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Introduction

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Introduction

Archaeology might appear a luxury in a world where many are faced with serious practical problems of survival and making a living. However, all cultures are concerned with their past and developing various ways to create or retrieve history; a group without a past has no present or sense of the future. Archaeology started as a western engagement with a range of pasts, but has become a vital technology for many in the world who are attempting to locate their own past or understand that of others. Archaeology has become a means whereby people from many cultural backgrounds can participate in and discuss issues of mutual interest, local or global.

Archaeology holds great potential for understanding varying forms of history, but is itself an area of debate and discussion, making it necessary to ask what archaeology was, is, and will be for the vast range of people participating in it. Indeed, the range of activities, modes of thought, and patterns of engagement connected with archaeology are so large as to bring into question whether it is a single subject at all. As academic forms of study have emerged since the nineteenth century, a number of divisions in those modes of study have been created. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, universities were almost solely concerned with classical languages and learning or biblical exegesis. As the century progressed, the range of sciences, humanities, and social sciences we are familiar with today emerged, with archaeology a relative latecomer that has complex roots in Classics but also has a distinct kinship with anthropology. Archaeology was also involved in the emergence of Darwinian thought, as well as in controversies over timescales, thus making it centrally involved in the broader battles between science and religion. Distinctions between humanistic and scientific approaches to the world continued to sharpen through the twentieth century, creating something of a fault-line through the middle of archaeology which continues to the present in some manner.

Also, from the turn of the twentieth century, amateurs and the general public became increasingly excluded from the main processes of academic life, to be very partially

readmitted through various forms of public engagement. Archaeology is a mode of enquiry pursued by both professional and amateur, and has felt the strain of this opening divide. Differences between western and other intellectual traditions became subjects of study in the later nineteenth century through a nascent anthropology, which often cast non-western traditions in an inferior light. Following this trend, archaeology started as the study of 'primitive' forms (p. xiv) of life past, which had relevance then for the present. Forms of life and thought are now more likely to be seen as different, with no imputation of superiority, but some of the older patterns of thought still exist within the discipline, making for division and debate. A further division can be seen in the subject matter of archaeology: the Palaeolithic period is seen as long and sparse of evidence, making it hard to interpret in social terms while encouraging approaches that privilege biological evolution or links with changing forms of environment. Archaeology has stretched across these divides as they emerged sometimes uncomfortably and, at other times, productively.

Links to the study of classical history, literature, and philosophy have remained important, to be complemented in the later twentieth century by links to other more recent historical records, some of the most important of which are in oral form as well as written sources. Historical archaeologies of various types raise issues about how far and in what manner archaeological results complement or subvert historical sources.

In many modes, archaeology is a severely practical activity, and this is the aspect of which the general public is most aware. Survey, excavation, and formal and scientific analyses are all key in generating material to be argued about and fought over in site reports or broader syntheses. Some of these modes of activity take place through modes of activity we label as 'science'. Generating absolute dates has been key in producing a world archaeology over the last fifty years and we can now reasonably ask about the general state of the world 18,000 years ago or the relative timing of colonization processes in varying parts of the world or moves towards farming. Scientific dating is, of course, only possible through broader developments in physics and chemistry, of which archaeologists have taken advantage. The same is true of investigations into the history of materials or human diet, which also ultimately draw on techniques from chemistry or biochemistry and use the skills of people trained in those disciplines. How far people trained within scientific traditions are able to talk to humanists or to value their results, which might appear to lack in rigour, has long been an issue. 'Can the theoretician and the practical archaeologist be friends?' is a very common question, often answered in the negative, although some of the older divisions are breaking down to the benefit of all.

Theoretical archaeology has taken practitioners of that discipline close to many others, including evolutionary theory, history, literature, philosophy, geography, the history of science, and more. Sometimes this theory is in modernist scientific mode and, at other times, it reflects postmodernist or more romantic fashion. Depending on the theory used, the relationship between method and theory has been differently conceived. Positivist forms of thought emphasize induction, observation, and the relative autonomy of theory and modes of observation. Postmodernist and critical theorists feel that observation is influenced by the (p. xv) broader ideas used, so that so-called facts are actually saturated with and collected through a whole series of theoretical presuppositions.

