

Archaeology in the Humanities

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Introduction

Since archaeology is fundamentally the study of the human past, which is what the word “archaeology” connotes according to its Greek etymology, it is part of the humanities. Archaeology was born as part of the Enlightenment project to establish a rational means of inquiry into questions of how humans lived, formed societies, developed settlements, farming, cities, and states. Archaeologists thus questioned philosophical speculations about how people lived in a “state of nature” and have established chronologies for remains left by the earliest humans and by less distant ancestors. Archaeologists have explored ancient civilizations that were dimly known in religious and historical writings and also discovered whole new societies and cultures that were utterly unknown before archaeological research. Our knowledge of the antiquity of humanity is a result of less than two hundred years of archaeological investigation (Renfrew and Bahn 2008; Trigger 2006; Bahn 1996; Murray, ed. 1999; 2001; 2007; Murray and Evans 2008).

To be sure, the meticulous work demanded of archaeologists requires that archaeologists systematically recover and examine materials in a scientific manner. Whereas teams of researchers are not usually found in humanistic research, it is critical that archaeologists collaborate with specialists in chemistry, physics, geology, anatomy, botany, and other scientific areas in their investigations. Archaeologists also employ quantitative techniques characteristic of the social sciences. Comparisons among human societies, their interactions with neighbors and environments are standard practices among archaeologists. Indeed, archaeologists are an academic hybrid of humanists, scientists, and social scientists, and archaeologists are pleased to live in the interstices of many academic disciplines.

In the United States, where the writers work, university archaeologists are mainly found in departments of anthropology, which are classified among the social sciences. The two exceptions to this are archaeologists who teach in departments of Classical studies and those who are in

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departments of Near Eastern studies (and there are a few archaeologists in departments of South Asian studies and East Asian studies). Anthropology and archaeology have a special disciplinary relationship in US, however, due to their traditional collaboration in the study of Native American (Indian) peoples. Indeed, when American anthropology was formalized at the end of the nineteenth century, it distinguished itself through the collective study of native people, their cultures, languages, biological affinities, and pasts (Willey and Sabloff 1990). The archaeology of the Americas, which preceded the creation of anthropology, thus, came to be part of anthropology.

In older disciplines of Classical and Near Eastern studies, archaeologists were (and are) partly trained in the ancient languages of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Mesopotamia and in the related field of art history. Nowadays, many Classical and Near Eastern archaeologists have been trained in departments of anthropology or see themselves as anthropological archaeologists (in exile), and a few archaeologists trained in Classical and Near Eastern studies find employment in departments of anthropology. The humanistic and/or social science aspects of Classical archaeology are subjects of considerable interest and debate (Renfrew 1980; Cherry, Margomenou, and Talalay 2005). In other parts of the world, archaeology is considered part of history (for example in India) or as a department on its own (for example in the United Kingdom and see below).

In this article, we shall outline some new directions in archaeological research that resonate in the humanities. These include research into agency, art, beliefs, cognition, gender, history, identity, ideology, landscapes, nationalism, oral history, the past in the present, power, and symbols. Just the listing of these topics current in archaeological research indicates a humanistic turn in modern archaeology. We explore these topics briefly in our next section of this chapter on the history of archaeology in the humanities. We follow that section with some examples of archaeological research on “origins” – of language, religion, and agriculture, then of urban life and ancient states. We conclude by discussing how archaeologists study material culture in a humanistic perspective, and how archaeology is increasingly part of modern political realities.

A brief history of archaeology in the humanities

Some histories of archaeology claim that the first archaeologist was the Babylonian ruler, Nabonidus (555–539 BC), who rummaged around ruins, collected ancient inscriptions and artifacts, celebrated earlier kings, and tried to write texts in the style and ductus of those long dead monarchs. Han historians (206 BC–AD 220) wrote about ancient China and displayed artifacts from the “Three Dynasties” period, and Vitruvius in first century BC Rome described Greek and Roman architecture. The standard histories of archaeology (Trigger 2006; Bahn 1996; Willey and Sabloff 1990; Daniel 1975; Fagan 1996; Schnapp 1996) provide detailed accounts of the transition from pure speculation to antiquarianism to an academic discipline, and we summarize the course of events here.

In the European Renaissance travelers recorded buildings and collected sculpture from Greece and the ancient Near East, including, notably, Egypt. But the foundations for the development of archaeology as a discipline were laid in the nineteenth century in Europe. In order to display artifacts in museums, the Dane, C. Thomsen, invented the “three-age” system of Stone, Bronze, and Iron (Rowly-Conwy 2007), and the Swede, J. Worsaae, conducted careful excavations. Further developments in archaeology built on the advances in understanding stratigraphy by the English geologist, C. Lyell, who had studied the evolutionary theories of C. Darwin and A.R. Wallace. The Frenchman, C. Boucher de Perthes showed that stone tools could be correlated with extinct animal bones; the Swede, O. Montelius, and the Englishman, A. Pitt-Rivers, developed elaborate

typologies of artifacts; W. Flinders Petrie developed pottery seriation so that changes in Egyptian ceramic styles could be relatively dated and then correlated with other artifacts and buildings; and the German, H. Schliemann, and the Englishman, A. Evans, found the material evidence for Minoan and Mycenaean civilization. J. Stephens, an American, and F. Catherwood, an Englishman, produced an account of travels in Central America along with splendid illustrations of a “lost” Maya civilization, then explored by A. Maudslay; and the German, M. Uhle, began the first systematic archaeological work in Peru. In the early twentieth century, countries like Mexico and India established their own archaeological institutes in order to explore their countries’ ancient pasts, and most research in formerly colonized lands is now in the hands of local professional archaeologists.

