

# INTERPRETING ARCHAEOLOGY

*Finding meaning in the past*

*Edited by*

*Ian Hodder,*

*Michael Shanks,*

*Alexandra Alexandri,*

*Victor Buchli,*

*John Carman,*

*Jonathan Last*

*and Gavin Lucas*

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Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, Alexandra Alexandri,  
Victor Buchli, John Carman, Jonathan Last and  
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# Introduction

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Archaeology is increasingly important in contemporary society. Some archaeologies provide a narrative of prehistory and a complement to documentary history. But archaeological materials are also being referenced more and more in relation to local and national identities. They are being used by commercial interests in entertainment and leisure industries. The archaeological past is being quoted and interpreted in many diverse cultural fields. Archaeologists are also continuing to ask questions of themselves – the procedures, questions and interests appropriate to a discipline which focuses often on the past but which is concerned with its role in the present. This book is about the state of the discipline in the 1990s. It is a perspective of Anglo-American archaeology, but one which has an eye also on other parts of the world, and one which is prepared to shift with new outlooks and learn new ways of thinking the material past in the present.

## **ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF MATERIAL CULTURE: A REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE**

This book arises from a gathering of 140 archaeologists for three days, late in the summer of 1991 at Peterhouse of the University of Cambridge. The college has long been associated with radical and reflective thought on the nature of the discipline archaeology, and this was the purpose: to explore the latest thinking on the issues associated with interpreting the material remains of the past – and, indeed, understanding material culture generally, past and present. The meeting was not composed of people gathered to hear the opinion of a few designated ‘experts’, but of professional academic and archaeological fieldworkers, students, amateurs, and those in associated fields, whose experience and opinions were canvassed widely. Most time was given in the conference to short papers to raise issues (rather than to communicate definitive statements) and small-group discussions. An ‘agenda’ was precirculated to all, proposing some questions and themes which an organising committee of over fifteen members of the Department of Archaeology, Cambridge, considered significant and worthy of debate; comment and suggested amendments were sought and received. The conference attracted people from the United States, many parts of Europe, Africa, India, Japan and Australasia, as well as Britain – an international gathering.

The specialised and narrow atmosphere of many academic meetings was side-stepped both by the exchange of many opinions and also by the emphasis on issues common to most of the human and social sciences – questions of how to explain and understand the material culture dimension of society and its development. These questions run through archaeology, history, anthropology, sociology, ethology and

behaviour studies, philosophy and social theory, design studies, archaeological heritage management and interpretation, and museology.

The international and interdisciplinary scope and the multivocal discussions are reported and developed in this book, which can consequently lay claim to representing a cross-section of thinking, a poll of opinion about the present state and future of an archaeology or archaeologies (to retain the pluralism) actively concerned with interpreting and explaining, rather than simply discovering and codifying, the material past for the present.

The main body of this book consists of five sections, each taking a distinct theme and containing editorial statements and short papers. The editorials set the scene, provide a context for the points raised in the short papers and also, importantly, assimilate the conference discussions (based on tapes and notes made by organising committee members and conference participants themselves). The papers vary in their style and format. Some are many-referenced and carefully worded, even guarded, statements. Others are lighter pieces intended to raise issues and provoke thought. To retain a sense of multivocality, editorial control was not exercised heavily in an attempt to achieve uniformity. Informality was encouraged. The book begins with an essay on the character of interpretation and some of the areas of contention (from an Anglo-American perspective) in contemporary archaeology. There follows an outline of some of the questions and issues tackled by the book and which form its intellectual context. This outline is a development of the conference agenda – modified, of necessity, after the event. At the end there is a report of other comment which was less easily assimilated into the main body of the book. A glossary of some key terms provides further orientation.

The opinions and ideas of over fifty people are here reported directly; those of over ninety more lie immediately in the background. This book depends on all of these. Their meeting would not have been possible without the facilities of the Department of Archaeology, Cambridge, the generous assistance of the British Council, the British Academy, the Macdonald Institute of Archaeology, Cambridge, Routledge Publishing, and particularly the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse.

# Processual, postprocessual and interpretive archaeologies

*Michael Shanks and Ian Hodder*

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The theme of this book is the character and scope of archaeologies which may be termed interpretive. However, in spite of the use of the word ‘interpretive’ in this way as a label, the authors are not proposing and outlining another ‘new’ archaeology. There have been many such gestures over the last three decades with programmatic statements of panaceas for archaeology’s perceived methodological maladies. We do not wish to add to the host of methods and approaches, but present here a general examination of current states of thinking in archaeology via the topic of interpretation. Our interest is interpretation in archaeology.

