the archaeological is asserted. Finally, the question of practical implications is addressed, offering several guiding principles.

Deficiency and circularity

Archaeologists habitually approach their data as lacking and deficient. It is a cultural record that has no people; it is a historical “document” in which events (in the sense of short-term happenings) can hardly be demonstrated; and it is a literary source that has no voice and whose significations cannot be determined. Broadly speaking, discussions of archaeological deficiencies can be grouped under three complementary labels: residuality, distortion, and statics.

The archaeological conceived as residue is readily apparent. It is taken to be a remnant of a once functioning whole that has stopped operating; many of its components disappeared without a trace, while many others were preserved in an incomplete manner. Collins (1975, p. 29) concisely echoed this sentiment in his seven sources of bias:

(1) Not all behavior patterns result in patterned material culture. (2) Of those which do, not all will occur where there is an opportunity for inclusion in archaeological context. (3) Of those so occurring, not all will be included in such a context. (4) Of those which are included not all will be preserved. (5) Of those which are preserved initially, not all will survive. (6) Of those surviving, not all will be exposed to, or by, the archaeologist. (7) Among patterns exposed to the archaeologist, not all will be perceived or properly identified.

The archaeological, in this respect, is the result of a continuous sequence of losses. What the archaeologist is left to work with often amounts to little more than faint residue. But the processes involved are not only processes of omission, they also promote distortion. An exceptionally wide range of agencies and mechanisms, some human, some natural, some systemic, some contingent, are responsible for observed patterns; and they are so closely intertwined that even if identified their disentanglement is often nearly impossible (see, [Schiffer 1987](#)). The “Pompeii Premise” does not hold, and the archaeological is, for the most part, a far cry from a faithful documentation of quotidian life ([Binford 1981](#); [Murray 1999](#); [Schiffer 1985](#)). Consequently, the term “palimpsest” is often used to describe the archaeological, designating it an undifferentiated aggregate of numerous events and processes enveloped in sedimentological units, a condition that has been argued to render the archaeological incompatible with interpretive aspirations that aim for short timescales ([Bailey 1983](#); 2007).

But the challenges faced by the archaeologist do not pertain solely to the processes that led from past behavior to present material remains; they pertain also to a significant qualitative gap, largely captured by Lewis Binford’s (Binford 1975, p. 251) distinction between dynamics and statics:

The archaeological record is a contemporary phenomenon. It is above all a static phenomenon. It is what remains in static form of dynamics which occurred in the past as well as dynamics occurring up until present observations are made. The only meaningful statements we can make about the past are dynamic statements. The only statements

we can make directly from the archaeological record are some form of descriptive statics.

The record is not only reduced and distorted, but the premises of its description are incompatible with the logic of the phenomena archaeologists strive to reveal. Lastly, the absence of people, as in active discursive individuals, must be noted as well. This is undoubtedly the most disconcerting aspect of the archaeological condition, undermining aspirations to articulate observations in terms of human experience, thought and action.

The archaeological is thus primarily perceived in negative terms: it is reduced, it is distorted and skewed, and it embodies patterns that are qualitatively removed from meaningful cultural dynamics. An impulse for compensation naturally follows: to reinstitute people, to re-produce movement, to find a voice, to establish ever finer temporal distinctions, etc. Ultimately, the majority of differences among archaeological communities pertain to what is considered an appropriate response to these shortcomings. Some responses strive to expand the archaeological record and urge towards finer resolutions of observation; others contemplate on cultural phenomena and explore ways in which they may be reconstructed from material finds. On the ground, the particular form the concrete response takes depends on scholars' alliances with certain views on humanity, cultural studies, and scientific method; and these are as variegated within archaeology as they are across the academic landscape.

Crucially, these responses cannot be contained within the archaeological. For the archaeological in itself does not have the means to "reconstruct the past," or to point on its own accord to what it does not possess. In order to realize that the archaeological is lacking people, that it is static rather than dynamic, that its various components were moved about and manipulated by multiple agencies, one must have reference to other sources of information and inspiration, in light of which these matters can be postulated and explored. Thus the sense of deficiency pervading archaeology has its origins outside of the archaeological; and it is from outside the archaeological that one must work towards the compensation for these deficiencies. Archaeology's inclination to multi-disciplinary scholarship, therefore, is not a choice, but a necessity, the only way forward under the established conditions of its operation.