In Europe archaeology began as a sub-discipline of national history and as a means of collecting materials for their museums. Classical scholars, who occupied an entrenched part of universities and intellectual life, began to include the art and architecture of Greece and Rome and to a lesser extent the humbler artifacts of those civilizations. In the eighteenth century, J.J. Winckelmann in Germany described in detail Classical antiquities with special attention to the finds at Herculaneum and Pompeii, which had been tunneled with great success.

In North America, Thomas Jefferson is considered the father of modern archaeology since he investigated whether the contemporary Indians of Virginia were descendants of earlier “mound-builders.” He launched excavations that noted the condition of soils, refuse, and artifacts and concluded (tentatively) that indeed the earlier Indians were lineal antecedents of those living in eighteenth century Virginia. It was only late in the nineteenth century that the federal government of the United States employed archaeologists in the Bureau of American Ethnology and undertook to systematize information on Native Americans. In universities in the early twentieth century, mainly under the leadership of Franz Boas at Columbia, archaeology was incorporated within anthropology, and archaeologists found employment in university museums and anthropology departments, often in joint appointments.

Archaeology through these years was an exercise in describing and classifying material, tracing changes in styles which were mainly thought to have been brought by migrating people. In Europe in the mid-twentieth century, the Australian archaeologist, V.G. Childe, based in Edinburgh, then in London, ambitiously launched comparative investigations, grounded in current archaeological knowledge, that are still fundamental to archaeologists: how did farming begin, what was the relation between environmental change and social change, and how did the first cities and states emerge. Childe also traced the influence of Near Eastern civilizations into Europe and mapped the spread of Indo-European (languages and people) from their putative homeland. Archaeology had begun to move decisively away from antiquarianism.

A major challenge to the descriptive and classifying goals of archaeologists in North America was issued by W.W. Taylor in 1948. Taylor called for a new holistic understanding of archaeological materials – his “conjunctive approach” – which in his view was a repudiation of “historical” approaches. Although his criticism of the deans of the field did not lead to much direct influence, it did stimulate L. Binford to formulate what he called “processual archaeology” (or “new archaeology” [see Wylie 2002]) in the early 1960s.

The movement towards a social archaeology was unquestionably advanced by the development of absolute dating, mainly through W. Libby’s discovery in 1949 of how to measure the regular disintegration of a carbon isotope that is found in all living things. Freed from the preoccupations of relative dating (although in the American Southwest, archaeologists had been using tree-ring dating from the 1920s), archaeologists became increasingly interested in anthropological questions about social formations and social change. In 1958, G. Willey and P. Phillips called

for a “processual” approach, by which they intended that archaeology could and should turn to matters of explaining the past rather than merely describing it. Whereas the concerns of archaeologists in the US and Europe (with the exception of Childe) to discuss social change and social struggle were novel, the story was very different in the Soviet Union, since archaeology was officially entrusted with understanding social change, although official Marxist dogma constrained the development of theory (Klejn 1977).

L. Binford in the United States and D. Clarke in England were the main protagonists of new archaeology, the enthusiastic response to the calls of Taylor and Willey and Phillips. They were self-proclaimed revolutionaries and in the case of Binford, especially, scathing critics of all non-new archaeologists, whom he considered “cultural historians” and thus non-scientific. In the nearly half-century since Binford’s first writings, it now seems that his (and others’) attempts to construct laws of adaptation and behavior were naïve, and in the context of this article, anti-humanistic. One of Binford’s students, K. Flannery, for example, proudly declared that he was uninterested in artifacts or the Indian (as he put it) behind the artifact but only in the system behind the Indian. As in the case of the linguist Noam Chomsky, whose first papers convinced no linguistics professors, but did convert all of their graduate students, new/processual archaeology, with its emphasis on quantitative analysis, hypothesis-testing, formal deductive reasoning, and emphasis on environmental adaptation (and thus climate change as the chief cause for social change) became, for true believers, a “paradigm shift” in archaeological research. To signal their break with other older archaeologists and their antique ways, many new archaeologists spelled their discipline “archeology.”

There were some early cracks in the façade of New Archaeology. J. Fritz (1978) tried to explain the architecture and settlement system of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico as a product of ideology, which was dismissed by the new archaeologists as “superstructure,” and R. Jones (1978) found that no ecological adaptation could explain the prehistoric Tasmanians’ decision, after thousands of years of eating fish, to stop eating fish. The explicit challenge to processual archaeology, however, came from I. Hodder and his students at the University of Cambridge, who coined their movement “post-processual.” Just as processual/new archaeologists considered themselves real anthropologists, not historians, and emphasized explanations that borrowed strongly from “cultural ecology” in anthropology, starting in the late 1970s and flourishing in the 1980s and 1990s, post-processual archaeologists, as one can guess from their name, were part of the post-modernist movement in anthropology and other disciplines.

Post-processual archaeologists stressed the interpreter’s role in “reading” the material record of the past, and especially how archaeologists responded to modern national interests in the way they viewed the past (Hodder 1986, 1990). Ideology was not consigned to a superstructure, materials were considered the means with which people thought about their daily lives and pasts, and migration and diffusion were revived from the pre-processual past as subjects of investigation.

