

The Paradox of the Historical Archaeologies

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A text that is nothing other than an artifact, an artifact that is nothing other than a text has remarkably little to say.

—JOSIAH OBER, 1995:122

Archaeology is limitless. Archaeologists can study the first human beings in East Africa with the same interest as yesterday's kitchen garbage in Tucson, Arizona. Yet archaeology is also full of limits. Archaeology is not a coherent tradition covering the whole of human history, but rather a scientific field crossed by different traditions and separated by diffuse boundaries from other fields of scholarship.

An important boundary in the field of archaeology runs between disciplines studying periods without writing and those studying periods with writing. This boundary separates "prehistoric" archaeology from "historical" archaeologies, such as Egyptology, classical archaeology, medieval archaeology, and historical archaeology in the United States. The boundary, which is based on the presence or absence of writing, is a legacy of the breakthrough of modern human science in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the antiquarian tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the boundary did not exist, since it was an impossibility. Antiquarian study was based on the idea that human history as a whole could be followed through texts; even Creation itself was known through the book of Genesis. The idea of a prehistory, with endless spaces of time beyond the horizon of writing, was a radical breach with the antiquarian way of thinking, and it was the very foundation of archaeology as a modern science. Yet at the same time when "prehistoric" archaeology was established as a modern science, classical archaeology was also created as a professional "historical" archaeology. The division into prehistoric and historic archaeologies can thus be traced back to the beginnings of modern archaeology.

The division of modern archaeology into subjects focusing on either literate or illiterate societies is also reflected in the duality of the concept of archaeology. On one hand, it can be perceived as a discipline concerned with the distant past, before the oldest texts. On the other

hand, it can also be perceived as a research field focusing on material culture in all ages, regardless of whether texts exist. In principle, most archaeologists today perceive the concept in its limitless sense, but in practice the attitude is often different. The cleavage is particularly clear in the view of the historical archaeologies. Considerable work is being done in the historical archaeologies; in Scandinavia and Britain alone, more than half of all archaeological literature is devoted to historical periods. At the same time, the historical archaeologies play a paradoxically modest role in general archaeological surveys. There are often historiographic overview of individual branches of historical archaeology, but the general surveys are dominated by a "prehistoric" perspective. The debate in prehistoric archaeology is automatically placed in the center, whereas historical archaeologies are dismissed as a "Balkanization" of the subject (Trigger, 1989:12), or viewed as rather irrelevant (Hodder, 1991), or passed over in complete silence (Klindt-Jensen, 1975). That is why we can read about C. J. Thomsen's three-age system, but not that his famous "Guide" also encompassed the Middle Ages, or that his contemporary Thomas Rickman worked with the same typological and stratigraphic methods in his chronological studies of the English Gothic. That is why we can read about Gordon Willey's epoch-making surveys in Peru, but not about contemporary landscape inventories conducted by British classical archaeologists in Etruria. And that is why we can read about the emphasis on the symbolic value of artifacts in postprocessual archaeology, but not about the long tradition of symbolic interpretation in many of the historical archaeologies. Several of the surveys have an implicit assumption that "archaeological" thinking has mainly taken place in the prehistoric archaeologies and that little is to be gained from the historical archaeologies, even if a great deal of work is done in them.

It is true that the discussion in the historical archaeologies is divided and often difficult to survey, since it is often geared to specific historical periods or areas, and is rarely formulated in relation to the general archaeological debate. Like K. R. Dark (1995:196), however, I believe that the stereotyped view of the historical archaeologies needs to be changed. Debates are carried on in the historical branches of archaeology too, and they are not just pale copies of the debates conducted in the prehistoric archaeologies. That is why the prehistoric perspective in many historical surveys of archaeology is too one-dimensional and oversimplified. The archaeological tradition is reduced, and hence also the image of archaeology, since historiography actively helps to create an archaeological identity. If the limitless

sense of archaeology is to be maintained, the history of research must broaden its perspective to include all topics concerned with material culture. Historiographic surveys should therefore also comprise the historical archaeologies as well, and bear in mind that archaeology borders not just on anthropology and history but also on aesthetics, philology, European ethnology, American folk studies, and religious studies. The history of archaeology, and hence the archaeological identity, can thus acquire more facets, if both the internal and the external definitions of archaeology are made less unequivocal.