A vicious circle begins to emerge here. The deficient conception of the archaeological originates from outside of it, and it is by means of concepts and methods developed outside of it that these deficiencies are confronted, thus reinforcing the original premise (of deficiency). Operating under a notion of loss

and deficiency, archaeologists invest much of their efforts in compensation, i.e. completing that which is missing. In order to do so, one must rely on 'models' of the complete, furnished by theories and concepts, drawn from other disciplines, whose record is conceived as complete or at least more so than the archaeological one. This entrenches archaeology's reliance on others, effectively reinforcing the sense of deficiency and lack.

Incommensurability and other implications

Surely, archaeology is not the only field that has to cope with deficiencies or gaps in its data. Historians, ethnographers and many others face challenges of this sort on a regular basis. In fact, gaps in the data are an integral part of scientific conduct (at least in the humanities and much of the social sciences); otherwise it would be nothing more than documentation. Moreover, one could argue that scientific research does not observe or encounter gaps in its records, but produces them. Data (or records, or sources) in- and of-themselves are complete; they are perfect and lack nothing, for they simply are (what they are). Gaps and deficiencies emerge only once data are taken to be evidence of something. One must consider the archaeological evidence of human behavior in order for the absence of people to emerge as an issue in the first place. Science is thus much about the convergence of epistemological commitments and ontological conditions (see, [Kuhn 1970](#); [Megill 2007](#); Polanyi 1958, esp. part three; Popper 1959, esp. 34-39).

Preoccupation with deficiencies of one's materials is, therefore, in no way unique to archaeology. Archaeologists produce them just like other scholars do. But archaeology does often seem to push this pattern to its limits. For, unlike other fields, they are not due to circumscribed events, emerging from the application of specific concerns to one's data. Rather they are pervasive, built into the very structure and aspirations of the archaeological project, into the very purpose of archaeologists' efforts. Although emphases and concerns vary, for most of us the goal of archaeology is to get a grasp of things that are beyond the archaeological: human culture, human behavior, social structure and other related matters (most candid definitions are found in introductory books, e.g., Gamble 2007, 1; White 2008, 11), hence the cycle of deficiency and compensation noted above.

This is in accord with the impression Edmund Leach had after listening to archaeologists for three days in Sheffield more than 40 years ago. He emphasized that between the patterned material finds that archaeologists study and the social systems that generated them in antiquity there lies an enormous

black box that hinders the possibility of confident inferences to be made across it. Crucially, he notes, this is not the case for the anthropologist. “In contrast [to the archaeologist], the ethnographer-social anthropologist has no Black Box problem; he can observe the workings of the system at first hand, and that is always the focal point of *his* interest” (Leach 1973, p. 767 emphasis in original). While certainly simplistic, this statement does convey an elemental demeanor: for the anthropologist the objects of analysis and objects of interest are quite the same, for the archaeologist they are not.

Doubts regarding the ability of archaeologists to provide valid inferences about past societies are a natural consequence of this condition. The complicated history of analogical reasoning is a case in point (for a useful discussion see, Wylie 2002). More recently, however, the heart of the issue was addressed, pointing out a problem of incommensurability between empirical conditions and interpretive aspirations. [Johnson \(2006\)](#), for instance, argued for a lack of correspondence between theoretical and other modes of archaeological practice, noting an incompatibility between formal theoretical tenets and discursive assumptions at work in concrete archaeological practice. Pointing in a similar direction, Lucas (2012, p. 3) observed that “... the current interpretive dilemma is not an epistemological one... but an ontological one, insofar as the metaphysical assumptions framing different discourses often remain unexamined. Does the reality posited in archaeological discourse about agency theory bare any correspondence to the reality posited through excavation or through artifact analysis?”

Provocatively, Bintliff took this to mean that contemporary archaeological theorists are *Ideopraxists*, activists engaged in the promotion of ideologies rather than scientific projects: “...a central divergence occurred in the grand Archaeological Theory Project, between deploying concepts to test as structures for archaeological observations, and the insistence that structures attractive to the researcher for other reasons should be taken as the undisputed basis for organising those data into meaningful patterns” (Bintliff 2011, p. 17). A chasm is open between archaeology as the production and management of the material record and archaeology as a field of research that strives to understand its material as a human and social phenomenon (see also, Jones 2004). As argued by Murray (1999, pp. 8–9) there is a need to recognize that

... conceptual and epistemological debate with contemporary archaeology should now be understood as being primarily centred on the tension between a developing understanding of the importance of the structural properties of archaeological records... and the traditional theoretical authority and primacy of views of how human action can

be meaningfully described and understood—which lie at the core of anthropology, history and the social sciences generally.