Today, many or even most archaeologists, especially younger archaeologists, do not feel they must carry one banner of thought as their exclusive means of investigating the past. Just as most archaeologists have adopted the rigor espoused by the new archaeologists, especially in the selection of problems, research design, and methods of recovery and analysis, they also consider themselves interpreters of the past, seeking to understand past identities, practices, beliefs, and worldviews. If archaeologists maintain their interest in social and ecological “systems,” then, they are equally interested in how people lived and understood their lives, constructed and gave meaning to their environments, and decided which part of their identities to privilege in times of social and environmental stress. In responding to the theme of this essay, we can say that

archaeologists now consider themselves part of the humanities as well as part of the social sciences, and they are not hung up on these jejune boundaries between traditional academic superfamilies.

The enduring question of origins

For the bulk of the human past, archaeology provides the primary means of investigating everything from the daily practices of individuals to long-term evolution of social institutions. Whereas written texts provide insight into roughly five millennia of history in the Near East (and there are ancient Chinese, Indian, Classical, and Maya documents), most of the world can only be studied through textual materials for the past five centuries following the onset of colonialism. Recently, some archaeologists have begun to take seriously the claims of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Africa and Australia who have always emphasized that their oral histories document a past deep into the pre-colonial period (Deloria 1997; Vansina 1985). In the absence of supporting archaeological evidence, however, indigenous accounts of antiquity are still typically regarded as being more myth than history, more ideology and cosmology than an account of a succession of events. Of course, written texts themselves, especially ones from antiquity, are hardly dispassionate histories.

Beyond text and oral history, one might argue that genetic research increasingly challenges archaeology as the privileged source of human antiquity. Even before the sequencing of the human genome and the explosion of DNA-based genealogy services, genetic data had begun to revolutionize our understanding, not only of the emergence of humans as a species, but also of a wide array of questions from human migration patterns to the evolution of clothing (Wade 2006). Historical linguistics, too, is regarded by some as a key means of reconstructing past social processes, and there have been calls for a bold new collaboration between genetic, linguistic and archaeological research to address the key questions of human development (Renfrew 2002).

But archaeology remains the discipline of the grand narrative, *par excellence*, for its evidence speaks not only to questions of biological or demographic change but to the deep histories of religious belief, economic organization and politics as well. The intimacy of a find such as the famous 5,000-year-old “Ice Man” from the Austrian Alps will always prompt special reflection on the private experiences and struggles of individuals (Hodder 1999, 2001). Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s there was a concerted effort in many quarters to redirect attention toward the short-term, the individual and the idiosyncratic as a result of an explicit engagement with postmodern, poststructuralist, and feminist social theory (Dobres and Robb 2001). This critical turn away from the grand narrative is far from over. (There are even some moves afoot to theorize the individual experiences of pre-human hominins (Gamble and Porr, ed. 2005).) Fueled by an indefatigable public desire for sweeping evolutionary accounts, however, the key question of origin – of language and art (Mithen 2006), agriculture (Cauvin 2000), writing (Houston 2004), institutionalized social inequality (Paynter 1989), cities and states (Yoffee 2005) or what have you – has never strayed far from the heart of the archaeological enterprise. In this sense, it comes as little surprise that even those who had championed the study of individual experience during the 1990s are now beginning to return to the problem of long-term change with renewed vigor (Robb 2008; Pauketat 2007; Hodder 2006).

That said, archaeological accounts of origins and long-term evolutionary change look quite different today than they did two or three decades ago. Twentieth century archaeology, by and large, was dominated by a profoundly materialist orientation, the assumption being that the main

driver of social evolution was the adaptation of humans to their natural environments, first through foraging and hunting and later through the development of increasingly sophisticated technologies. Explanation proceeded via a series of reductionist moves from superstructure to base: changes in religious practices, for instance, were regarded as having been driven by underlying political dynamics which, in turn, were regarded as driven by economic competition over access to resources (which could always be reduced further to a biological matter of reproductive success once biological anthropologists were consulted). This particular tradition of materialist reductionism was established in the nineteenth century by evolutionists such as Lewis Henry Morgan, but it gained in sophistication in the first half of the twentieth century through the Marxist scholarship of V.G. Childe (see above) and L. White (see Yoffee 2005) and through the consolidation of processual archaeology during the 1960s and 1970s (see above).

The late twentieth century witnessed significant challenges to this materialist paradigm coinciding with a new body of research directly focused on religion, symbolism, and ideology (Fogelin 2008). Drawing inspiration from work in cognitive science, behavioral psychology, semiotics and the like, so-called cognitive archaeologists have sought to understand the ancient mind on its own terms without necessarily succumbing to the tendency to reduce thought to behavior to ecological adaption (Renfrew and Zubrow 1994). Arguably, the greatest impact of this approach has been felt in pre-agricultural contexts. Mithen (1996), for instance, has developed an influential thesis that draws upon notions of cognitive fluidity across distinct domains of intelligence to account for the explosion of Upper Paleolithic iconography, ritual and (presumably) belief in the supernatural after 40,000 years ago. The argument here is that the origin of religion and “art” may have more to do with the workings of the mind than with competition over access to resources.

