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Triangulating absence: exploring the fault lines between archaeology and anthropology

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The cracks beneath the surface: inter-disciplinary fault-lines

Archaeology is a new discipline at the University of Iceland; when the programme was started in 2002, archaeology was placed with the Department of History in the Humanities Faculty. Recently, the university was in the process of re-structuring its academic divisions and in this re-organization, archaeology considered moving to join anthropology in the Social Sciences. I mention these events because the institutional location of archaeology raises issues of disciplinary affiliation for any university, even if other, totally unrelated reasons might weigh equally or more so in such contexts. In our discussions in Iceland, opinions varied on the intellectual kinship of archaeology, but mostly they were drawn towards three predictable options: history, anthropology/ethnology or geology/geography. In practice, the responses were strongest from the first two, one person arguing that archaeology *is* history, and another suggesting that archaeology is part of the fourfold field of anthropology. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the proponents of these extremes were not archaeologists, but a historian and anthropologist respectively.

In many ways such debates profit us little because disciplinary connections (or boundaries for that matter) are multiple and shifting; besides which, at the end of the day, most of us like to think that 'archaeology is archaeology is archaeology', in the oft-cited words of David Clarke (1973). It is always a dangerous game to define what distinguishes one discipline from the next – exceptions can always be found, and in these times of dismantling disciplinary borders, such attempts are doubly problematic. Throughout this paper I have largely chosen to keep the language of disciplinary identity but I would hope the reader will see that the issues are really about different modes of scientific operation; as a generalization, different disciplines have different modes of operation and if I use disciplinary labels as shorthand for these modes, this in part reflects the historical traditions of the disciplines. In this paper, I want to explore a few of the connections between archaeology and anthropology along a very specific path; a similar discussion could be had about archaeology's relationship to history which would raise other issues, but that is another story.

It would be difficult, even foolish to deny the extensive overlap between many of the

goals and broader theoretical frameworks of archaeology and anthropology. However, I would like to suggest that such broader conceptual similarities – which indeed have a long history – conceal a troubling rift between the two disciplines at an empirical level: the differences between ethnographic and archaeological contexts. My argument here is fairly simple: by stressing the broader conceptual similarities while ignoring the empirical differences, one is faced with precisely a situation where archaeology can appear unequal or asymmetrical with respect to anthropology, simply because the archaeological record is encouraged to do work it is not up to. I have no wish to erect a barrier between archaeology and anthropology. Rather I examine the nature of the possible bridges – and blockages – that exist between the two disciplines. Yet, I would suggest that such similarities between the subjects have been forged largely in the context of abstract, over-arching perspectives (which doubtless extend beyond archaeology and anthropology to encompass all the human and social sciences) in a top-down approach. This ignores the empirical nature of each discipline and favours homogenization, even conventionalization (Murray, in Lucas 2007: 162–3). In contrast, a bottom-up approach maintains the heterogeneity of each subject while creating the possibility of empirically traceable connections; following Latour, one could also characterize this as an attempt to 'flatten' the discourse between the disciplines in order to avoid easy abstractions that paste over the empirical rifts, rather than work at suturing them (Latour 2005).

I call the differences between the archaeological and ethnographic contexts rifts or fractures because it is the discontinuities that I want to emphasize here rather than the continuities. By stressing discontinuity, it is hoped that any links can be given a more secure hold. While the sections below discuss the fractures, they equally attempt to find ways to repair them, producing a creative tension. My aim is to avoid a situation where such discontinuities are transformed into an asymmetry, by keeping my discourse as 'flat' as possible. These fractures are manifold but in order to put some kind of limits to this discussion, my focus here will be specifically on the differences between archaeology on the one hand and on the other, the branch of anthropology concerned with material culture. This is simply because this is the sub-field of anthropology which is the closest, empirically, to archaeology. Both share the same ostensible object of study, i.e. material culture – and it is the empirical differences that concern me here. Wherever I refer to the terms anthropology or ethnography in this text, I will therefore be primarily referring to an ethnography of material culture, unless otherwise stated. This latter should not necessarily be equated with the general inter-disciplinary field of material cultures studies (as centred at UCL; e.g. see Miller 1998; Buchli 2002), for in many ways the point of this paper could alternatively be defined as an exploration into the discontinuities of such a broad field as material culture studies. In the following three sections, I will examine the sites of three fractures between archaeology and ethnography as they concern material culture.