This incommensurability of archaeology as an interpretive practice and archaeology as empirical conduct is a direct projection of the abovementioned cycle of deficiency and compensation. For these two aspects of archaeological practice have different objects of interest. Empirical conduct is preoccupied with the archaeological proper, observing it, managing it, and most importantly organizing it in a practical manner. So-called interpretive efforts, on the other hand, usually have entirely different matters of interest, which have much less to do with the properly empirical (past culture, society, behavior, ideology, etc.). For these purposes, the archaeological proper and the record produced by empirical practice are often severely lacking and equivocal; hence its deficiency and hence the need for compensation.

A recent and interesting spinoff of this incompatibility is the frustration expressed by some scholars on the little attention received by archaeology from the growing ontological object-oriented discourse. This burgeoning field includes movements such as object-oriented ontology ([Bryant et al. 2011](#); Harman 2010), non-representational theory ([Thrift 2008](#)), thing theory (Brown 2001), and actor-network theory ([Latour 1993, 2005](#); Law 2009). While archaeologists have certainly been participating in this movement (Hodder 2012; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Olsen 2003; Shanks 2007; Webmoor 2007), they appear to have received little regard outside the field (but see Harman 2014). Thus, in their opening statement to their book *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things*, Olsen and co-authors (2012, pp. 1–2) state:

It would certainly be disingenuous fully to disassociate ourselves from such [object-oriented] academic kinetics, yet our novelty of purpose lies in revisiting, articulating, and developing what archaeologists have always done since the days of antiquarian science, and to emphasize how much archaeology brings to this new focus on things. Indeed, we even argue that archaeology offers an essential grounding to this *ontological turn*. This point is strangely absent from what is an increasingly pressing transdisciplinary discussion... This is not to say that archaeologists are not undertaking work that engages with the discussion... However, it is quite appropriate to suggest that archaeology is most often caricatured by other fields of endeavor as a circumscribed set of technical practices and interests that bear only indirectly upon the key terms of debate taken up in the ontological turn to things (emphasis in original).

And this is how Meskell (2013, p. 92) put it: “... why has archaeology—the study of the human past through its material remains—been largely omitted from a new canon of materiality studies? In this new wave of writing you are more likely to find literary theorists, geographers, anthropologists, historians, and even classicists discussing the constitution of the object world and our human engagement with things, instead of archaeologists.”

In short, how is it that archaeology—the discipline of things *par excellence*—is not being embraced by this growing field of interest in materiality and things? A range of explanations could probably be offered for this question. However, in line with the above observations, I would like to suggest that it has much to do with archaeologists’ negative perception of the archaeological. Because their basic attitude is of remedying the deficient condition of their materials, rather than regarding them as an abundant source, archaeologists are ill-positioned to argue for the ontological significance of material objects (but see, Olsen 2010). Consequently, archaeology lags behind the object-oriented discourse. Moreover, the *ontological turn*’s impact on archaeology may eventually emerge as another conceptual and methodical means with which to compensate for what the archaeological is lacking. For insofar as the point of departure is a philosophical frame of mind that originates from outside (or beyond) the archaeological, the mode of engagement will be largely one of getting the latter to conform to the former.

Yet, much of the impetus of this turn is not about replacing one theoretical framework with another, rather it is about removing elaborate conceptual constructs and carefully tracing associations concretely observed in empirical observations. It is about attentive observation and painstaking descriptions that follow whatever threads one can get a hold on. For archaeologists this would mean to abandon much of their interpretive aspirations and to proceed strictly from their empirical engagements; that is, from the operations that engage with the archaeological and produce the archaeological record. This would remove the problems of incommensurability noted above, but—and this is the greatest challenge—it would also produce a demand to reformulate archaeological practice and goals. For it means relinquishing the human, the dynamic and the social as predetermined or primary goals; and working within the static and non-human cultural phenomenon we call archaeological.¹

¹ The ontological turn in other fields of study did not have to give up the human, nor the constant movement of social interactions. This is unique for archaeology and it is also where, ultimately, the greatest rewards are likely to be found.

The archaeological constituted

Until now, the terms ‘archaeology,’ ‘archaeologist(s),’ ‘archaeological record,’ and ‘the archaeological’ were used in a somewhat off-hand manner. It is appropriate, at this point, to dedicate a few lines to clarify how I use these terms and how they differ from one another. I take *archaeology* to be a field of scholarly practice, and *archaeologists* its practitioners. *The archaeological* is the object of the field and its practitioners, but only indirectly. It is approached through the *archaeological record*, a durable construct that serves as a representation of *the archaeological*.

