

Postcolonial archaeologies between discourse and practice

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Abstract

As postcolonial theories have gradually but persistently gained more prominence in archaeology over the last decade or so, most attention has been directed towards critiques of contemporary academic and, to a lesser extent, popular representations of past colonial contexts. Much less effort has been spent on alternative and fresh interpretations of the colonial contexts in the past themselves. In this issue, however, the focus is firmly on 'doing archaeology' along postcolonial lines. That means either novel interpretations and perspectives on colonial situations in the past, whether distant or less so, or reflections on fieldwork and research in contemporary postcolonial contexts. In both cases, the underlying assumption is that postcolonial theories offer exciting perspectives for doing archaeology differently and it is the aim of this issue to explore these differences, both past and present.

Keywords

Postcolonial theory; representation; context; agency; colonialism.

Postcolonial roots

Postcolonial theory has rapidly become a fixture on the academic scenes of the humanities and the social sciences, ever since literary critics first began to explore alternative ways of 'reading' colonial societies in the later 1970s. The publication in 1978 of Edward Said's *Orientalism* is widely regarded as a foundational moment, even if authors and intellectuals like Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Mahatma Gandhi had already voiced the need for a fundamentally different look at society and history much earlier. Said's intervention was nevertheless instrumental in putting these and related developments on a sure academic footing. The rest is academic history and is extensively covered in a range of academic handbooks and readers (e.g. Barker *et al.* 1994;

Loomba et al. 2005; McLeod 2007; Young 2001). The more recent appearance of specialized academic journals like *Interventions* and *Postcolonial Studies* and a substantial number of dedicated university programmes further underline just how much postcolonial studies have become part of the fabric of the (English-speaking) academic world.

In archaeology, the first explicit discussion of postcolonial theory, if not also its first mention in archaeological literature, is straight away an entire volume on *Roman Imperialism*, whose subtitle *Post-Colonial Perspectives*, leaves little room for doubt about the editors' inspiration and intentions (Webster and Cooper 1996). It is surely no coincidence that Roman archaeologists were quick off the mark to explore the new postcolonial ideas, as by the mid-1990s their field had already seen a decade of discussions about the nature of Roman imperial power and the ways in which conquered peoples coped with it. The term 'post-imperial' had already begun to gain currency, and postcolonial perspectives in Roman archaeology have subsequently largely been subsumed into what we now call the 'Romanization' debate (Mattingly 2002; 2010: 75–123; Woolf 1997: 239–41; 1998: 1–23).

No doubt because colonialism has traditionally constituted a major topic in historical and classical archaeology, these fields quickly followed suit, even if explicit engagement with postcolonial theory has been more gradual (e.g. Gilchrist 2005; Given 2004; Silliman 2005). The significant rise in interest in colonialism as such and in particular its emergence as a major research theme in its own right, beyond the narrow confines of these various fields, nevertheless surely owe much to postcolonial theory in general. This is also suggested by increased attention for topics like resistance, subalternity, appropriation and 'modes of contact' (Given 2004; Lawrence and Shepherd 2006). An early case in point is a *World Archaeology* issue (28.3 in 1997) on the topic of culture contact and colonialism that included two papers, both associated with Roman archaeology, that explicitly discussed postcolonial theory, while several others examined topics like resistance and 'responses to colonialism'. As is the case with later volumes that explicitly compare colonialism across time and space (Gosden 2004; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002; Stein 2005), the majority of contributions explore the ancient Mediterranean, Roman expansion or modern European colonialism but crucially do so with explicit acknowledgement of the wider relevance of each particular colonial situation to broader colonial debates.

Postcolonial contexts

As shaped by Said and subsequently developed in cultural and critical studies, postcolonial theory has become largely centred on the closely related notions of representation and discourse. The reason for scrutinizing how colonizers represented themselves and, in particular, those whom they had conquered and whose labour and resources they exploited, was spelled out by Said, who stated that conquest and exploitation are 'supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations . . . as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination' (1993: 8).

As these and other postcolonial ideas were taken up and further developed by scholars with primarily literary backgrounds, emphasis has inexorably shifted away from the Foucauldian 'power-knowledge' connection advocated by Said, as most postcolonial work has tended to concentrate on literary texts. This literary focus was taken to task early on

by historians, who pointed to Said's insistence that both literary and other discourses did not exist in isolation but served to legitimize and to underwrite very real powers of domination and exploitation. It was alleged in particular that a one-sided focus on representation, no matter how critical, effectively perpetuated 'the reality of empire' and resulted in an opaque culturalism that contributed little to our understanding of colonial processes on the ground (Boehmer 1995: 20; Dirlik 1994). A distinct lack of contextualization of the texts and their colonial settings was succinctly highlighted as the root cause of this state of affairs (Turner 1995).