Missing persons: the absent subject

One of the experiences one has when excavating a well-preserved site is the feeling of emptiness – even though you may be surrounded by fellow diggers, to work in a space with high standing walls, floors and internal features engenders an impression of being in someone else's space, where that someone is absent – that is, the people who once built and inhabited this space however many years ago. One gets the same feeling as a tourist walking around sites like Pompeii or Herculaneum or even more recent ghost towns of the 20th century like Chernobyl or Oradour. With varying degrees of effort however, the feeling can be elicited from almost any archaeological site or find, such as holding a 10,000 year old flint axe that was made by another person and is the only testament to their existence. This experience of emptiness, of lack, becomes articulated into the more dispassionate, conventional goal of archaeology: to get at 'the Indian behind the artefact' (Braidwood 1958: 734).

Perhaps the first and most apparent difference between archaeology and an ethnography of material culture is this question of the missing person. This creates something of an ostensible reversal of goals: while archaeology conventionally tries to get to people *through* things, an ethnography of material culture, superficially at least, tries to get to things *through* people.¹ This reversal of the proximate and ultimate subjects of archaeology and ethnography has a certain irony but also a certain asymmetry; for the ethnographer, both terms (people and things) are present, but for the archaeologist, the ultimate term (people) is always missing. One of the ways, in fact probably the most common way archaeologists have dealt with this absent subject is to conflate it with another, equally absent but also abstract subject where the goals of archaeology and ethnography converge: Culture, or Society (or any variation thereof such as Identity, Consumption, etc.). As Kent Flannery put it, the aim of archaeology is to get at the *system* behind both the Indian and the artifact (Flannery 1967: 120). In this sense, both archaeology and ethnography are chasing abstract subjects, entities that occupy a different ontological plane to their empirical field of people and things (Figure 3.1). Whether one agrees that there is a final, shared goal where the two disciplines converge or not is not the primary issue here; rather it is the fact that for archaeologists, the absence of people is somehow rescued (and thus its relevance suppressed) by this ultimate reference, a social or cultural abstraction.

So what are the consequences of the absent subject in archaeology? In some ways, the answer to this question can be found in the history of theoretical debate in archaeology since the 1950s. Writing in 1954, Christopher Hawkes' 'ladder of inference' linked the opposition of materialism and idealism to the distinction between things and people creating an epistemological scale, where knowledge about past peoples through things was most secure at the bottom of the ladder with materialist explanations such as economy and technology and least viable when it came to understanding past ideas and beliefs (Hawkes 1954). Another way of framing this problem in North America was in

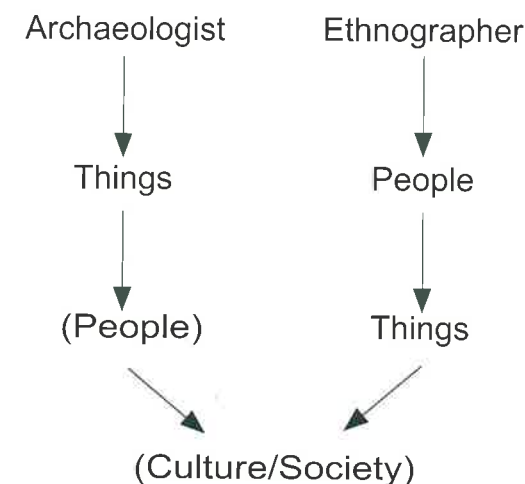


Figure 3.1. The intentional structure of archaeology and anthropology; bracketed terms denote empirical absence.

terms of an interpretive dilemma: archaeology performs best when it is exploring the formal and physical properties of objects through typology and material science, but this also says very little about the people who made these things. Yet as soon as one wants to go beyond this kind of 'artefact physics', one also loses any firm ground to validate interpretation (DeBoer and Lathrap 1979: 103; Wylie 1989). Despite these doubts over the limits of archaeological inference, since the 1960s archaeologists have been pushing ever wider the horizon of what things can reveal about people, scaling and ultimately discarding Hawkes' ladder. In this respect, a number of critical ideas emerged which restructured the disciplinary intentions, as depicted in Figure 3.1.