Just as influential has been the work of Lewis-Williams (2002; Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005) who combines neuropsychological research into altered states of consciousness and the iconographic study of rock art to build new understandings of shamanism and ritual in hunter-gatherer societies. This work has had special impact in the discipline, insofar as the archaeology of hunter-gatherers has always been strongly biased toward the study of ecological adaptation and the modeling of optimal foraging strategies. Naïve notions that pre-agricultural peoples – ever-teetering on the brink of starvation – thought only about the food quest were abandoned long ago (Sahlins 1972), and calls for a more humanistic understanding of early hunter-gatherers have repeatedly been made (Conkey 1984), but only in the past fifteen years have these calls been widely addressed (e.g., Price 2001).

The increased attention to religion and ideology within pre-agricultural societies is also driven by impressive empirical discoveries that have forced archaeologists to grapple with the precociousness of many early hunter-gatherers. Monumental mound sites such as Watson Brake and Poverty Point in Louisiana, for instance, have revealed a complex hunter-gatherer world of ritual aggregations and collective labor projects in the American Southeast beginning roughly five millennia ago (Sassaman 2005; Randall and Sassaman 2010; Kidder 2002, 2010). Even more remarkable are the recent finds in Anatolia at sites such as Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori that have dealt a heavy blow to the materialist model of the Neolithic (Hodder 2006; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005).

In the classic archaeological narrative of human development, it was the domestication of plants and animals – an economic transformation – that stood in a key causal position, making possible the production of surpluses to support large sedentary villages and to fuel the subsequent growth of complex societies. Widely celebrated as the “world’s first temple,” however, Göbekli Tepe was a monumental ritual center constructed as much as 11,000 years ago by hunter-gatherers who erected enormous monolithic pillars decorated with fantastic carvings of animals. The

excavators have suggested that the ritual demands of supporting a large congregation of builders and worshippers may, in fact, have been what prompted the shift towards agriculture and economic change – rather than the other way around (Schmidt 2001; Curry 2008).

Such finds make for heady times in world archaeology. Indeed, they bolster prior work by Jacques Cauvin (2000) and Ian Hodder (1990) who argued that only a complex interplay of economic and symbolic systems could have led to the profound reorganizations of human society glossed by the term “Neolithic.” To manage plants and animals intensively, for instance, one must first be in possession of an ideology that makes such new relationships comprehensible, legitimate and desirable (Bender 1978; Ingold 2000). “Domestication” thus emerges as a process whereby human society’s understanding of itself is reconfigured in concert with the biological transformation of non-human species of plants and animals.

The development of the earliest cities, states, and civilizations

In the late fourth millennium BC, highly differentiated societies that were greatly stratified in wealth and status were evolving in Mesopotamia and Egypt. As part of this process, a new kind of governmental center emerged, which included specialized, hierarchical roles. This center came to express the legitimacy of interaction among differentiated social elements, made decisions that affected the entire society, especially in war and defense, and maintained the central symbols of society. Archaeologists refer to this governmental center and its surrounding political domain as the “state.”

A few centuries later, states also appeared in the Indus region, and shortly after 2000 BC in North China. In the New World states in Central Mexico and the Maya area to the south were present by AD 200 and in South America, in today’s Peru, shortly thereafter. How did these states evolve and how did people live in them? What did states do, and what did they not do? In what respects are the earliest states comparable, and in what ways are each of the ancient states distinctive? These are questions that archaeologists have investigated with significant success, as we briefly recount.

Most of the early states, with the exception of Egypt, were territorially small, indeed can be called city-states or micro-states (Yoffee 2005). The earliest cities in most instances evolved relatively rapidly, not as a gradual process but as a demographic explosion. Their appearance transformed the countryside, and in the development of cities the practical experience of people, in and out of cities, was utterly changed. It was in cities that new ideologies were invented, including the idea that there should be kings, that kings had always existed, and that the perpetuation of the cosmos depended on the figure of the king celebrating critical rituals and ceremonies.

In several regions of the world, however, a number of cities (or city-states) emerged simultaneously and synergistically, since neighboring cities regularly contested for power in a region. Indeed, one of the reasons for the growth of cities was endemic warfare in which people found protection and power in new urban settings. These competing cities came to share an ideology of government, including what kings should do and how power should be contested. Archaeologists refer to the larger regional cultural order of shared values in which various cities were embedded as a “civilization,” a term used to delineate both political phenomena, that is, the governments of cities and states, and the overarching set of ideas within which politically independent polities interact.

States and civilizations are coeval, since it is the emergence of the idea that there should be a state that accompanies their formation, makes them legitimate, and ensures their durability or

ability to reproduce themselves. Especially critical is the idea that there should be a state with rulers who intercede with the gods and represent the rest of society in ceremonies celebrating the state.

This distinction among political and cultural institutions in the development and nature of the earliest states allows archaeologists to refer to Mesopotamian civilization or Maya civilization or Chinese civilization (in the Three Dynasties period) or Indus/Harappan civilization. Each of these civilizations was constituted by a number of city-states that interacted with one another and had similar belief systems and material culture. Archaeologists can describe particular artifacts as Chinese or Mesopotamian or Maya or Harappan, and also investigate the political independence of Mesopotamian cities or Maya cities or Shang cities or Harappan cities. Of course, the various cities in each of these areas competed with one another and sometimes one city effected a political hegemony over neighbors in their regions. These conquests, however, were rarely long-lasting since the sense of independence of individual city-states was more powerful than the abstract sense that all cities shared an ideology. In Mesopotamia, the text known as “The Sumerian King-list,” which proclaimed there should be one Mesopotamia, that only one city should rule at a time over the entire land, was only an idealization. When one city did conquer its Mesopotamian neighbors, that rule was invariably short-lived as the cities quickly established their own autonomy.