While this critique has eventually begun to be taken on board by literary scholars (Mullaney 2010), it is quite remarkable that those archaeologists who have engaged with postcolonial theory have also for the most part focused on critical analysis of discourse and representation. Their main concern has been how archaeological representations, and in their wake all types of research, including fieldwork, have been influenced by contemporary colonial situations and colonialist concepts. A typical example is the close reading of T. J. Dunbabin's *The Western Greeks* that for many decades was both starting-point and touchstone for studying ancient Greek colonial expansion in the south of Italy. The analysis showed its approach and interpretation to rely heavily on Dunbabin's own colonial experiences in the British Empire (De Angelis 1998). Given the extraordinary prominence of references in the Western world to Roman culture in particular and to classics in general, archaeologists and, following them, classicists have also turned their attention to the ways in which such representations were anchored in images beyond academic studies and libraries. They highlighted, for instance, the large numbers of neo-Classical buildings across Europe, the United States and their colonies, in which such images were almost literally cemented (Goff 2005; Hingley 2001).

There is of course good reason for such a critical preoccupation with past perspectives and biases in archaeology, as the discipline, quite like its sister anthropology, has a long history of close connections with colonial power and administration (Gosden 1999: 15–116; van Dommelen 2006: 108–10). At the same time, however, it is noteworthy that, of all scholars, so few archaeologists have risen to the task of contextualizing postcolonial theory more widely in their discipline and of looking beyond representations at the actual colonial contexts of the archaeological material concerned.

Postcolonial archaeologies

Context is as ubiquitous a concept in (post)modern archaeology as it is of critical importance to the discipline, since it not only establishes the stratigraphic and chronological basis for organizing the archaeological record but has also been foregrounded as the conceptual key for post-processual interpretations of the archaeological evidence (Hodder 1986: 118–46). In this light, it is less than obvious why archaeologists have by and large shied away from the perspectives and research questions that postcolonial theories have highlighted. Certainly in interpretative terms, context surely constitutes an eminently suitable starting-point from which to explore alternative (pre)histories and to give subaltern communities a voice or at least document their active engagement or covert practices?

To be sure, even if postcolonial studies are beginning to make up for the ‘weak contextualisations’ of the early years (Turner 1995: 204), material culture is a concept that does not feature in postcolonial handbooks – but, then again, that is precisely where archaeologists can and should contribute to postcolonial studies, as Chris Gosden pointed out already ten years ago (2001: 248–9). This is also not to say that archaeologists have not engaged at all with postcolonial theories in material terms, as imaginative and promising work has certainly been undertaken, but most archaeological engagement with postcolonial theory continues to be concerned primarily with representation and discourse (for a comprehensive discussion, see van Dommelen 2006: 110–20).

Exploring practice and material culture in postcolonial and archaeological terms is not restricted to past practice either. As Chris Gosden succinctly noted that ‘[a]ll archaeology today is postcolonial’ (2001: 241), there is great scope, as well as a need, for scrutinizing the social and political dynamics of archaeological research undertaken in the (post)modern world, whether in the decolonized countries of the so-called Third World or in the former metropolis (e.g. Gosden 2001: 249–57; Meskell 2007).

Postcolonial archaeologies in practice

It is the explicit aim of this issue to examine postcolonial archaeologies ‘in practice’ in the broadest sense of the term and to draw on the strengths of the discipline to begin to develop a practical and ‘material-cultural turn’ in postcolonial studies (Hicks 2010). Beyond this editorial, this issue is made up of seven substantial papers that appropriately enough discuss these matters through a range of case studies that vary from Roman Iberia to the Americas and Britain in the eighteenth century; others explore African colonial histories from Iron Age Morocco to twentieth-century Ethiopia.

The issue opens with two papers that focus on archaeological practice in the postcolonial world of today. In the first paper, Paul Lane takes us to the decolonized countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where postcolonial matters are perhaps of most immediate concern, to examine how and to what extent indigenization and nationalism are compatible with European postcolonial preoccupations. Darryl Wilkinson, by contrast, looks at current academic practice in the West in the light of (much) older European colonial perceptions and politics.

The other five papers are concerned with specific case studies from the more distant and recent past across the globe to investigate a number of postcolonial themes in explicitly archaeological terms. Alfredo González-Ruibal, Yonatan Sahle and Xurxo Ayán Vila look for indigenous domestic life amidst the violence of the Italian colonial war in twentieth-century Ethiopia. Jeff Oliver observes how maps not just (mis)represented eighteenth-century British Columbia but were also actively used by local actors as tools to engage with the often rapidly evolving colonial situation. Marcia Bianchi Vilelli shows how, around the same time but at the other end of the continent, inhabitants of a state-sponsored Spanish colony in Patagonia did not hesitate to develop their own practices in and interpretations of colonial life. She also draws attention to the distinct ways in which Latin American scholars are engaging with both their own postcolonial context and the colonial situations of the continent. The final two papers by Alicia Jiménez and by Carlos

Cañete and Jaime Vives-Ferrándiz investigate the notion of hybridity and convincingly demonstrate the relevance of this concept in practical terms in Roman Iberia and Iron Age Morocco respectively.

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