The first idea is crystallized in the work of Hodder in the 1980s with the notion of material culture as both meaningfully constituted and active. Hodder helped to develop the 'linguistic turn' within archaeology, arguing that ideologies or cosmologies can be read from material culture; he also stressed that things are not simply inert matter, reflecting the intentions and actions of people but mutually constitutive of such actions and intentions (Hodder 1982). Objects become agents. The second idea, largely coming through gender and queer theory, is almost the inverse – turning people into objects, by focusing on the embodiment of people, and how their identity and actions are inextricable from their physical form – and how the boundaries between the body and material culture are fluid and transgressive rather than stable and fixed (e.g. Meskell 1996). The third and final idea is the most recent, and comes through the development of symmetrical archaeology by Shanks, Olsen and others, influenced by Latour, where the very distinction between people and things is challenged and in its place, more

hybrid collectives are proposed (see the recent collection of papers in the journal *World Archaeology* volume 39(4)). If one accepts these arguments, then clearly the articulation expressed at the beginning of this section is misleadingly simplistic; archaeologists do not aim to get at people *through* things any more than ethnographers try to get at things *through* people, since the very separation is dubious if not false. The absence of people is then, in itself, not damning – in the first place, people are present (as bodies or remnants of bodies), but more importantly, the absence of people is *potentially* no different to the absence of any thing which does not preserve, such as organic materials and so on. The fragmentary nature of the archaeological record should not overstate the absence of people over the absence of other things. Symmetry is restored – not just between people and things, but between archaeology and ethnography. Or is it?

From statics to dynamics: what happened in prehistory

The notion that both people and things share agency and embodiment, that what really matters is the way in which agency is distributed within collectives or how people and things constitute each other in practice are ideas eminently suited for exploration in ethnographic contexts. The ethnographer can observe such interactions, can observe the performativity of people and things; if performance or practice is the site where people and things are constituted, then ethnographers have a front row seat. The archaeologist on the other hand, is not only not in the front row, she or he is not even in the theatre; they do not observe practice or performance, they have to infer it from the arrangement of things and bodies left lying on the stage which constitute the archaeological record. They arrive after the performance is over. There is a real difference between a skeleton and a living human being, between objects in action and objects lying inert, buried under the soil. It appears as if we have just substituted one absence for another – performance for people.

This second fracture is a traditional one for archaeologists insofar as it can be mapped onto the classic distinction of statics and dynamics articulated by Binford (1981; 1983). Binford argued that the principal problem facing archaeologists was how to infer dynamic processes from a static archaeological record; his solution, the Rosetta Stone of archaeological translation, was middle range theory which uses actualistic studies, particularly ethno-archaeology, to create bridges between dynamics and statics. However one judges the merits of middle range theory – and it has been hotly contested (e.g. Kosso 1991; Tschauer 1996) – it does not alter the basic temporal relation of the archaeologist to their data. Ethnography and even ethno-archaeology observe events in motion – observe change – while archaeologists can only infer it from spatial configurations of matter. If we want to find a way to cross the divide between the ethnographic and archaeological records, we have to deal with this problem of change.

One solution is to argue that the rate of change inferable from the archaeological

record is quite different to that in ethnography, because of the different tempos – archaeology deals with slow or long-term processes often imperceptible at the level of human experience. Indeed, it has been argued that the nature of the archaeological record is such that it necessarily entails such a conclusion (Bailey 1981). Such a solution then, questions the idea that archaeologists and ethnographers are looking at the same kinds of phenomena; if they are not, then the ostensible asymmetry between archaeology and ethnography indicated in the theatrical metaphor which opens this section is open to doubt (see also Yarrow, this volume). The lateness of archaeologists to a performance is not so much an obstacle to understanding but is an advantage, insofar as it allows one to have a different temporal perspective, which is impossible for the ethnographer. For even though the ethnographer can directly observe change, this is confined to a comparatively small temporal frame; traditional ethnographies accentuated this with an emphasis on synchronic studies, but even the more diachronic or historical ethnographies which emerged in the later twentieth century are still relatively restricted in time scale, compared to archaeology.