One region in which the evolution of early cities did not follow the pattern of independent city-state politics within a larger civilizational system is ancient Egypt. In Egypt in the fourth millennium, to be sure, archaeologists observe a process of increasing stratification of rank and status, mainly in large cemeteries, a certain standardization in material culture and beliefs, and the evolution of the first cities in the region (Kemp 1989). In the late fourth and early third millenniums, however, an Egyptian territorial state arose. It was politically centralized, and its political frontiers were largely congruent with the cultural view of ancient Egypt.

This strong sense of Egyptian territory was linked to the ecologically uniform environment of the Nile Valley, the concentration of the most important resources within Egypt’s borders, and especially the excellent transport link provided by the Nile River. The relatively small population of about a million people in the Old Kingdom (Baines and Eyre 1983) within this linear expanse made urbanism a part of the trends towards territorial unification rather than a factor opposing such trends, as was the case elsewhere. Symbols of kingship and unification, including royal names, are found all over the country in the latest prehistoric period, and these motifs supply evidence of a developing territorial ideology within which cities also existed. Much of the structure of cities was dedicated to displays of royal power and religious ceremony, and administration in the cities was primarily concerned with managing these displays and the labor needed to build and maintain the edifices of royal and ritual power (Baines and Málek 2000).

Teotihuacan in south-central Mexico is also an exception to the “ideal-typical” model of city-states within a regional civilization. Teotihuacan in AD 200 covered an area of over 20 km² and had an estimated population of 100,000 (Cowgill 1997). But Teotihuacan had no competing cities/city-states in its region, partly because its one would-be peer, Cuicuilco, was buried under a volcanic eruption as the two neighboring cities were developing. Teotihuacan came to dominate its region, and its growth came from the surrounding countryside which became depopulated as the city grew. It is also interesting that Teotihuacanos did not develop a distinctive writing system and did not adopt the Maya writing system, which they certainly knew (Taube 2000). Furthermore, although there was a central location for the ceremonies of state and rich warrior burials in pyramids at Teotihuacan (Sugiyama 2005), not much is known about the political administration of the city and its territory, and there are few images of kings, again odd in that kings are so visible in nearby Maya territory. In the cities of Harappan civilization in South Asia

there is also a lack of royal burials, images of kings, and indisputable palaces (Kenoyer 1998; Possehl 2002). Some archaeologists consider these cities, and also Teotihuacan, to have been ruled by a kind of oligarchy, which would explain the lack of focus on individual rulers.

In the early history of all these cities, states, and civilizations, differentiated social groups became recombined in cities (the following is a recapitulation of Yoffee 2005). Cities were the nodal points of pilgrimages, storage, and redistribution, and centers for defense and warfare. In these cities, along with their countrysides, which typically became restructured in relation to cities, new identities were created but did not entirely supplant existing identities as members of economic, kin, and ethnic groups. Certain aspects of identity were also forged with citizens in other cities who shared a common, if created, heritage, and these were maintained and reproduced over time.

In the earliest cities, new rituals and ceremonies connected rulers with citizens and the gods. These rituals and ceremonies displayed and justified the supremacy and legitimacy of kings and reaffirmed the social order. The social roles and practices of citizens were routinized within the urban layout of monumental constructions, streets and pathways, walls and courtyards. The built environment itself demonstrated the superior access to knowledge and planning held by the rulers, ostensibly on behalf of all. Statecraft in the earliest cities and states involved providing an order to the present, which the rulers relentlessly proclaimed in literature (as we know especially well from Egypt and Mesopotamia, see Baines and Yoffee 1998) and in a created landscape (Smith 2003) that overlay the unruliness of a society composed of many groups, each with its own interests and orientations.

It is one of the myths about ancient states, propagated by rulers of the states themselves, that ancient governments were totalitarian, controlling all means of production, consumption, and exchange in their societies. What modern archaeologists increasingly find in ancient states, however, is that governments were highly unstable, and social fissures led often to the “collapse” of those political systems. Furthermore, archaeologists and ancient historians have been able to show that the economies of ancient states were far from being under the control of kings. In Mesopotamia, for example, in the Old Assyrian period (Larsen 1976; Veenhof 2008) merchants were able to move goods from where they were plentiful to where they were scarce and to make large profits from their interregional transactions. The Old Assyrian state had a certain interest in the trade, since it was able to tax the mercantile profits, but it did not organize the trade or manage it. The state was concerned to make sure that merchants had access to foreign regions, as far as it could do this with limited forces and treaties with foreign powers. We also know that the Old Assyrian state itself consisted not only in kings, but in councils of notables and with a “city-hall” in addition to a palace.

This digest of research on the earliest cities, states, and civilizations shows some new directions in archaeological research that have been stimulated by the new questions we have been able to ask, the burgeoning amount of information that allows new comparative studies, and the use of early historical documents alongside new studies of material culture and settlement systems.