I am aware that some readers may find this line of formulation contentious. Scholars tend to use these terms—especially the latter two—in different ways, emphasizing different features and including or excluding different phenomena or conditions (for several notable discussions see, Lucas 2012; Patrik 1985; Rathje 1979; [Schiffer 1972](#); [Shanks et al. 2004](#)). Specifically, the *archaeological record* as a construct and the material remains of the past as given are easily conflated; and it is these two which I would like to keep distinct. I reserve, the term ‘*the archaeological*’ for the supposedly pristine condition of the materials, prior to their encounter with the archaeologist. It is the site hidden below the surface, an artefact entombed within a sedimentological matrix, alongside others.²

It is this condition of being out of sight, hidden below the surface, and disengaged from the incessant movement above that constitutes *the archaeological*. It is a condition of being, in which the cultural converges with the geological through burial. Excavation thrusts these things back to the surface, pulls them out of their geological encasement and into a dynamic cultural context once more. The archaeological can be accessed only through its destruction and dismemberment; we get only a fleeting momentary sense of it and then it is gone. Hence the significance of the record: the documents, photographs, plans, section drawings, journals, artifacts organized in an orderly and accessible manner. The archaeological record is necessary and must stand for the archaeological that has been undone. It is a descriptive endeavor, and is certainly not without its biases or preconception that channel its accounts into specific molds (see e.g., Goodwin 1994; [Hodder 1997](#)). But it usually embodies a genuine effort to

² This is not to deny, however, that archaeology constitutes the archaeological as an object of inquiry. But one should not take this to mean that the archaeological is dependent on the archaeologist for its existence, or that it is reducible to archaeological practice.

be faithful to the phenomenon it accounts for, if only by maintaining that the archaeological itself is its primary object of interest.³

It is because of this effort to be faithful to the archaeological that the archaeological record has the “deficiencies” noted above and it is for the same reason that problems of incommensurability emerge between the empirical and interpretive components of archaeological practice. Yet, most importantly for the present concerns, it follows that the perceived deficiencies of the archaeological—the absence of people, its static nature, its coarse-grained temporal resolution, etc.—are in fact constitutive of it. It is only because of these “deficiencies” that something can be designated archaeological. If there were active living people in it, it would not be archaeological, but ethnographic; if it would regularly provide accounts of short-term events, it would be historical; if it would signify a range of abstract or generalized ideas and concepts, it would be literary. Correct these “deficiencies” and the archaeological will disappear. The impulse of compensation, therefore, amounts to a conversion of the archaeological into something else (for some recent discussions on the constitutive and generative capacities of absence and vagueness see, [Bille et al. 2010](#); [Hetherington 2004](#); [Sørensen 2015](#)).

Loss and absence

How are we to understand this phenomenon? Archaeology, is a scholarly field whose expertise lies in the archaeological. Yet, a great deal of its energy is dedicated to confront and undo some of its most basic constitutive features. It is as if archaeology’s competence does not lie so much in the archaeological *per se*, but in its transformation into something else. It presupposes an original state or condition in which the archaeological was complete, exempt of the discomfort of its flawed existence in the present. At some point along the way it is said to have lost its dynamism, its voice, and its people. But insofar as the absence of these things is constitutive of it, then the archaeological never had what it is presumed to be lacking. In other words, archaeology approaches these things as losses, while for the archaeological these are constitutive absences.

³ This is a fairly narrow definition and one that poses significant problems regarding the finds of surveys or archaeologies of the present (Badcock and Johnston 2009; Buchli and Lucas 2001; Gould and Schiffer 1981; Harrison and Schofield 2009; Harrison 2011; Rathje 1979). It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider these issues in detail here. I will only say that one may engage these issues in two ways. One is that the archaeological can possibly be a matter of degree, in which forms of disengagement from society and culture (other than burial) may be considered. Second is to consider the archaeological record as a means of mitigation or conversion – the present may be made more archaeological if an archaeological record is produced from it.

If the reader finds this notion of constitutive absences to be confusing and vague, it is because it refers to something that is boundless. It encompasses all those things that an object does not have, of which there are always infinitely more than those things it does have. Take, for instance, a limestone pebble. It does not consist of flint, dolomite, clay, hornblende and numerous other rock forming minerals. Nor does it have the mass of a boulder, or angularity; it does not have life, not to mention sentience and thought. All of these and many others are absent in the limestone pebble; these are things it does not have, but which are constitutive of what it is. For if it did have them, it would not be a limestone pebble, or at least not the specific limestone pebble we chose to discuss. Thus to consider a constitutive absence to be a loss may have significant implications.