A "total" history of archaeology along these lines remains to be written; here I shall only contribute fragments from the often neglected field of the historical archaeologies. Since the area is defined on the basis of writing, the relation between artifact and text will be in focus throughout. To give as multifaceted a picture as possible of the historical archaeologies, I apply both historical and thematic perspectives. It is essential to emphasize the historical lines, since they are often missing from today's debate, and since they can make the problems concerning artifact and text more obvious. Yet it is also important to stress the thematic perspectives to cross the often sharp disciplinary lines within the field and hence create the conditions for a more general debate. My desire to transgress disciplinary boundaries follows a tendency in recent years to see the historical archaeologies as a coherent field, with certain specific problems (e.g., Kardulias, 1994; Little, 1992; Morris, 1994; Schmidt, 1983; Small, 1995; von Falkenhausen, 1993).

As one point of departure for the study, I want to take the paradoxically contradictory view that exists of the historical archaeologies. On one hand, the presence of written sources is seen as a great advantage, since archaeology is always dependent on analogies in order to translate material culture into texts. Many people working in the prehistoric archaeologies look favorably, almost longingly, at "text-aided" archaeology (e.g., Clarke, 1971). On the other hand, the presence of texts can be seen as a great disadvantage, since it seems to leave little scope for archaeology by hampering the potential of archaeological analyses and interpretations. There is a constantly overhanging risk of tautology, and all historical archaeology can become, as Peter Sawyer's drastic criticism runs, "an expensive way of telling us what we know already" (cited from Rahtz, 1983:15). Some archaeologists claim that it is precisely the presence of written sources that has led to the characteristic "theorylessness" of many historical archaeologies, since writing appears to take on the same explanatory value as theories in "prehistoric" periods (e.g., Austin, 1990; Ellis, 1983). To put it in extreme terms, the

paradox is that those who lack texts want them and those who have texts would like to avoid them. The historical archaeologies are thus characterized by tensions between necessary analogies and inhibiting interpretations.

My aim is to try to chart these tensions, above all by stressing the relation between material culture and another discourse, namely, text. Writing is a “technologizing” of the spoken word (Ong, 1982), which means that it records a partly different “version” of the past from the one preserved in material culture. My study thus focuses on the way in which two partially different representations of the past can be related to each other. I shall not, however, consider pictures, another important and much older representation system than texts. If I had included images as an element running right through my study, the section of the archaeological field would have looked different and would have encompassed all archaeologies concerned with periods from the Late Paleolithic onwards.

Looking at artifact and text as partly different discourses means that some form of fundamental distinction is maintained between the two media. Consequently, I believe that we cannot solve the problems in historical archaeology by abolishing the distinction. To claim in a literal sense that artifact is identical to text (cf. Christophersen, 1992; Wienberg, 1988) or to perceive artifact and text as equivalent semiotic signs (see Sonesson, 1992:299 ff.) only makes the problems less visible, but they do not disappear.

My emphasis on the relation between artifact and text means, moreover, that I will be examining the shared features in the historical archaeologies. I will not, therefore, look in any depth at the way the different archaeological specialities can be related to theoretical models for individual periods—for example, medieval archaeology in relation to the concept of feudalism (cf. Andrén, 1985:66 f.; Klackenberg, 1986), or American historical archaeology in relation to the concepts of capitalism and modernity (cf. Leone, 1988; Little, 1994; Orser, 1988b, 1996:57 ff.; Paynter, 1988). Instead, my focus on the relation between material culture and writing means that the field of historical archaeology is viewed as a special methodological perspective. In this context, however, I see “method” as something more than a pure technicality. The historiographic outline makes it possible to detect changes in this methodological attitude, and “method” hence becomes a critical awareness of the changeable nature of practice.

Since the focus here is on the relation between material culture and text, the occurrence of writing is the primary limiting factor in the study (Figure 1). Writing was a conceptual revolution that made it