Contemporary agendas: The material turn

If the discipline of archaeology is inevitably linked to questions of origin and evolutionary change, it is also grounded in the study of material culture. Archaeologists are defined by their distinctive and often singular gaze on the world of things – things that have weathered the ravages of time but also material things in general. As we have suggested already, most archaeologists have moved beyond materialist social theory, but it is nevertheless the case that the discipline seems to

be more embracing of its *methodological* materialism than ever before. Indeed, if ever there was a time when archaeologists assumed the role of the impoverished ethnographer or historian – stuck with mere stones and bones and comforted only by having so many millennia of stones and bones to consider – that time is long past.

This is apparent in the fast growing popularity of historical archaeology, which is specially charged with extending, challenging and, at times, powerfully critiquing textual accounts of the past through the analysis of physical remains. The archaeological record, it is said, does not lie, nor does it privilege the stories of the elite, as texts generally do. Historical archaeology, then, provides important opportunities for the writing of counternarratives (Leone 1995, 2005; Singleton 1985). The past decade has also seen increasing numbers of archaeologists undertaking material culture studies of the present, their claim being that archaeology offers special insight into the nature of human-object relations even when living informants are available. William Rathje's program of "garbology" – in which he and his colleagues excavated active landfills and garbage cans in Tucson – stands out as particularly noteworthy (Rathje and Murphy 2001). In a playful study, a British team has even reported recently on their "excavation" (or studied dismantling) of a 1991 Ford Transit van (Bailey et al. 2009).

The broader observation to make is that archaeologists are active participants in the recent "material turn" in social theory that has been widely commented upon in the humanities (Brown 2001; Miller 2005; Preda 1999). Whereas it was once fashionable to regard the world as a text to be read, many disciplines are now converging on the notion that only texts can be read as a text and that things must instead be understood as material presences that are caught up in the world in a sensuous and not merely semiotic manner. Within archaeology the material turn is apparent in the shift from what has been called symbolic or interpretive archaeology (Hodder 1986) to the congeries of conversations glossed by terms such as "material engagement theory" (Demarrais, Gosden, and Renfrew 2004), "material practice" (Mills and Walker 2008), "object lessons" (Meskell 2004, 2005) and "symmetrical archaeology" (Shanks 2007; Olsen 2003, 2007), the latter reflecting the growing influence of Bruno Latour in contemporary archaeological theory.

The genealogy of the material turn in archaeology can be variously traced. Key texts by colleagues in sociocultural anthropology (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Gell 1998; Ingold 2000; Miller 1987) and further afield (e.g., Butler 1993; Latour 1993; Merleau-Ponty 1992) have had wide impact, but there are internal stimuli as well, and here we briefly point to two intellectual traditions in particular – archaeological studies of landscape (Johnson 2007) and of the body (Borić and Robb 2008) – that have been instrumental in drawing archaeological attention to the problem of materiality both in the present and in the deep past.

The contemplation of landscapes and of the situation of ancient sites within landscapes extends back to the discipline's origins. Early antiquarians typically viewed prehistoric sites as part of their natural settings just as early colonial scholarship tended to view the indigenous peoples of Africa, Australia, and the Americas as anachronistic members of an original state of nature. Hence, in William Stukeley's eighteenth century renderings, the English countryside seemed as much a part of Stonehenge as the megaliths themselves; and in the nineteenth century in the United States, prehistoric sites came to be classified as evidence of "natural history," archaeological remains being curated in museums alongside geological samples, pressed plants, and frogs in formaldehyde. By the early twentieth century, however, sharp lines had been drawn between archaeological sites and their natural settings, and a major agenda of processual archaeology became the analysis of how the residents of hunter-gatherer camps, agricultural villages, towns, or cities extracted resources from their surrounding environments. In the 1990s, this stark modernist opposition of nature and culture was critiqued, and archaeologists began to approach landscapes

both (1) as cultural constructs, inscribed with meaning and (2) as places of phenomenological encounter (Bender 1993, 1998; Bradley 1998; Ingold 1993; Tilley 1994, 2004; Van Dyke 2008), much though these approaches might be viewed as sitting in uneasy tension with one another.

The new theorization of landscapes is best exemplified in studies of the British Neolithic – in part, for quite practical reasons. Throughout most of the world, the major early agricultural sites are sedentary villages, domestic contexts that have enabled excavators to reconstruct ancient patterns of social organization (e.g., Chang 1987; Flannery 1976; Kuijt 2000; Longacre 1970). The British Neolithic, in contrast, has very few actual residential sites to speak of and is instead characterized by monuments – megalithic tombs, causewayed enclosures, standing stones, and the like – that have prompted special inquiry into how the landscape was marked and made meaningful (e.g., Bender 1998; Bradley 1998, 2000; Scarre 2002). Seeking out innovative ways to think about large ancient stones set on hilltops has led some to adopt an explicitly phenomenological approach and to interrogate the embodied experiences of those who constructed and visited monuments (e.g., Barrett 1994; Tilley 2004). It has also led to much discussion of how the materiality of monumental landscapes – for instance, the durability of stone, the perishability of wood, or the manner in which natural and human-made features dictated particular ways of moving and viewing – influenced the meanings attributed to them (e.g., Parker Pearson et al. 2006; Jones 2007).

