

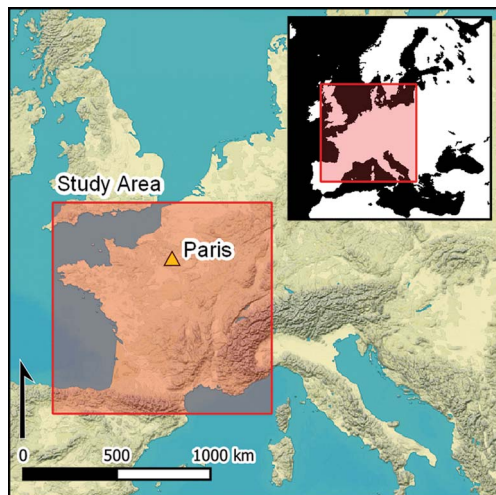


Research Article

French historical and contemporary archaeology: a critical assessment

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Modern and contemporary archaeology, the French equivalent of historical archaeology, emerged in the 1970s. Subsequent attempts at theorising this sub-discipline have been hindered by a lack of broad professional recognition and funding. While the archaeology of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries is now more widely recognised in France, studies of the post-nineteenth-century period remain limited to a few specific contexts. Here, the author offers an overview for the Anglophone readers of modern and contemporary archaeology in France and argues that greater theorisation, cross-fertilisation with other archaeological traditions and a diversification of the range of themes considered might enhance recognition of this sub-discipline within and beyond France.

Keywords: Western Europe, France, historical archaeology, contemporary archaeology, archaeological theory

Introduction

Is there a unified theory of historical or contemporary archaeology in France? Since the late 1970s, there have certainly been many attempts to achieve common theoretical grounds but the largely descriptive and preventive (developer-led) nature of most archaeological research on post-sixteenth-century sites, and the historical disregard for these periods among many archaeological practitioners and funding institutions, has slowed the maturation of this field. The term ‘historical archaeology’ itself, favoured in British and American scholarship, has almost never been used in France. Instead, French scholars have preferred the locution *archéologie moderne et contemporaine* (modern and contemporary archaeology; Bruneau & Balut 1982, 1997; Journot & Bellan 2011), which has existed in parallel with synonyms such as industrial archaeology (Daumas 1980) and the archaeology of the recent past. French modern and contemporary archaeology has so far remained largely separate from British and

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North American archaeological research due to the language barrier; thus, this article proposes to bring the English-speaking readership up to date with four decades of advances in French modern and contemporary archaeology.

Today, the archaeology of sites from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries is becoming relatively well-developed in France, in large part due to preventive or pre-development archaeology projects led by INRAP (the Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives or National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research). On the other hand, vestiges from the nineteenth century onwards are still often disregarded archaeologically. At the start of the twenty-first century, however, a surge of interest in the material remains and memory of the two World Wars and colonialism is beginning to change attitudes. Other sub-fields such as contemporary archaeology have also started to emerge since the 2000s, although much more slowly due to the difficulty in securing funding for such research. Over the past five years, an increase in the acceptance of the value of studying these more recent periods has opened up new possibilities for the discipline in France, and beyond, from interdisciplinary collaboration and the use of new digital methods to the exploration of previously neglected topics.

Origins and historiography

Despite its current slow theoretical development, the emergence of the archaeology of the most recent past in France dates to roughly the same time that the same sub-discipline developed in North America. Indeed, Bruneau and Balut (1982, 1997) began teaching ‘modern and contemporary archaeology’ in 1978 at Sorbonne University in Paris. They imagined this sub-discipline as chronologically following on from medieval archaeology, in the same way that the modern and contemporary period in French history follows the medieval period, from the sixteenth century onwards. The label of ‘modern and contemporary archaeology’ was also seen as an alternative to the term ‘industrial’ (which was viewed as restrictive) and ‘post-medieval’ (which was rarely used outside of Italy). In 1982, Bruneau and Balut founded the journal *Revue d’Archéologie Moderne et d’Archéologie Générale* (*Review of modern archaeology and general archaeology*), or simply *RAMAGE*, which served as a more explicit manifesto for the new sub-field (Figure 1). For several decades, the journal published extensively on topics ranging from an ambitious archaeology of Parisian cinemas and their spatiotemporal distribution (Cabezas 1983) to various articles on the archaeology of Catholicism under the French Republic (Artru 1983; Bruneau 1983, 1984, 1986).