Dominick LaCapra (1999) offers an illuminating discussion on these matters in the context of trauma. Absence, according to LaCapra, is transhistorical; it is not an event, nor is it tied to one; it is more of a condition: "...one cannot lose what one never had" (LaCapra 1999, p. 701). Losses, on the other hand, are historically specific and related to events. Crucially, whether something is construed in terms of absence or loss has significant implications: "Historical losses can conceivably be avoided or, when they occur, at least in part be compensated for, worked through, and even to some extent overcome. Absence, along with the anxiety it brings, could be worked through only in the sense that one may learn better to live with it..." (LaCapra 1999, p. 712).

Loss is thus anchored in an event and demands some kind of compensation, while absence is a condition that may involve anxiety but one which needs to be managed. Loss in these terms always involves absences, but absences need not entail loss. The problems arise when the two terms are unwarrantedly conflated:

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in a indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and the interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. (LaCapra 1999, p. 698)

The conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object – the lost object – and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome... In converting absence into loss, one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity,

wholeness, security, or identity which others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made “us” lose. (LaCapra 1999, p. 707)⁴

The treatment of absence as loss underlies the principal attitude of archaeologists toward their materials. By definition, there are no people in the archaeological, nor are there social institutions like family or religion. The archaeological does not embody events in the documented historical sense, nor does it operate at timescales comparable to those of ethnography or our daily experience. These things were never there; they are absent in the transhistorical sense explicated by LaCapra.

Conceiving them as losses runs the risk of leading us astray. For loss demands compensation, and compensation for an absence can only come at the cost of undoing of the object; that is, the archaeological. It is crucial under such circumstances that absence be acknowledged as such, allowing other lines of progress to be explored:

Paradise absent is different from paradise lost: it may not be seen as annihilated only to be regained in some hoped-for, apocalyptic future or sublimely blank utopia that, through a kind of creation *ex nihilo*, will bring total renewal, salvation, or redemption. It is not there, and one must turn to other, nonredemptive options in personal, social, and political life – options other than an evacuated past and a vacuous or blank, yet somehow redemptive, future. (LaCapra 1999, p. 706)

Singularity

Following this line of thought thus demands that the archaeological project be rethought; that the absences and “deficiencies” of the archaeological be accepted and that other ways of engaging with it be explored, ways that do not seek to redeem it from its supposed losses. This, however, is easier said than done. In fact, it is nearly inconceivable. If archaeologists do not relate the finds they unearth with the people that produced, manipulated and discarded them, what meaning can one possibly hope to find? If one is not concerned with past societies, what is s/he to be concerned with?

Undoubtedly, the challenge is formidable. But it only proves the singularity of the archaeological phenomenon. It is so strange, so foreign to our mind and experience that the engagement with it could

⁴ In most archaeological circumstances the matter of placing blame is more general, of course. But it nevertheless is there, with reference to time, natural processes of degradation or so-called “disturbances.”

be made comprehensible only by converting it into something else, something familiar and better known. So archaeologists insist on discussing human behavior, or social structure, or cultural evolution; things that one can relate to either through personal experience or through the learnings of other fields. This, however, has a coercive quality to it, for it insists that the archaeological answer standards that do not necessarily belong to it. Or as Murray and Walker (1988, p. 251) put it, archaeologists tend to “...sacrifice this significant property [of singularity] so that they may apply conventional interpretations and explanations of archaeological data thereby gaining meaning and plausibility which “trickle down” from the contemporary social sciences.”

It is precisely because of these difficulties that the rewards in the long run are likely to be considerable. For the archaeological is Other; and its otherness is not so much due to its origination in a cultural context very different than the present, but because it constitutes a condition radically different from that of human experience. For the most part we are still unable to contain it; but if we succeed in this we might discover a new continent. For it is a cultural phenomenon unlike any other and, therefore, should provide a view that is equally unique. It need not bear equivalence to those of other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Rather relationships of another kind may be produced, where the archaeological may complement, augment and even contradict the understandings offered in other fields.

Surely, the present paper is not unprecedented in its attempt to argue for the singularity of the archaeological. Such assertions have been made, but their impact was limited. [Bailey \(1983; 2007\)](#), for example, argued for sensitivity to timescales, insisting that archaeology operates over durations significantly longer than those of ethnography and history. Crucially, he argues different phenomena are observable at different timescales and archaeologists must be sensitive to these variations and adapt their perspectives so that multi-temporal phenomena may be disclosed and their intertwining explored.