More particularly, it is proposed that ‘interpretation’ is a term which helps clarify current debates in Anglo-American archaeology between processual and post-processual approaches (see, for example, Preucel (ed.) 1991, *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 22, 1989, Yoffee and Sherratt (eds) 1993).

Processual archaeology<sup>1</sup> is the orthodoxy which emerged after the reaction, beginning in the 1960s and calling itself ‘new archaeology’, against traditional culture-historical and descriptive approaches to the material past. Its characteristics are as follows:

- Archaeology conceived as anthropological science rather than allied with history.
- Explanation of the past valued over description.
- Explanation via the incorporation of particular observations of the material past into cross-cultural generalisations pertaining to (natural and social) process (hence the term ‘processual’).
- Explanation via explicit methodologies modelled on the hard sciences.
- An earlier interest in laws of human behaviour has shifted to an interest in formation processes of the archaeological record – regularities which will allow inferences about processes to be made from material remains.

For many, and although it may not explicitly be described as such, processual archaeology is a good means, if not the best, of acquiring *positive knowledge* of the archaeological past. Positive archaeological knowledge is *of the past*, which means that it aspires to objectivity in the sense of being neutral and, indeed, timeless (the past happened in the way it did; that much at least will not change). Under a programme of positive knowledge, archaeologists aim to *accumulate* more knowledge of the past. The timeless and objective quality of knowledge is important if the aim is to accumulate and build on what is already known; it would be no good building on facts which cannot be relied upon, because they might change. The aspiration to timeless and value-free knowledge also enables high degrees of specialisation, knowledges isolated in their own field and disconnected from the present. The cultural politics of the 1990s does not affect what happened in

prehistory, it is held. The archaeologist can live with one while quite separately gaining knowledge of the other.

To secure this timeless objectivity is the task of method(ology), and in processual archaeology this may be described as coming down to reason or rationality working objectively upon data or the facts. Reason is that cognitive processing which is divorced from superstition, ideology, emotion, subjectivity – indeed, anything which compromises the purity or neutrality of logical calculation. To attain objectivity means carefully relying on those faculties which allow access to the past – particularly observation, controlled perception of those empirical traces remaining of what happened. Theory-building may be involved in moving from the static archaeological record of the present to past social dynamics (Binford 1977), but to move beyond controlled observation is to speculate and to invite bias and subjectivity, contamination of the past by the present.

These aspirations to positive scientific knowledge, neutrality, and reliance on controlled observation of facts have led to processual archaeology being described as positivist and empiricist (see, among others, Shanks and Tilley 1987a).

Processual archaeology is anthropological in the sense of being informed by an interest in social reconstruction of the past. The following form the main outlines of processual conceptions of the social as they developed from the late 1960s.

- Society is essentially composed of patterned sets of behaviours.
- Material culture and material residues, the products of processes which form the archaeological record, *reflect* the patterned behaviours which are society, or they are the result of natural processes which can be defined scientifically (the decay of organic materials; the corrosion of metals).
- Society is a mode of human adaptation to the social and natural environment.
- Accordingly, explaining social process means focusing on those features of the society which most relate to adaptation to environments: resources, subsistence and economic strategies, trade and exchange, technology. Attention has, however and more recently, turned to symbolism and ritual.
- The interest in cross-cultural generalisation and patterning is expressed in societal typing (identifying a particular society as band, lineage-based, chiefdom, state, etc.) and schemes of cultural evolution.

Postprocessual archaeology, as the label implies, is something of a reaction and supercession of this processual framework (especially after Hodder, ed., 1982; see also Hodder 1985, 1986). Since the late 1970s issue has been taken with most of these tenets of processual archaeology: the character of science and aims of objective explanation; the character of society; and the place of values in archaeology, the sociopolitics of the discipline, its contemporary location as a mode of cultural production of knowledges.<sup>2</sup>

Doubt, from theoretical and empirical argument, has been thrown on the possibility of an anthropological science, based upon observation of residues of patterned behaviours, detached from the present and aspiring to value-freedom (as positive knowledge). So the processual–postprocessual debate has centred upon the forms of knowledge appropriate to a *social* science, how society may be conceived (reconciling both patterning or structure and individual action, intention and agency), and upon the workings of the discipline of archaeology, its ideologies and cultural politics, its place in the (post)modern present.