In 1980, Maurice Daumas published *L’archéologie industrielle en France*. Unlike modern and contemporary archaeology, this opus was largely inspired by the emergence of industrial archaeology in the UK and Belgium. Daumas was a historian of technology rather than an archaeologist, but nevertheless was part of the academic circle of Balut and Bruneau, publishing on industrial archaeology in the first issue of *RAMAGE* (Daumas 1982; Balut 1984). Within a few years, the creation of public entities such as CILAC or the Committee for Industrial Heritage (*Cellule du Patrimoine industriel*), attached to the Ministry of Culture, led to the rapid development of industrial archaeology, but also its separation from a more general modern and contemporary archaeology (Woronoff 1989; Chassagne 2002; Gasnier 2020).

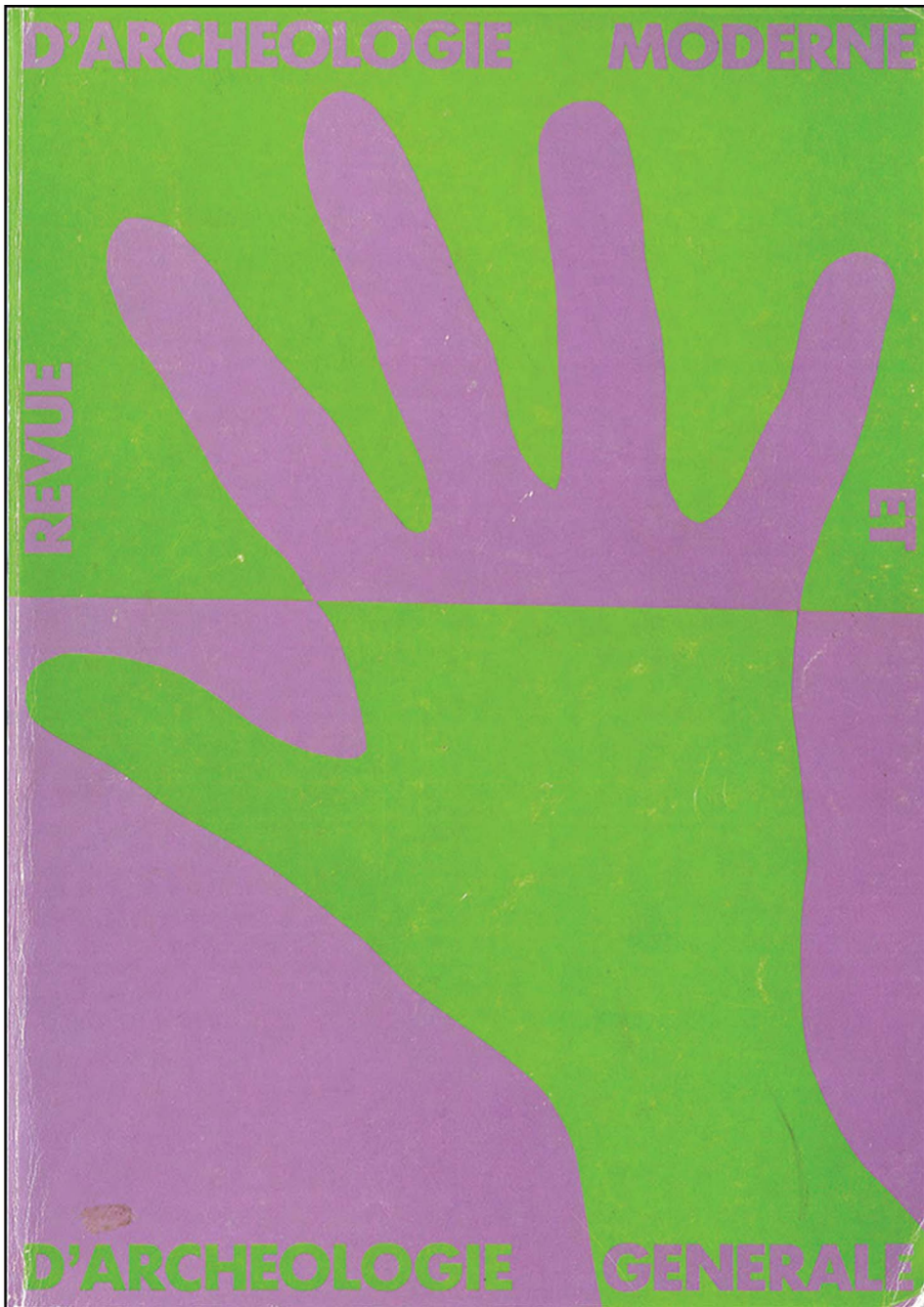


Figure 1. Cover of the 1983 issue of the journal Revue d'Archéologie Moderne et d'Archéologie Générale (reproduced with permission from the editorial board).

Within two decades, regional differences within modern and contemporary archaeology were already visible between different regions of France. In 1992 for instance, Marin listed the variety of modern and contemporary archaeology projects undertaken in both urban and rural contexts in Normandy, attributing the fast regional growth of this sub-discipline to the locally strong medievalist tradition. There were also connections south of the Alps, where the study of historical archaeology was crystallising around the Italian periodical *Archeologia Postmedievale* (see Bruneau & Balut 1997, published in the first issue). Historical archaeology in France was therefore characterised by an early but slow start, and is largely independent of the cohesive sub-field of historical archaeology that was emerging in the USA in the same years (Deetz 1977; Schuyler 1978; Orser 1996).

In 2004, roughly two and a half decades after the birth of the sub-discipline in France, the journal *Les Nouvelles de l'Archéologie* published an issue, edited by Burnouf and Journot, with numerous contributions seeking to theorise a common ground for the archaeological study of the past five centuries (Burnouf & Journot 2004; Trombetta 2004). This unifying project was later continued by the editors elsewhere, as Journot went on to publish a volume dedicated to modern and contemporary archaeology in France (Journot & Bellan 2011) while Burnouf co-edited a *Manual of medieval and modern archaeology* (Burnouf *et al.