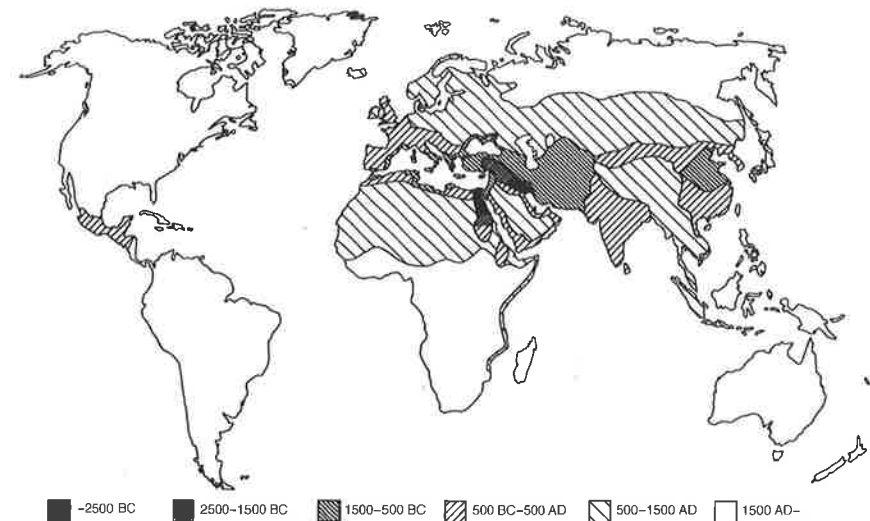


Figure 1. The distribution of deciphered scripts in time and place. The map is based on data on the occurrence of writing in different regions (Coulmans, 1996; Dinger, 1962, 1968; Djait, 1981; Hrbek, 1981; Marcus, 1992). The figure shows a minimal version of the chronological and geographic framework of historical archaeology. If ethnographic information, mythological narratives, and oral tradition were also included, this global view of historical archaeology could be modified in certain areas.

possible to render the spoken word in signs. This representation system, which is found in a multitude of different forms, has been spread over the world, probably from three different areas: Mesopotamia, China, and Central America (Dinger, 1962, 1968). Yet the presence of writing merely indicates the youngest possible limit for the historical archaeologies. Many cultures without texts of their own are known to varying extents from descriptions by outsiders, composed in areas with writing. In addition, oral tradition—whether recorded as written text or still living—can also go back beyond the oldest written evidence about an area (see Schmidt, 1978). The relevance of oral tradition for archaeology varies from region to region, however, and its chronological scope is often an unresolved controversy. A good example of the difficult problem of oral tradition is the renewed archaeological interest in the Indo-European languages (see Figure 30), since language per se must be viewed as the most fundamental form of oral tradition. The very idea of a common “Indo-European” origin for the related languages may be rejected, but if the idea is accepted, its importance for archaeology can vary significantly. Depending on the interpretative perspective, Indo-

European languages can be compared with material culture starting from the Early Neolithic, the Middle Neolithic, or the Early Bronze Age (cf. Mallory, 1989; Renfrew, 1987). Both ethnographic texts and oral traditions are important dimensions in the historical archaeologies, but because of the often unclear spatial and chronological scope of these types of tradition, the following survey primarily comprises the branches of archaeology that concentrate on areas and periods with writing. In these text-based disciplines, moreover, methodological issues are more explicit and hence discussed more often.

In addition, the question of writing and oral tradition concerns the very concept of "historical archaeology," and I shall briefly comment on this too. The concept can be used in two different senses: to designate archaeologies working with the modern era since around 1500 (see Orser, 1996:23 ff.; Orser and Fagan, 1995:6 ff.), or to define archaeologies focusing on all societies with writing over the last five thousand years or more. It is in the latter sense that I use the term, although it is not an entirely happy one, since it includes an ethnocentric hint that people without writing lack history (see Schmidt, 1983:64). Unfortunately, it is difficult to find a better alternative. The concept of "text-aided archaeology" (cf. Clarke, 1971; Little, 1992) has a one-sided bias toward archaeology, ignoring the fact that not only do texts aid archaeology, but the reverse is also the case. At present a term like "textual archaeology" evokes too obvious an association with postprocessual archaeology. Instead of a neologism, such as "grapho-archaeology," I have decided, after some hesitation, to retain the conventional terms "historical archaeology" and "historical archaeologies." These can be partly defended on the grounds that the concept of "history" is ambiguous. It stands not only for the history of humanity as a whole, but also in a limited sense for the mainly text-based discipline of history and for the potential to tell a story. For Hayden White (1987:55), the presence of writing means that "historical narrative" takes on a completely different character than in contexts where there are no texts. He therefore finds it justified to speak of "prehistory" as opposed to "nonhistory."