However, even if such arguments are plausible, they do not resolve the original problem. In fact they accentuate it: archaeology, unlike ethnography, does not observe change, it only infers it, at whatever scale it happens to unfold. The first step towards a realistic resolution to this problem is to abandon the original distinction between statics and dynamics. It takes little imagination to realise that the ethnographic record is not exclusively defined by things happening – just as often as not, there is stasis. Nothing happens in a locked store room. To be sure, this is partly a question of perspective – some things happen much slower than others, often too slow to be perceived and of course periods of stasis are always temporary, even if they can last a relatively long time. But then the same applies to the archaeological record – it is never static, as Schiffer reminds us, but always undergoing transformation of some kind (Schiffer 1987). If the static-dynamic distinction is no longer helpful, especially in distinguishing the archaeological from the ethnographic context, then it opens the way for a new rapprochement between archaeology and ethnography. This comes by re-considering the nature of material collectives. Not only should we break down the distinction between people and things (as discussed in the last section), we also need to break down the distinction between objects and events.² This separation of object and event lies at the heart of our conventional characterization of archaeological inference, which depends on the distinction of static objects from their dynamic context. The one has survived (static object), the other has not (dynamic context). If however, one argues for the inseparability of objects and events, then the issue is not about how objects act/perform, but rather about the distribution of the *power* to act/perform within and between collectives. It is more like exploring the entropy or inertia in material organizations, the *latent* rather than manifest side of action or performance (Lucas 2008).

A room, with nobody inside and where nothing happens, is still actively charged – its material configuration gives it certain propensities for resisting or engendering change,

which is not simply about the physical properties of entropy (i.e. decay or preservation) but cultural properties too. To re-align the British traffic system or electrical system to continental configurations would meet resistances of quite a different scale to re-aligning shoe or clothing sizes. These propensities are, in principle, just as observable in the archaeological record as in the ethnographic present, and reinforce symmetry between material culture in the archaeological and ethnographic records. Rather than inferring dynamic events from static things, archaeology can explore the latent forces that bind things into material assemblages or collectives.

Doubling the present: the archaeologist and their object

However, while this may have removed the problem of observing events or change as a site of difference between archaeology and ethnography (or at least relocated it onto another distinction, that between latent and manifest agency), it does not remove the problem of a temporal fracture between present and past. If the last section partially sutured the rift between the temporalities of material culture in archaeological versus ethnographic contexts, in this section one faces the temporality of the relationship between the respective disciplines and their subject. Ethnographers exist contemporaneously with their object while archaeologists are always out-of-phase, existing in an anachronous rather than synchronous relationship to their object. As Edmund Leach once suggested, archaeologists are always too late (Leach 1973). To continue with the theatrical metaphor of the last section, while both an ethnographer and archaeologist can study the latent performance of an empty stage, the difference is that the ethnographer knows that someone will or might be coming on to stage any minute, whereas the archaeologist knows that everyone has already left the building. This might seem contradicted in archaeologies of the contemporary past where archaeologists study contemporary society (the classic example being Rathje's Garbage Project – see Rathje and Murphy 1992; also Buchli and Lucas 2001), but in a sense this temporal anachronism is essential to the archaeological process. Indeed, the very act of archaeological intervention guarantees this insofar as the site is put under a form of temporal quarantine. This is why such archaeologies of supermodernity work best on sites of disaster – sites which have undergone a sudden and rapid change leading to abandonment, catapulting them into a past which is yet still contemporary (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008). But such archaeologies of the contemporary past are largely archaeologies of destruction not because destruction is a condition of supermodernity, but because such archaeologies can only effectively operate where a sudden and rapid abandonment of a site has happened. Disaster is not a characteristic of 'our time', but rather defines the possibility of an archaeology (as opposed to ethnography) of 'our time'.