The debate has tended towards a polarisation of positions, and it is this which has led to an obscuring of the issues. Postprocessual has come to be seen by some

as anti-science, celebrating subjectivity, the historical particular in place of generalisation: the cultural politics of the present displacing positive knowledge of the past. Above all, the authority of a scientific and professional knowledge of the past is posited against particular and subjective constructions, a pluralism of pasts appropriate each to their own contemporary constituency: science is pitted against relativism (Yoffee and Sherratt (eds) 1993, Trigger 1989b, Watson 1990).

We refer to an obscuring of the issues because this polarisation is unnecessary indeed, damaging. We are proposing that a consideration of the character and scope of interpretation may help overcome the polarisations. And, to begin, a renaming may be appropriate. The label 'postprocessual' says nothing about what it stands for, other than a relative position in respect of processual archaeology. If we are to use interpretation as an epithet, *interpretive archaeologies* may be used as a more positive label, perhaps, for many of those approaches which have been called postprocessual. These are archaeologies (the plural is important, as will become clear) which work through interpretation. And we hope it will become clear that a careful consideration of interpretation entails abandoning the caricatures of science versus relativism, generalisation versus the historical particular, and the objective past versus the subjective present.

The main aspects of archaeologies termed interpretive might be summarised as follows.

- Foregrounded is the person and work of the interpreter. Interpretation is practice which requires that the interpreter does not so much hide behind rules and procedures predefined elsewhere, but takes responsibility for their actions, their interpretations.
- Archaeology is hereby conceived as a material practice in the present, making things (knowledges, narratives, books, reports, etc.) from the material traces of the past – constructions which are no less real, truthful or authentic for being constructed.
- Social practices, archaeology included, are to do with meanings, making sense of things. Working, doing, acting, making are interpretive.
- The interpretive practice that is archaeology is an ongoing process: there is no final and definitive account of the past as it was.
- Interpretations of the social are less concerned with causal explanation (accounts such as 'this is the way it was' and 'it happened because of this') than with *understanding* or *making sense* of things which never were certain or sure.
- Interpretation is consequently multivocal: different interpretations of the same field are quite possible.
- We can therefore expect a plurality of archaeological interpretations suited to different purposes, needs, desires.
- Interpretation is thereby a creative but none the less critical attention and response to the interests, needs and desires of different constituencies (those people, groups or communities who have or express such interests in the material past).

## TO INTERPRET, THE ACT OF INTERPRETATION: WHAT DO THE WORDS MEAN AND IMPLY?

We particularly stress the active character of interpretation: one is an interpreter by virtue of performing the act or practice of interpreting. An interpreter is a translator, an interlocutor, guide or go-between.<sup>3</sup>



### Meaning

To interpret something is to figure out what it means. A translator conveys the sense or meaning of something which is in a different language or medium. In this way interpretation is fundamentally about meaning. Note, however, that translation is not a simple and mechanical act but involves careful judgement as to appropriate shades of meaning, often taking account of context, idiom and gesture which can seriously affect the meaning of words taken on their own.

### Dialogue

A translator may be an interlocutor or go-between. Interpretation contains the idea of mediation, of conveying meaning from one party to another. An interpreter aims to provide a reciprocity of understanding, overcoming the lack of understanding or semantic distance between two parties who speak different languages or belong to different cultures. Interpretation is concerned with dialogue, facilitating and making easier.

In a good dialogue or conversation one listens to what the other says and tries to work out what they mean, tries to understand, to make sense. Translation may be essential to this, performed either by a separate interpreter or by the parties of the dialogue themselves. Further questions might be asked and points put forward based on what has already been heard and understood. The idea is that dialogue moves forward to a consensus (of sorts) which is more than the sum of the initial positions. This *fusion of horizons* (a term taken from hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, discussed below) is potentially a learning experience in which one takes account of the other, their objections and views, even if neither is won over.

It is not a good and open dialogue if one party simply imposes its previous ideas, categories and understandings upon the other. Preconceptions are simply confirmed. It is not good if the interpreter does not recognise the independence of the interpreted, their resistance to control and definition. A good conversation is one perhaps which never ends: there is always more to discover.

What might be a dialogue with the past? One where the outcome resides wholly in neither side but is a product of *both* the past and the present. Archaeological interpretation here resides in the gap between past and present. Such a dialogue is also ongoing. We will take up these points again below.

### Uncertainty

Interpretation involves a perceived gap between the known and the unknown, desire and a result, which is to be bridged somehow. There is thus uncertainty, both at the outset of interpretation (what does this mean?) and at the end of the act of interpretation. It could always have been construed in a different way, with perhaps a different aspect stressed or disregarded. Although we might be quite convinced by an understanding we have managed to achieve, it is good to accept fallibility and not to become complacent. Is this not indeed the character of reason? Rationality is not an abstract absolute for which we can formulate rules and procedures, but is better conceived as the willingness to recognise our partiality, that our knowledge and reasoning are open to challenge and modification. Final and definitive interpretation is a closure which is to be avoided, suspected at the least.