* 2012). In 2014, another issue of *Les Nouvelles de l'Archéologie* was dedicated to French modern and contemporary archaeology (Hurard *et al.* 2014), witnessing the growth of the sub-discipline since the start of the 2010s. As a result of this work, several distinct themes have emerged, ranging from the archaeology of twentieth-century conflict to contemporary archaeology and the archaeology of colonialism.

Contemporary themes in French historical archaeology

The early modern period, spanning from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, was the first post-medieval period to be officially accepted as worthy of archaeological interest. This was in large part due to the success of excavations beneath the Louvre Museum in Paris in 1983 (Schnapp 1985; van Ossel 1998; Besson & Chaoui-Derieux 2019), coinciding with the start of the theorisation of modern and contemporary archaeology. The size and budget of the project, and the wealth of early modern material recovered, highlighted the potential for archaeology to broaden the understanding of historical periods previously considered to be within the domain of historians and sociologists. Studies of post-medieval pottery (Horry 2012; Dieulefet *et al.* 2014) and modern urban centres (Bouiron *et al.* 2012; Ayala 2013) have since flourished, and INRAP has also supported excavations of many sites of more recent date, such as the remains of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century horticulturists' houses in Montreuil (Dufour *et al.* 2013). Until the 1990s, however, the post-nineteenth-century period remained almost entirely unexplored by archaeologists. This is starting to change, although studies have largely been limited to four main areas: the archaeology of conflict (particularly of the two World Wars), industrial heritage, a few contemporary archaeology projects and—mostly led by non-French Francophone scholars—the archaeology of French colonialism.