The relationship between archaeology and its various publics has constantly changed. In the western world, where archaeology began, many outside the discipline have an interest in local histories, landscapes, and forms of tradition, as demonstrated by the large number of local societies or individuals involved in archaeological fieldwork and research. Many also read in their newspapers about issues of more global concern, such as the possible discovery of a new hominid species in Indonesia, past evidence for global warming, or new research throwing purported light on the building of the Pyramids. Increasingly it is obvious that other concerned groups exist outside the confines of the western world, who often feel that western archaeology has ignored, undervalued, or appropriated elements of their past. For First Nations or Aboriginal peoples in settler societies, claims on their land and other elements of their culture are the foundations of attempts at cultural regeneration. Archaeologists may be enemies or allies in these struggles, with court-cases taking place to recover human remains and artefacts, at the negative end of the spectrum, counterbalanced by new forms of partnership or covenants between indigenous people and archaeologists at the positive end. Archaeology has shared with anthropology concerns with non-western forms of history, modes of thought, and culture which have sometimes united the two disciplines as well as causing both to wonder whether other modes of life, past and present, can be understood using western intellectual tools and tropes of writing. A broad Anthropological synthesis, in which the capital A is vital, casts archaeology as one of four linked disciplines, including also social/cultural anthropology, linguistics, and physical anthropology. This set of disciplines emerged first through colonial attempts to understand and govern Others, but now wonders about issues of synthesis and writing in a partly post-colonial world.

It should also be noted that an important element of archaeology in many so-called developed countries today is carried out by commercial firms in advance of development. Developer-funded archaeology is unevenly developed even across the western world, but in places like the United States and Britain far larger forms of excavation and analysis are possible in the commercial world than in the university sector, and we urgently need to try to renegotiate this set of relationships, to ensure that productive archaeology is done which feeds into research and informs the general public.

Archaeology is proud of its ability to deal with very long timescales, ultimately covering the whole span of human evolution, currently thought to be some six million years long. However, real doubts exist as to whether the whole range of evidence can be thought about in the same way. In particular, distinctions are made between the vast *longue durée* of the Palaeolithic and the more tractable timescales of the Holocene. For much of the Palaeolithic, we are dealing with creatures other than ourselves, with capabilities and forms of social organization for which (p. xvi) there are no good modern analogues either among primates or human groups. Imagination needs to be stretched and active to think about how our ancestors of different species organized themselves and what evidence they left behind. On the one hand, the timescale over which the Palaeolithic evidence is generated is also challenging to people whose personal experience of time is measured in decades. On the other hand, the Palaeolithic evidence allows and indeed forces us to ask big questions about what it means to be human and how we became human. The processes through which language, community, the use of tools, and forms of intelligence all emerged in what we now recognize as human

form are some of the largest questions archaeology can ask. It is hard to ask, much less answer, such questions if we leave out the Palaeolithic evidence.

We tend to feel slightly more at home in the shorter timescales of the Holocene, and westerners derive some spurious comfort when dealing with settled peoples with relatively abundant amounts of material culture. But there are major uncertainties as to whether we can really make more sense of recent evidence than earlier forms. To complicate matters further, a third sort of archaeology that may well exist, when judged against timescale, is alluded to above—historical archaeology, which can operate in a range of time much closer to the biographical and with a greater richness of detail about human relations, individuals, and events. Comparison and contrast between these three modes of doing archaeology could tell us a lot about what it means to be human, how we construct and represent a picture of humanness, the manners in which gender and identity and individuality are conceived, as well as how we practise archaeology in all its various guises.

In this book, we have tried to construct a sense of these issues and many more that help make up archaeology as both a global discipline and a series of local practices. The book ranges over issues of history, theory, and methods of archaeology, and looks at some of the big issues and key periods of the past, dwelling less than previously might have been the case on the archaeology of the western world. We hope that the varied contributions give those new to the discipline some sense of the excitement, possibility, and controversy of archaeological practices and results. For those already knowledgeable, there is plenty that is new and which has never been brought together in this form before. We have encouraged the contributors to develop their own points of view rather than any line of thought deriving from the editors: to show the plurality of archaeology has been our aim. Not all the pieces originally commissioned came through, and there have been some changes of authorship along the way, as is inevitably the case in a work of this size and scope.

We are very grateful to Hilary O'Shea at Oxford University Press for initiating this volume and for her support and patience at various delays. We thank all the contributors and especially those who got their contributions in on time for being so patient. As all the contributors will recognize, Lynda Smithson has been (p. xvii) vital to the production of this volume, ordering and formatting material as well as chivvying contributors and editors alike.

Identity is an issue for all today, as are questions of how to live well in our relations with others and in tune with the material world. Archaeology produces no answers to such issues and questions, but does expand our range of thought about them, showing us other times and places which shake us out of easy cultural complacency. We hope that this volume indicates some of the range of uses to which archaeology can be put—their histories and strengths and weaknesses. Archaeology is fast-changing and exciting. This snapshot of the discipline does, we hope, convey some sense of that as well as indicating future possibilities. (p. xviii)

