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Between Artifacts and Texts

Historical Archaeology in Global Perspective

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Preface



This book is about historical archaeologies all over the world; about their history, their methods, and their raison d'être. The focus is on an existential question for archaeology: whether investigations of material culture are necessary at all when studying societies with writing. Is it not sufficient to read and interpret texts if we wish to understand and explain historical periods? This book has been written out of a conviction that archaeology *is* important, even in the study of literate societies. Yet the book has also been written out of a conviction that the importance of the historical archaeologies is not obvious to everyone. The disciplines have a tendency to be marginalized in relation both to history and to archaeology and anthropology, because the archaeological results are sometimes perceived as unnecessary confirmations of what is already known. Although I regard theoretical considerations as crucial for all scholarly work, I do not think that the solution to this marginalization can be found in any "definitive" theory that might raise the disciplines above the threatened tautology. Instead, I have found it more important to examine different methodological approaches in the historical archaeologies, to investigate how material culture and writing can and could be integrated. I am convinced that the tautological threat should be averted in the actual encounter of artifact and text. By problematizing this encounter, I believe that it is possible to create favorable methodological conditions for new perspectives on the past. It is only through such new and interesting results that the historical archaeologies can assert their importance.

The problems treated in the book have engaged me ever since I came into contact with archaeology 25 years ago. As a student, a digging and report-writing archaeologist, a museum worker, and a teacher and researcher, I have constantly touched upon questions concerning the relation between artifact and text. In retrospect it is easy to see that these questions did not just happen to come my way; on the contrary, I have been continually drawn to them. Despite this fascination with the intricate association between material culture and writing, however, a long time elapsed before the idea for this book finally took shape. When it did, it gave me the opportunity to combine two major interests—

Jes I have carried on an incessant and inspiring dialogue about archaeology and historical archaeology for many years. His comments on different versions of my book have, as always, been critical and thought provoking.

Thanks to generous grants from the Faculty of Arts, the Elisabeth Rausing Memorial Foundation, the New Society of Letters in Lund, and the Swedish Institute, I have been able to undertake many trips abroad, and I have also been able to invite guest scholars from Europe and the United States to lecture about problems in the historical archaeologies. These guest lectures have provided important inspiration for this text. Other decisive stages in my work have been series of seminars on historical archaeology that I have held in Lund, Tromsø, and Stockholm. The seminars forced me to formulate certain problems more precisely, and the discussions led me to narrow down several crucial questions.

The present text was mainly written in Lund in the autumn of 1994 and in Athens in the spring and summer of 1995. The greater part of 1996 was devoted to the revision of the Swedish manuscript and the translation into English, which was financed by the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. In connection with the translation, I have had rewarding discussions with Alan Crozier about the difficult art of recasting Swedish expressions in English forms. Ann Tobin has helped me with bibliographical data and has compiled the index. Tina Borstam has drawn some of the illustrations, whereas Bengt Almgren has made most of the figures camera-ready. In the hectic final phase, Gunnar Broberg read the manuscript and made significant comments from the point of view of the history of ideas. Special thanks are also due to Charles Orser, who has been kind enough to accept the book for the Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology series and who has made important comments on the text.

Finally, I wish to turn to my family. My parents have, as always, supported my work. Besides reading and commenting on the text, they have also been of invaluable assistance in their role of grandparents. My wife, Sanne, has shared her life with me for roughly as long as the idea of this book has existed. I am especially grateful for her constant encouragement and for her professional criticism during these years. It is also due to her, and her work in Greece, that the most intensive writing period took place during some dreadfully hot summer months in Athens. Every morning and afternoon during this summer on the way to and from our children's day-care center, I passed over the conduit through which the River Ilissos is channeled. In other words, every day during this hot summer I passed the place where Socrates, according to Plato's *Phaedrus*, discussed writing as a problem.

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Between Artifacts and Texts

Historical Archaeology
in Global Perspective

The Paradox of the Historical Archaeologies

1

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

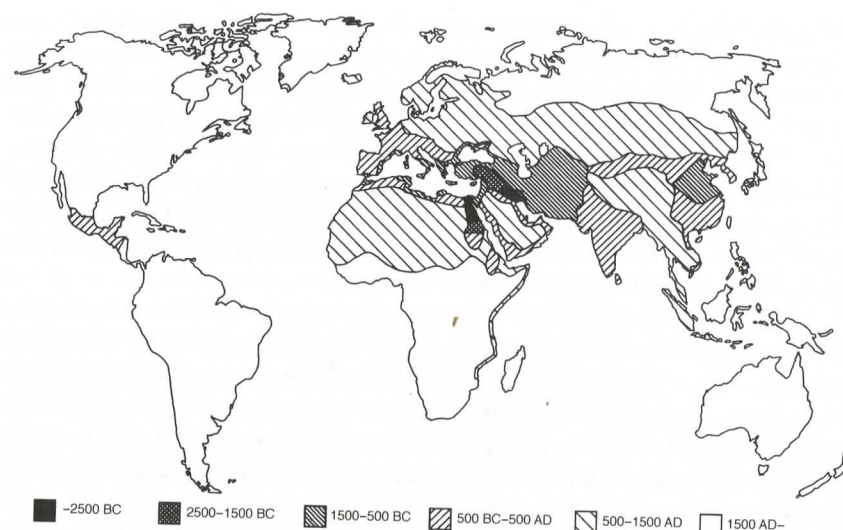


Figure 1. The distribution of deciphered scripts in time and place. The map is based on data on the occurrence of writing in different regions (Coulmans, 1996; Diring, 1962, 1968; Djait, 1981; Hrbek, 1981; Marcus, 1992). The figure shows a minimal version of the chronological and geographic framework 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 (Diring, 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-

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).