Murray and Walker (1988), as noted, criticized archaeologists of sacrificing the singularity of the archaeological record in favor of conventional interpretations and explanations that originate in the social sciences. They urged for the use of refutation strategies as a condition for the acceptance of analogical inferences. More recently, Lucas (2004) dwelt on the concept of *prehistory* and prioritized an ontological meaning over a temporal one – material culture before text.

A particularly interesting and comprehensive effort to reformulate the archaeological agenda was provided by Laurent Olivier (2011). Much in accord with the arguments offered above he asserts that

The conventional approach to the archaeological past posits that history—past events, what really happened historically in the past—is the only tangible identity of the past that artifacts express. It is widely believed that the past can be read from artifacts, and that this allows us to establish the reality of the past as it was; in other words, its historical identity.

But this is not at all so. There is no such thing as reading the past as it was. Its original identity was definitively lost in the process of fossilization through which it passed. Its material remains come down to us truncated, or enlarged, or transformed, and we are at a loss to distinguish what existed originally when the past was unfolding from the altered forms that evolved thereafter (Olivier 2011, p. 47).

For Olivier archeology is the study of material memory of the past and not the past itself; “... it is the work of the archaeologist to study the way in which memory is constituted over time...” (Olivier 2011, p. 99). Or, to borrow from Christopher Witmore (2015, p. 383), archaeology’s concern is with “Memories held within and between specific things.”

The limited impact these and other attempts, to reconsider archaeology’s relationship to its materials, is unfortunate, but not surprising. Much works against them. The circularity of deficiency and compensation with its capacity for self-perpetuation and reinforcement naturally rejects them; the perception of absences as losses is particularly deeply rooted; and it is extremely difficult to convince an audience, thinking along the line of loss, that cultural phenomena that do not operate on the human scale are worthy of attention. It is my hope, nevertheless, that the foregoing observations can serve to legitimize efforts of the kind cited here, and encourage an experimental line of thinking that may support the meandering course of trial and error that may seek to establish it in archaeological thought.

In practice?

The foregoing discussion is a theoretical argument; it operates in the realm of broad and abstract concepts. Even if it is logically sound and coherent, it remains uncommitted, somewhat aloof and detached from the nitty-gritty of archaeological practice and circumstances. Surely, the range of possible methodologies and applications is indeterminate and it would be imprudent to impose too much beforehand. In fact, what is most needed is a spirit of experimentation, and a willingness to try and err. Yet, this does not mean that matters of method and practice should not be considered. In fact, I

would like to suggest that at least three operative principles can be drawn from what has been said so far:

1. The object of analysis should also be the object of interest;
2. The procedure ought to be essentially descriptive; and
3. The validity of an account is to be valued according to its agreement with the phenomenon observed.

Insisting that the object of analysis be also the object of interest is a direct response to the observation that the archaeological is repeatedly sacrificed in favor of other matters. The premise of deficiency and the efforts at compensation are rooted in expectations that the archaeological provide access to phenomena that are not necessarily within its capacity. The result is a persistent demand that the archaeological be transformed into something else. If, however, we were to subscribe to the view that the archaeological is the object of our interest—that we analyze it and deconstruct it for no other purpose than to understand it better—then the circularity of deficiency and compensation will be neutralized. For under these premises, absences do not appear as deficiencies, the need for compensation dissolves, and the conversion of the archaeological is no longer implemented.

The call to apply a descriptive procedure follows naturally from the insistence that the object of analysis and object of interest be one and the same. This is partially due to the limitations of an explanatory approach (as in answering the question ‘why?’). For explanation can account for something in only one of two ways, causally or teleologically. In either case the object explained is dissipated; it becomes a function of something else, whether deriving from preceding conditions (causal) or serving other purposes (teleological) (see Lyotard 1991, pp. 95–100). Thus, seeking to explain the archaeological will defeat the purpose. Instead of understanding it better we will lose sight of it once more.

Thus, given the outlined program and goals, the election for a descriptive procedure is requisite. “We must turn “to the things themselves,” describe them correctly, and draw from this description an interpretation of their *meaning*...” (Lyotard 1991, p. 98 emphasis in original). Evidently, then, description is not reducible to mere reiteration. It is the base for interpretation and understanding. It is a foundational act, a constitutional intervention, through which the chaotic quality of the undifferentiated world gives way to order; it is a necessary measure with which a phenomenon is made to make sense (Lévi-Strauss 1966, Chapter 1).