It was only in 1991 that an archaeological team conducted what is today recognised as the first French study of a First World War site. This consisted of the excavation of a collective war

burial to identify the remains of the soldier and well-known writer Alain-Fournier who was killed in 1914 (Adam 2006). This excavation sparked an interest in the archaeology of twentieth-century conflict and opened the door for further studies. In 2008, Desfosses and colleagues published a seminal book on the archaeology of the First World War in France. This was followed by an important volume by Carpentier and Marcigny (2014a) on the archaeology of the Second World War and in particular the Normandy landings. Since then, many articles have been published on topics ranging from internment camps for German prisoners (Carpentier & Marcigny 2014b; Fichet de Clairfontaine 2016; Vermard *et al.* 2016) to the study of bomb shelters (Carpentier *et al.* 2016) and graffiti in the Drancy internment camp for Jewish prisoners (Pouvreau 2014). The archaeological investigation of war has also extended to older conflicts, for instance with the excavation of a Napoleonic military camp dating to 1803–1805 (Lemaire 2010).

As with the archaeology of twentieth-century conflict, industrial archaeology is today widely supported by public institutions and funding bodies. Since the initial explorations in the 1970s and 1980s by Maurice Dumas (1980, 1982), the field has—under the influence of institutions such as CILAC—mostly focused on the preservation of French industrial heritage (*patrimoine industriel*) rather than archaeological investigations (Chassagne 2002; Gasnier 2020). The re-emergence of interest in contemporary archaeology in the twenty-first century is, nevertheless, opening exciting opportunities for the development of a contemporary industrial archaeology. For instance, Bonnot (2018) excavated the waste dump of a twentieth-century ceramic factory; while Moëlle and colleagues (2021) have investigated an abandoned automobile and aerospace factory at Vaux de Vire, making sole use of non-invasive methods such as the analysis of standing buildings and graffiti, digital modelling and the collection of oral histories.

The excavation and identification of Alain-Fournier's grave in 1991 is often considered as the earliest example of contemporary archaeology in France. For two decades, the field continued to focus on the archaeology of the World Wars and on industrial heritage, but over the past 15 years three ambitious projects challenged the limits of what could be considered contemporary archaeology. In 2009, a team from INRAP uncovered several monumental sculptures abandoned after the destruction of the Soviet pavilion of the 1937 International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris (Gentili 2013). The following year, Demoule (2013) excavated the remains of Spoerri's *Déjeuner sous l'herbe*, a 1983 artistic performance during which a large meal was buried in a trench. At the time, the Minister of Culture, Frédéric Mitterrand, despite having expressed an interest in it, was dissuaded from visiting this excavation because of its controversial nature—the excavation being considered by many, including by public national entities regulating archaeological research, as not coming under the definition of archaeology. Finally, in 2013 and 2014, the movie set of the film *Peau d'Âne*, released in 1970 by director Jacques Demy, was excavated, uncovering a large quantity of material from the production of the film (Weller 2014). These three projects remain controversial in some academic circles and heritage management institutions, but they successfully reopened debates that first emerged in the 1970s surrounding the temporal limits and object of inquiry of archaeology. This research has also prompted philosophical investigations into the epistemological implications of including the most recent past within archaeology's remit (see volume by Balut *et al.* 2016, especially chapters by Balut 2016;

Bellan 2016; and Boissinot 2016). In particular, this has included attempts to redefine archaeology and its object of inquiry in light of contemporary debates in Anglophone archaeology concerning materiality and the ontological turn (Boissinot 2016) and of studies with a stronger focus on temporality and memory (Olivier 2004, 2011).