Rather than economic resources to be exploited, then, landscapes have come to be understood as material realities that act upon and constitute the subjectivities of those who dwell within. To an extent, this is a continuation of prior archaeological engagement with the practice theory of Bourdieu (1977), particularly his model of how a bodily habitus is inculcated as individuals physically move through social space. In his recent research at the Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük in Turkey, for instance, Ian Hodder (2006) undertakes a detailed analysis of how individuals would have moved through domestic spaces. Some of these spaces, he notes, would have been associated with the dead (plastered platforms that contained the subsurface remains of the ancestors) and others with the living (spaces dedicated to cooking and sleeping). Some spaces would have been gendered male and others female. And some would have contained ritual objects interred behind wall plaster that would have underscored the social realities of secrecy and differential access to esoteric knowledge. Hodder's analysis of how distinctively Neolithic subjectivities would have been the product of habitual movement through such spaces closely parallels Bourdieu's (1973) well-known analysis of the typical house of the Kabyle Berbers of Algeria.

Many landscape archaeologists have built upon this basic analytical approach by simply increasing the spatial scale. Christopher Tilley (1994), in particular, has argued that movement through the larger social landscape is an implicitly narrative practice that inculcates particular "spatial stories" in individuals (a notion borrowed from de Certeau [1984]). It must be said, however, that the theoretical literature that informs contemporary landscape archaeology is increasingly broad, ranging from Lefebvre's (1974) understanding of the production of space to Basso's (1996) exploration of the manner in which "wisdom sits in places." During the past fifteen years, in other words, archaeologists have come to directly grapple with past landscapes as complicated milieus that were at once external material realities, social constructions, and crucibles for the construction of human subjectivities.

Practically speaking, most actual fieldwork in landscape archaeology tends to be focused upon the distribution of either imagery (rock art) or monuments (non-domestic rock or earthen constructions) across a region. The former has naturally led to symbolic analyses of how the landscape comes to be a meaningful human construct (e.g., Bradley 1997). The latter, however, has more centrally engaged with the issue of materiality and has given rise to a particular interest in questions of memory and memorialization (Hamilakis and Labanyi 2008). Archaeologists

working in many parts of the world are now deeply attentive to the ways in which remembering and forgetting are bound up in material practices (Yoffee 2007) – for example, in the construction of durable stone monuments, the burning of the home of the deceased, or the burial of ritual objects (e.g., Mills and Walker 2008; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003).

It should come as little surprise that the community of archaeologists engaged in the study of landscapes overlaps with those interested in the body as an archaeological category. Indeed, many view research into the embodied nature of perception and experience as a necessary complement to the study of the material world with which humans are entangled. People, it is said, make things, but things also make people. This, in short, is the philosophical issue of the subject-object dialectic (Miller 2005), an issue that has become a passionate subject of archaeological debate during the past decade in some quarters.

Paralleling the study of landscapes, the archaeology of the body has moved between two different theoretical orientations: one attentive to the bodily surface as a site of semiotic inscription where social identities may be read as if a text, and the second concerned with the embodied experience of daily practice where subjects emerge as flesh (bodies) among flesh (the material world), following Merleau-Ponty (1968:138) (Borić and Robb 2008; Hamilakis et al. 2002; Meskell and Joyce 2003). Broadly speaking, interest in the former preceded the latter, and herein one finds echoes of the broader shift in the humanities from the linguistic turn of the 1970s to the material turn of the 1990s. Most archaeological statements in this literature represent efforts to reread gender in antiquity through an interrogation of the material traces of bodily performance, accessed either through iconographic depictions, architectural spaces, or actual human remains. And to an extent, there is a tendency simply to draw from the broader theoretical literature without adding substantially to it. Nevertheless, archaeology's ability to speak empirically – through, for instance, the tangible traces of habitual practices on skeletons – and not merely metaphorically about the effects of the material world on human bodies holds much promise to intervene in debates about embodiment across the humanities.

As we have noted, archaeologists are materialists by method if not necessarily by theoretical inclination, and while recent landscape and embodiment studies have made significant contributions to our understanding of the materiality of human life, the study of artifacts has also been a constant source of new ideas. There are traditional commitments to, for example, constructing typologies of stone tools or analyzing the chemical composition of ceramic vessels in order to better understand the nature of their production and circulation; such studies have been and continue to be an important part of the science of archaeology. They are complemented, however, by an expanding set of object-oriented research interests that bear marked similarity to those of colleagues in art history, philosophy, and literary criticism.

Beyond traditional studies of artifact provenance, for example, archaeologists increasingly seek to illuminate the biographies of objects in a manner akin to what Appadurai (1986) has called “methodological fetishism.” Archaeological objects are approached as if they possessed complex social histories: from production (birth) to consumption or discard (death) with a range of life stages in between (Gosden and Marshall 1999). Much of the inspiration for this work comes from the ethnographic literature, particularly Melanesian ethnography (Mauss 1990; Munn 1992; Weiner 1992), but here too, archaeologists are making their own distinctive contributions by addressing comparable phenomena in the distant past and by attending to the physical traces of object biographies that reside in artifact composition, use-wear, breakage patterns, and context of deposition.