Description, therefore, is already interpretive; and interpretation can, in many respects, be a higher order of description. Thus, the descriptive-interpretive efforts at elucidation need not cease with the first articulation of the phenomenon at hand. It can and should proceed further, persistently pondering the nature and qualities of the articulated features and their relations (This is an age old understanding, acknowledged across the humanities and social sciences; see for example, [Geertz 1973](#); [Gerring 2012](#); [Latour 2005](#); [Megill 1989](#)).

I take the archaeological record—the durable construct composed of photographs, plans, field notes, sorted finds, etc.—to be a description of the foundational kind. It renders the archaeological manageable and understandable. Surely, it is already interpretive and therefore also open to questioning ([Goodwin 1994](#); [Hodder 1997](#)). But what is presently important is that it describes the archaeological and explores its properties and features. As such, it provides a venue for further engagement and continued questioning. To embrace a descriptive procedure is, therefore, to continue along this line, to retain the archaeological as the focus of concern. Indeed, to argue for a descriptive procedure is to insist on a mode of conduct the primary function of which is to establish and maintain a sustained engagement with the object of analysis, with the archaeological.

Notably, such procedures are not foreign to archaeology that is already equipped with important means of engagement. Stratigraphy, typology and technology—the discipline’s three methodological pillars ([Schnapp 2002](#))—consist of well established modes of descriptive analysis that focus on the archaeological or particular aspects thereof. If one finds it difficult to envision how these methods can serve the agenda promoted here, it is because they are too often made to function as stepping stones for the compensation of absences, instead of serving as a means to further our engagement with the archaeological. The matter at hand is thus not only about experimenting with new descriptive procedures, but also about how existing procedures are to be deployed.

Asserting that description be the principal mode of engagement with an archaeological phenomenon, amounts to an insistence that nothing be added or removed. In other words, analysis must remain faithful to its object throughout; hence the third principle concerning validity. As with the two previous principles mentioned, this too is a response to the predicaments of the circularity of deficiency and compensation that demands that the archaeological be complemented with other things. Consequently, the validity of one’s account must rest in its persistent fidelity to the object at hand. Indeterminacies and ambiguities must not be glossed over, but carefully described; the concepts deployed and the

relations articulated must be clearly linked to the various features and aspects of the phenomenon at hand. If incompatibilities emerge, the account needs to be rethought.

Adherence to these three operative principles should enable us to pave the way towards a better comprehension of the archaeological, to acknowledge its absences and to appreciate its singularity. They serve to direct our attention and to guide our efforts. They encourage us to seriously engage with our objects of analysis and interest; but they certainly do not offer a definitive scheme of action. In this respect, they are largely open-ended and one must find her or his own way. Indeed, the object of concern may be anything archaeological; and one is justified to apply her/himself to anything from a single artefact to an archaeological culture, or, indeed, to the archaeological as a whole.

This being said, it is important to realize that if one is ready to follow through with the implications of the foregoing arguments—to embrace archaeological absences rather than make up for them—then one must also be willing to meet at least two kinds of challenges. One challenge is to be willing to enter into an engagement with a given object without knowing beforehand the kind of understanding that will emerge from it; indeed, if any understanding will crystallize at all. Another challenge is that the accounts produced may not answer established standards of valuation. For insofar as value judgments follow standards that prioritize compensation (that is, standards that value claims for non-archaeological issues like social structure, human agency, ideology, and gender), accounts that attempt to subvert these standards are likely to be judged as uninteresting or meaningless. The reason for this is the existence of a logical gap, to use Polanyi's (1958) terminology, between two frames of mind. Simply put, the one perceives the archaeological as complete and as the explicit object of interest; the other perceives the archaeological as incomplete and as a medium to reconstruct an ethnographic, sociological or historical past. The two are quite far apart; they situate the archaeological in disparate frameworks and have, accordingly, different expectations and standards. Bridging the distance is, therefore, a considerable challenge:

Formal operations relying on *one* framework of interpretation cannot demonstrate a proposition to persons who rely on *another* framework. Its advocates may not even succeed in getting a hearing from these, since they must first teach them a new language, and no one can learn a new language unless he first trusts that it means something. (Polanyi 1958, p. 151 emphasis in original)

Conclusion

Surely, for many of us the attraction of archaeology lies in the connection it fosters with a long-lost past; something mysterious and strange. And certainly, it is this endeavor to get a glimpse into the past that constitutes the field's main scholarly thrust. However, while investing considerable efforts to determine what the archaeological *was*, archaeologists tend to neglect what it *is*. The present paper argued that this is a problem; and one that is yet to be properly acknowledged and addressed.