I will conclude this chapter by giving a short introduction to the following three chapters, in which the historical archaeologies are presented in a global outline. The aim of these chapters is to present briefly a number of disciplines in the field of historical archaeology to achieve a united starting point for the more thematic surveys. Although the historical archaeologies cover only parts of the archaeological field, the area is enormous. It is thus neither possible nor even desirable to present a total picture. I have deliberately concentrated on the European subject areas, since archaeology, as a "modern project," has its

origin in Europe. At the same time, representative traditions from most other continents will be touched upon. I have primarily focused the introductory surveys on subject areas that are of interest in the present context, that is to say, disciplines that I have found interesting in relation to issues of artifact and text.

Since historiographic surveys of the individual disciplines are normally available, I do not seek to paint a complete picture of the history of research in each of the subjects. This global sketch should rather be seen as an attempt to capture essential perspectives in the different subject traditions. This concerns the general view of the areas and periods under study, and the methodologically important issue of the relation between material culture and writing. It goes without saying that I cannot have an equally profound knowledge of all the different subjects. However, experiences from my own subject, North European medieval archaeology, have guided me in my search for similarities and differences in the other disciplines. I have found good points of departure for my quest in surveys of research history, handbooks, anthologies, and debate articles. Any archaeological investigation in a historical period could potentially contribute to the survey, but I have included only those works that are brought up via the other texts.

Neither archaeology as a whole nor its special branches are God-given categories; instead, the divisions between different archaeological specialities are historical constructions. I have nevertheless chosen to present the following subjects as distinct areas, since the disciplines are often "self-defining"; that is, they can be limited by means of special designations, by patterns in modes of reference, and by more or less clear subject identities borne by the practitioners of the individual branches. I have taken particular interest in the professionalization of the various disciplines, since this shows when a sphere of knowledge is demarcated and acquires its characteristic profile. A more general interest in the past becomes a discourse that makes certain perspectives possible and others impossible. The final professionalization is normally expressed by the emphasis of a special identity in fieldwork, teaching, research, organizations, conferences, and journals. I have also devoted some attention to the preliminary stages of professionalization, which sometimes consist of a long professional "prehistory." Moreover, I have considered the interest shown in recent decades in the issue of artifact and text.

The perspectives on research history in the following summaries of the subjects are both intradisciplinary and extradisciplinary (see Liedman, 1978). Since there are normally historiographic surveys of most disciplines, I have primarily concentrated the intradisciplinary

perspective on questions of artifact versus text. The extradisciplinary perspective means that I link up with the critical historiography in archaeology in the last two decades, when the political and ideological functions of the disciplines have been stressed (e.g., Bandaranayke, 1978; Keller, 1978; Mahler et al., 1983; Oyuela-Caycedo, 1994; Silberman, 1982, 1989; Trigger, 1984, 1989). This critical perspective is hinted at in various parts of the survey, but I deepen it only when the perspective can shed light on the "methodological" problems shared by the historical archaeologies.

Historical Archaeologies in Europe

THE EUROPEAN TRADITIONS

The historical archaeologies in Europe are like a mosaic of different, partly overlapping traditions. The different parts consist of classical archaeology, provincial Roman archaeology, Byzantine archaeology, medieval archaeology, postmedieval archaeology, and industrial archaeology. In addition, historical archaeology can be found in some marine archaeology and in some "prehistoric" archaeology. In the latter case it is a question of protohistorical periods, such as the pre-Roman Iron Age in Central and Western Europe, and the post-Roman Iron Age in Northern and Eastern Europe. Taken together, the subjects cover all "historical" periods in Europe, but they do not represent a uniform archaeological tradition. The division into special branches, each with its own distinctive character, is largely due to the fact that the definitive "archaeological" professionalization took place at widely different times.

Despite the obvious division, there are nevertheless certain shared features. All the subjects have an indigenous European origin. They often have a long "prehistory," before the final professionalization, since material remains from the historical periods in Europe have been studied since the Renaissance, and they all concern fundamental questions of national and European identity.

In this context I have chosen to sum up only the two European archaeological traditions that I know best, namely, classical archaeology and medieval archaeology. Many of the characteristic features in these two disciplines can be found in the other subjects as well. For instance, the debate about artifact and text in classical archaeology and medieval archaeology is very similar to corresponding discussions in the other disciplines (cf. e.g., Alkemade, 1991; Champion, 1985; Gaimster, 1994; Harnow, 1992; Hill, 1993; Rautman, 1990; Scott, 1993).