Theoretical debate over materiality, object ontologies, and the relation between persons and things (or, increasingly, the blurring of these categories) is clearly one of the most explosive areas

of growth within the discipline. Explosions, however, are chaotic phenomena, and the emerging archaeology of materiality – unlike the more traditional archaeology of origins – still lacks anything resembling a dominant paradigm. Followers of a broadly phenomenological tradition inspired by Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty (e.g., Thomas 1996) find themselves sitting beside staunch advocates of an archaeological semiotics built upon the writings of Peirce or the indexical approach of Alfred Gell (e.g., Osborne and Tanner, ed. 2007; Preucel 2006). And seated across from the semioticians are the posthumanists who have taken the arguments of Latour to heart and have devoted themselves to the empowerment of things, to the fight against the tyranny of the subject, and to an archaeology that in no way privileges the *Homo sapiens* actor of the liberal humanist tradition (e.g., Shanks 2007; Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007). Such dinner parties tend to be cacophonous, running late into the evening, but it is here that the radical edge of the discipline is constituted.

The future of the past

Modern archaeology, then, naturally lends itself to interdisciplinarity, for it is here that one finds the hard sciences regularly put in the service of the social sciences and the humanities. Archaeology is a mode of inquiry in which laboratory analysis of isotopes in ancient animal bone may be undertaken to shed light on the diet of domesticated species, the movement of choice cuts across the landscape, the feasting of pilgrims at regional centers and, ultimately, the Bakhtinian nature of ritual gatherings during the period of state consolidation. Indeed, one commonly encounters archaeologists who simultaneously maintain special research interests in, say, ceramic petrography and Heideggerian metaphysics.

Archaeology's interdisciplinary stance extends into deeper levels yet. Society has always looked to the past and to narratives of origin to legitimize or contest political orders in the present. Social identity is rooted in the past, and many have argued that the sacred itself resides in the place of origin (e.g., Godelier 1999). Hence, no archaeological statement – no matter how ancient its subject, no matter how scientifically grounded its claim – ever fully divorces itself from prevailing political realities. In this sense, many would view archaeology not only as an interweaving of science and humanity but also as a mode of political and ethical engagement. The latter observation rose to the forefront of archaeological consciousness during the 1990s and has led to numerous critiques of archaeology's links to colonialism and the building of modern nation-states (Gosden 2004; Hamilakis 2007; Meskell 1998). It has also prompted the development of reflexive or so-called “decolonized” methodologies in which research designs are permitted to emerge through collaboration with the varied stakeholders, particularly indigenous peoples whose ancestors are frequently the object of archaeological study.

Needless to say, archaeological politics are frequently fraught with internal paradox and high emotion, sometimes leading to outright violence. Certain well-known cases have underscored this fact. When Hindu nationalists demolished the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India, in 1992, they were emboldened in their actions by (false) archaeological claims that a medieval Hindu temple – allegedly destroyed by Muslim conquerors in the sixteenth century – lay beneath the mosque. Over two thousand people were killed in riots following the demolition, and when the World Archaeological Congress met in New Delhi in 1994 the issue led to impassioned battles within the discipline over archaeological responsibilities in such matters.

In North America, the most politicized of archaeological cases in recent years is that of “Kennewick Man,” a 9,400-year-old human skeleton found eroding out of a riverbank in Washington State in 1996. Initial statements by archaeologists fueled stories in the popular media

that the skeleton was Caucasian, and this, in turn, played upon racist desires for a white history of the United States prior to the Native American presence. The ensuing court battle between archaeologists struggling to maintain access to the skeleton and native claimants seeking to rebury an ancient ancestor has been a lightning rod for debate over the status of pre-Columbian archaeological remains as the heritage of, at once, Native American tribes, the broader American public, and the nation-state itself (Thomas 2000).

It seems inevitable that such conflicts not only will continue apace with the development of archaeological traditions in particular regions but that confrontations over control of the past will increasingly be played out on international stages. The efforts of UNESCO to designate and financially support “World Heritage Sites,” for instance, are laudable insofar as they aim to preserve key archaeological resources and to increase respect for cultural traditions whose identities are linked to those sites. However, UNESCO’s universalization of world heritage has been alternately read as a culmination of the colonial project in which the West draws non-Western histories into its own meta-history and assumes legal guardianship of archaeological remains across the globe. Indeed, Finbarr Flood (2002) has argued that the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 had little to do with Islamic prohibitions on figuration, since Muslims had protected the figures for nearly two millennia. Rather, Flood and others take the radical position that reads the Taliban’s actions as an extreme political protest to the very sorts of hegemonic Western institutions that would bemoan the destruction of archaeological relics more than the suffering of Afghani citizens.

The broader lesson from these and other cases is that while archaeology may be, at heart, the study of the human past, the past is nevertheless very much a part of the present.

Conclusion

As we stated in the introduction, archaeology owes its origin to Enlightenment faith in the power of knowledge, a fascination with human nature, and a search for temporality, that is, contingent human history. Although some archaeologists have sought constant laws of human nature or principles of human systems, there has been in recent years a renewal of the historical imagination in archaeological research.

Archaeologists, whose interests continue to lie in reconstructing sequences of events and explaining the causes and effects of social change, also have moved into many new arenas of humanistic discourse. By means of new excavations, scientific analyses, and comparative investigations we know more about the past than could have been imagined a few years ago. If archaeologists will always debate exactly what the past was like and why things changed, they tend to agree strongly on what the past was not like: ancient monuments were not the gifts of extraterrestrial visitors and the human species does not date back only a few thousand years.

New discoveries, new technological inventions, and new critical perspectives in archaeology will continue to enrich the humanities as long as humans seek to understand our world and how it came to be.

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