The difference between material culture in an archaeological as opposed to a strictly ethnographic context, revolves around this issue of temporal fracture between researcher

and their subject. However, even this is not quite so simple, for in fact an archaeologist is a contemporary of their object of study as much as the ethnographer – these remains, these artefacts exist in the archaeologist's present, otherwise the archaeologist could not study them. Binford said as much, many years ago (Binford 1983: 19). The difference lies not so much in the temporal fracture between the researcher and their object, but in the temporal fracture within the object itself in archaeology: these remains exist in the present but they are also of the past. This fracture creates something of a paradox for archaeology but also one that has obvious parallels in everyday life: memory objects (e.g. see Olivier 2008 for an interesting discussion of this theme). Souvenirs, keepsakes, mementoes – in fact almost any object – have memories attached to them: they exist in the present but are of (and hence evoke) another present, an absent present we call the past. The same is true of archaeological finds. Can archaeology be likened to an ethnography of an absent present?

Ironically, this recalls Fabian's charge against traditional ethnography and its 'denial of coevalness'; that is, a refusal to see the ethnographic subject as existing in the same time as the ethnographer (1983: 31). While ethnography may have moved on, with archaeology this separation of two presents – the archaeological present and past present – remains a fundamental premise. The troubling implications of this 'doubling of the present' are brought out when we look at the respective modes of operation for archaeology and ethnography. The two disciplines used to share a similar practice, that of collecting things. However, in the transition towards a professional and academic discipline over the late 19th and early 20th century, the two subjects diverged; ethnography became defined primarily by a mode of intervention called participant observation, while archaeology developed principles of stratigraphic excavation (Lucas 2010). Where ethnography dropped its interest in things, archaeology continued to collect, only under increasingly more rigorous and systematic conditions. What is significant is that even with the return to material culture within anthropology since the late 1980s, it has maintained its distanced position with respect to things, studying material culture through participant observation rather than collection. The reasons for this divergence in modes of intervention are complex (see Lucas 2009), but not of immediate concern; more relevant are the questions of what this difference means and how it is significant.

If one looks at collecting in the context of early ethnography, what is interesting is how conflicting value systems created tensions for the proto-ethnographer. Objects became ethnographic artefacts primarily through an act of exchange – commonly but not exclusively a commodity transaction. This set up potential conflicts of meaning around objects as they embodied multiple values according to the contexts they circulated in prior to becoming ethnographic artefacts (e.g. see Thomas 1991; Gosden and Knowles 2001). The same problematic status now attaches to archaeological objects that may have come through the (illicit) antiquities trade and there is an explicit ambivalence about how an archaeologist should respond to such artefacts. Now it may be that ethnographers

simply do not need to collect objects to conduct the kind of material culture studies that thrive today, but this does not negate the fact that collecting would still be highly problematic. Issues of ownership and appropriation weigh much more heavily on objects given/received through an act of exchange, than objects found through an act of excavation. This is not to ignore the fact that even within archaeology, questions of ownership are not at stake; they clearly are, but this operates in a different sphere. Because by and large, ethnographic objects are acquired through acts of exchange while archaeological objects are acquired through acts of discovery, it sets up a very different chain of relations between people and things.

It is difficult to reconcile this difference. The only way one could do that, is to argue that the archaeologist, in the act of discovery, establishes some kind of posthumous relationship to the long dead people of the culture or society under investigation, so that discovery is in fact, a concealed or special form of exchange. In terms of the social function of archaeology, this is not so strange – even if the objects have been forgotten in an absolute sense, the archaeological operation can be viewed as a form of memory work nonetheless, a redemptive act on behalf of the dead (Tarlow 2006). But in arguing this – a not implausible case, since the issue meets concrete expression in the context of unearthing the skeletons of these same people – we are forced to re-introduce the concept of the absent subject with which we started this discussion and as a consequence, we are locked in a circle.