It was argued that archaeologists habitually approach the archaeological as lacking and deficient, and that much of their efforts are, consequently, oriented towards compensation. The methods and concepts mobilized provide both the frame through which the deficiencies are defined and the means to overcome them, setting in motion a circular dynamic of deficiency and compensation. Some unfortunate implications of this condition were noted, including the problem of incommensurability between empirical and interpretive practices, and the field's minor impact and contribution to the growing discourse around the *ontological turn* and thing theories.

The most crucial implication, however, is the denial of the archaeological itself. Efforts at compensation ultimately work to transform the archaeological into something else. For the supposed deficiencies and lacks of the archaeological are, in the final analysis, constitutive of it. Efforts at compensation stem, therefore, from a confusion of the condition of absence with the contingencies of loss. Finally, it was suggested that much of this is due the difficulty to acknowledge the otherness and singularity of the archaeological. It is singular not because it originated from a culture radically different from our own, but because it constitutes a condition very different from what we know. Making up for the supposed deficiencies of the archaeological, therefore, is much about eroding its otherness and rendering it familiar.

These problems are quite significant and raise difficult questions not only about the validity of inferences archaeologists produce, but also about the very structure and meaning of archaeology as a scientific field and a project. It suggests that, in practice, archaeology is about converting the phenomenon prescribed to it—the archaeological—instead of understanding it and that the archaeological is not conceived as it is, but as it is assumed it should be.

To be clear, while the foregoing arguments rebuke existing archaeological scholarship and goals, they do not wish to do away with them. Rather they seek to point out their limitations and problems. The response proposed above does not remove them, but insists that they take the back seat. The past,

whether conceived in historical, social, symbolic or evolutionary terms, can only be understood as a secondary construct that must be established on the grounds of the archaeological. Otherwise, we will inevitably slip back into the circularity of deficiency and compensation. If the past is accessible at all, it is only through those venues that the archaeological affords. What precisely these venues may be and what kind of past they may allow us to trace is yet to be determined. It is likely that some of the themes of interest to archaeologists will go through this process largely undamaged, others will have to undergo modifications, and others yet will probably have to be admitted as untenable.

Moreover, the various features and characteristics of archaeology will have to be considered in terms of their anchorage in the archaeological. For example, archaeologists have rightly taken pride in the interdisciplinary qualities of their field that transverses the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. Much of this is attributed to archaeologists' readiness to explore and experiment with ideas and methods developed in other disciplines. This is undoubtedly true and a necessary feature of the field's regular compensatory efforts. But, from the point of view that insists that no such compensation is needed, the field's interdisciplinarity cannot stem from its scholars' open mindedness, but from the qualities of its object. It is the archaeological itself that straddles disciplinary boundaries. For it is a fossil record, a cultural phenomenon, a social construct, a symbolic field, a geological deposit. It is interdisciplinary because it possesses something of each, but none of them is wholly compatible with it: the archaeological is a fossil record to which uniformitarianism does not apply; and it is a cultural phenomenon that is static and has no people.

Reaching this point, the predicament is that the issue at hand cannot be addressed from within existing frameworks. Throughout the paper, the points that have been made came at the cost of deconstructing existing conceptual schemes. This is not because efforts to reconstruct the past are illegitimate; and it is not because of a denial of the truth in perceiving the archaeological as incomplete. Both have their place, although now derivative and secondary. Rather it is because of the prosaic reason that the circularity of deficiency and compensation denies the possibility that there is anything beyond it.

Consequently, any attempt to address the issues raised here and to work them out also calls for a reformulation of archaeology's goals and standards of valuation. It was suggested above that the archaeological should be taken as the field's proper object of interest, that the procedure to follow is essentially descriptive, and that the standards of appraisal should be the degree of agreement between the account produced and the phenomenon observed. Such scholarship will have to withdraw from the throbbing scene of interdisciplinary conduct and ambitious objectives; it will have to settle, initially at

least, for a more confined, disciplinary setting. Surely, the rewards will be slow to crystallize, and trial and error is likely to be the main mode of engagement, for there is no formula to direct our attempts at understanding other than the insistence that the archaeological is our proper object of interest. Yet, every step towards a better appreciation of the singularity of the archaeological is likely to constitute a considerable contribution to all.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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