A final sub-field experiencing rapid growth within modern and contemporary archaeology is the archaeology of French colonialism, although this has mostly been spearheaded by non-French Francophone scholars. In this context, the Francophone scholarship on historical archaeology in Africa deserves its own overview, including the strong tradition of work in Senegal (e.g. Thiaw 2011, 2012; Richard 2013; Thiaw & Richard 2013; Sall 2017) and a sustained emphasis on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The archaeology of colonialism and enslavement in Senegal nevertheless seems to have more ties with the practice of historical archaeology in the USA than with French modern and contemporary archaeology. In the Americas, Francophone Canadian archaeologists have dominated the study of French colonial contexts, initially with the aim of contributing to Canadian nation-building (Waselkov 2009). In recent years, there has also been an increase in studies by Francophone scholars in the French overseas regions of the Caribbean and South America. Projects include the excavation of the graves of plantation owners executed in 1794 in Guadeloupe during the French Revolution (Romon *et al.* 2014), the study of ceramics and foodways also in colonial Guadeloupe (Arcangeli 2014) and the archaeology of penal colonies in French Guiana (Payraud *et al.* 2016).

Future paths and possibilities

After its slow development from the late 1970s, since the 2010s there has been a boom in interest about French modern and contemporary archaeology. But while the early modern period is now widely recognised as worthy of archaeological interest, studies of the post-nineteenth century remain largely limited to the few areas discussed above: the archaeology of the World Wars, colonialism and industrial heritage. The fast pace of recent developments does, however, offer the potential to expand.

The main limitation facing historical and contemporary archaeology in France is a lack of recognition by public institutions and funding bodies. Many of the stereotypes that archaeologists of the recent past have confronted since the 1970s still hinder the discipline today, presenting a challenge for the garnering of interest and securing of research funding. Indeed, for some practitioners there seems to be an uncertainty about the value the discipline of archaeology can bring to the study of the most recent past, an uncertainty that may partly serve as cover for a lack of acceptance within some academic circles or by underfunded heritage management institutions. The questions posed by an archaeology of the most recent past are also often political (ranging from modern inequalities to the origins of the climate crisis, racial capitalism, colonialism and its afterlives), of a type that archaeologists might be less familiar with and less prepared to address than, for example, sociologists. Although the discipline remains necessarily connected to preventive archaeology, the growing theorisation of French modern and contemporary archaeology (Burnouf & Journot 2004; Journot & Bellan 2011; Hurard *et al.* 2014; Weller 2014; Balut *et al.* 2016; Coulaud & Perarnau 2021) may challenge such objections and open the door for wider institutional recognition and, eventually, more opportunities for innovative and ambitious projects.

French modern and contemporary archaeology might also benefit from greater engagement with other archaeological traditions, not only with American and British historical archaeology but also with emerging traditions of historical archaeology in other European countries (Courtney 2009; Mehler 2013; Mientjes 2021) or African countries (Reid & Lane 2004; Pikirayi 2006; Ogundiran & Falola 2007; Thiaw & Richard 2013). Although historical archaeology elsewhere in Europe is often marked by the same lack of institutional recognition, the growing number of English-language overviews of European traditions of historical archaeology, of which the present article is one, may facilitate such cross-fertilisation (see Gelichi & Librenti 2007; Milanese 2007; Harnow *et al.* 2012; Gomes & Casimiro 2013; Herremans & De Clercq 2013; Mehler 2013, 2020; Krajić *et al.* 2017; Tourigny *et al.* 2017; Russov *et al.* 2021). It must be noted, however, that many of these overviews focus on the pre-nineteenth-century archaeology. Moreover, just as in France at the turn of the twenty-first century, contemporary archaeology in the rest of mainland Europe is still comparatively rare and mostly focuses on twentieth-century warfare (González-Ruibal 2007; Milanese 2010, 2018; De Felice 2018; Mehler 2020). This is despite notable exceptions (e.g. Pálsson 2012 in Iceland) which may serve as points of convergence for an emerging French contemporary archaeology.