This circularity is reinforced theoretically when considering the nature of archaeological objects as memory objects. Any memory-object, because of its split temporality (existing *in* the present but *of* the past), is also ineluctably linked to a split subject – either the same subject as they once were and as they now are (e.g. mementos from my childhood), or different subjects such as dead ancestors and living descendants (e.g. mementos of my dead father). Now in most cases, archaeology is not an excavation into one's own past, though in principle this is perfectly feasible; so with archaeology, the artefact as a split memory-object also entails a double subject – the archaeologist in the present and the people in the past. While the one is indeed contemporary with the object of archaeology, the object itself surely implies another, missing subject; in short, an absent present entails an absent subject.

Triangulating absence

In exploring the empirical differences between the archaeological and ethnographic contexts, I have pursued the sites of three fractures: the absent subject, the problem of change and anachronism. As this discussion has unfolded, these three fractures appear to be interlinked in important ways, and in fact may even be locked into a triangular relation to each other. In stepping back, these three fractures could be redefined as variations on a single theme: absence. The absent subject, the absent event and the

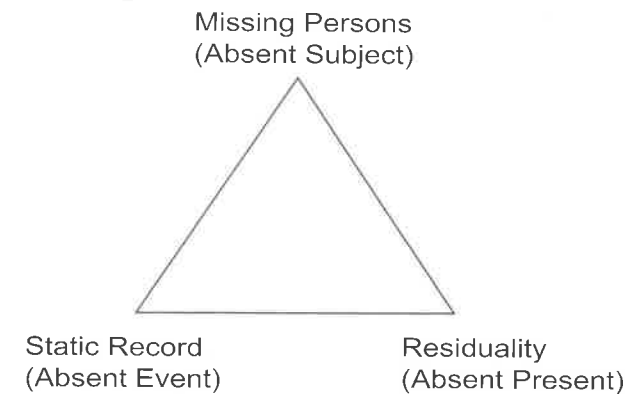


Figure 3.2. *Triangulating Absence: the threefold fracture between archaeology and anthropology.*

absent present, each term dialectically unfolding from the previous one (Figure 3.2). The absent subject referred to the missing people in archaeology and how conventionally, archaeology tries to get at the 'Indian behind the artefact'. The absent event refers to the fact that archaeologists do not observe change or things happening in time, they have to infer it – infer events from material residues of events, infer time from space. Finally, the absent present refers to the fact that the archaeologist is only partially a contemporary of the object of her study – that in fact, this object, as a residue, has a split temporality which entails an absent present, which we conventionally call 'the past'.

This absence, which lies at the heart of archaeology, is in a way what will always separate it from ethnography. But such differences should not be read as asymmetries; in a way, the problem of asymmetry emerges precisely when archaeology tries to mimic other disciplines such as anthropology as if the empirical and operational differences were unimportant. One cannot escape these absences which haunt archaeology, and rather than deny them or downplay them, archaeology needs to seriously engage with what they mean for the discipline. For they surely suggest important ontological differences between the archaeological and ethnographic records, which must impact on the sorts of narratives and interpretations the two disciplines can present. The first place to start might be to jettison the very term 'absence' which in itself conceivably adds to this perception of asymmetry. It served a useful purpose in this paper by highlighting distinctions, but new terms may come to take on more relevance, such as those of latent and manifest agency. If there is one point I would like to repeat in ending this paper, it is that for all the shared aims and ideas drawn from a broader body of social theory, each discipline has different modes of operation, which relate to the nature of their immediate subject. While the cross-disciplinary rise of material culture studies has been intellectually important, the field is not homogeneous. The practical and empirical differences between two disciplines like archaeology and ethnography should not be

overlooked and in fact, in paying closer attention to them, it may be possible to build much better bridges. At the very least, it removes the possibility of asymmetry rendered as inequality, and may help to forge new and mutual forms of respect.

Notes

- 1 This is of course somewhat of a simplification – in ethnographies of material culture, both people and things are equally present to the observer and it is their relationship that is of primary concern, even if it is things which are often foregrounded as the primary subject (e.g. see Henare *et al.* 2006).
- 2 Here the philosophical literature is of great relevance, particularly Whitehead ([1920] 2004).

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