The traditions of historical archaeology developing in countries formerly colonised by France (see above) might also serve to situate archaeological studies of the French modern period in a more global and political context. This should become of great interest to French historical archaeologists, considering France's position at the centre of lingering imperial nexuses, and by extension how many of its industries and the country in general benefitted (and still benefit) from the exploitation of racialised and colonised populations.

In addition to the language barrier, the development of French modern archaeology within specific national theoretical frameworks—such as ongoing debates about whether archaeology should still be viewed as an auxiliary science of history—might explain why its theoretical advances have been unappealing to North American and British historical archaeologists. In France, the move away from archaeology as an auxiliary science of history has often been complemented by a move towards anthropology, following the North American model (Hurard *et al.* 2014; Boissinot 2016; Moëlle *et al.* 2021), which resonates better with the multidisciplinary methods adopted since the 1970s by French modern and contemporary archaeology. This move of historical archaeology away from history and towards anthropology, along with the desire to emphasise interdisciplinarity, has also been felt in Central Europe (Mehler 2020). However, whereas British and North American archaeology was initially defined by an approach (exemplified by the debate of the 1990s to redefine the sub-discipline as the archaeology of the modern world rather than simply text-aided archaeology; Orser 1996; Andrén 1998; Hall & Silliman 2006), French modern and contemporary archaeology has, since its inception and in its terminology, referred to a chronological period (namely modern and contemporary history). Subsuming the French tradition into the North American and British traditions—a real risk with the likely future growth of interaction—would therefore come with the loss of much specificity and nuance.

Modern and contemporary archaeology in France has been marked by an experimentation with new methods, illustrated by the rejection of the equivalence between archaeology and excavations (see Bruneau & Balut 1982: 6 for the incredulity the pair often faced: 'you

mean, you say you are an archaeologist and yet you don't dig?'). This novel approach, inherited by much of the sub-discipline and today spearheaded by contemporary archaeology, should also facilitate greater interdisciplinary research and methodological experimentation, for instance in the adoption of digital techniques. Gasnier (2020) has specifically emphasised the potential of digital humanities, especially of 3D modelling, for the future of industrial archaeology in France.

Finally, the range of themes currently investigated by modern and contemporary archaeology in France is restricted. For example, the focus on twentieth-century conflict and industrial heritage has certainly led to a gender bias in the people studied because, with only some notable exceptions, warfare and most factory work were traditionally masculine occupations. The diversification of modern and contemporary archaeology might therefore move forward by grounding itself in recent advances in feminist, gender and queer archaeology (gender archaeology in France has so far confined itself to prehistoric studies, see Péré-Noguès 2011; Belard 2012, 2015; Trémeaud 2015; Algrain 2020). Archaeological studies of the material traces of women's labour in the modern and contemporary period might provide a balance to the current widespread androcentrism (see Michaut 2023 for an analysis of this phenomenon in a colonial context). Similarly, archaeologists have tended to focus on notable landmarks often reflecting elite classes (Hurard *et al.* 2014), and new themes previously disregarded such as subaltern and working-class history could therefore also form the basis for innovative investigations. Multi-method studies such as the one at the Vaux de Vire factory, with its attention to the pride and feelings of former employees, and in part explicitly inspired by North American anthropology, indicate the potential of such work (Moëlle *et al.* 2021).

As it becomes more widely recognised and accepted by public institutions, and incorporated into heritage management, French modern and contemporary archaeology will likely experience a growth in the coming years and a diversification of the themes pursued and the methods employed. These are developments to which both French- and English-speaking historical archaeologists can and should be attentive in order to develop a more interconnected and nuanced archaeology of the recent past.

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