### Exploration and making connections

Interpretation implies an extension or building from what there is here to something beyond. We have already mentioned that interpretation should aspire to being open to change, exploring possibility. Exploration of meanings is often about making different connections.

Here can be mentioned the structuralist argument that meaning, if it is to be found at all, resides in the gaps between things, in their interrelationships. A lone signifier seems empty. But once connected through relations of similarity and difference with other signifiers it makes sense. In deciphering a code different permutations of connections between the particles of the code are explored until meaning is unlocked.

### Judgement

A sculptor or woodcarver might examine their chosen material, interpret its form and substance, taking note of grain and knots of wood, flaws and patterning in stone, and then judge and choose how to work with or against the material. An archaeologist may examine a potsherd, pick out certain diagnostic traits and judge that these warrant an identification of the sherd as of a particular type: they choose an identification from various possibilities. Interpretation involves judgement and choice: drawing sense, meaning and possibility from what began as uncertainty.

### Performance

In this way interpretation may refer to something like dramatic performance, where a particular interpretation of a dramatic text is offered according to the judgement of performers and director. The text is worked with and upon. Focus is drawn to certain connections within the characters and plot which are judged to be significant. Interpretation is here again reading for significance, where significance is literally making something a sign.<sup>4</sup>

Dramatic interpretation has further dimensions. A text is read for significance and courses of action inferred. A past work (the text of a play) is acted out and in so doing it is given intelligible life. Now, there is no need here to take a literal line and think that archaeological interpretation involves those experimental reconstructions of past ways of life that are familiar from television programmes and heritage parks (though there is here a serious argument for experimental archaeology). We would rather stress that interpretation is in performance an *active apprehension*.<sup>5</sup> Something produced in the past is made a presence to us now. It is worked upon actively. If it were not, it would have no life. An unread and unperformed play is dead and gone. Analogously an archaeological site which is not actively apprehended, worked on, incorporated into archaeological projects, simply lies under the ground and decays. The questions facing the actor-interpreters are: How are the characters to be portrayed? What settings are to be used? What form of stage design? What lighting, sound and ambience? Simply, what is to be made of the play? (Pearson 1994).

Courses of action inferred, projects designed: these are conditions of interpretation.

### Critique

Judgement here involves taking a position, choosing how to perform, what to do, which meanings to enact or incorporate. Involved is a commitment to one performance rather than another. Any interpretation is always thus immediately

critical of other interpretations. Performance is both analytic commentary on its source, the written play, but also critical in its choice of some meanings and modes and not others.

### **The ubiquity of interpretation forgotten in black boxes**

Interpretation is insidiously ubiquitous. There are always choices and judgements being made even in the most mundane and apparently empirical activities. Describing and measuring an artefact, for example, always involves acts of interpretation and judgement. Which parts of a stone axe-blade are to be measured, for example, and from where to where?

But some interpretation is often overlooked when people accept certain interpretive conventions. So, for example, plants are most often described according to scientific specie lists. But these species lists are not 'natural': they are the result of scientific interpretation concerning the definition and classification of plants and creatures. Such interpretation may have occurred a while ago now, and be more of interest to historians of science, but it should be recognised that the choice or judgement is made to accept that interpretation. Interpretations such as this concerning the classification of plants are often worth following simply because so much work would be required, starting almost from first principles, to redesign natural history. The idea of a species is tied in to so many other things: evolutionary theory and ecology, botany and zoology, etc.

When an interpretation or set of interpretations is accepted, treated as uncontroversial and no longer even seen for what it is, the term *black-boxed* can be used. Interpretation is made, accepted and then put away, out of sight and often out of mind, in a black box. It allows us to live with the world more easily; we would otherwise be as infants, asking whether this thing in front of us really could be interpreted as a table with a box upon it which is most difficult to interpret, a computer.

Indeed, all archaeology is hereby interpretive, concerned intimately with the interpretation of things. However, some archaeologists refuse to accept this, or choose to overlook or black-box acts of interpretation. Excavation, for example, is so thoroughly interpretive. Many students on their first dig find the uncertainty very disturbing. Where does one layer end and another begin? How can you tell? How can it be ascertained that this scatter of traces of holes in the ground was once a wooden house? Yet this pervasive interpretive uncertainty is the construction of 'hard' facts about the past.

### **Hermeneutics<sup>6</sup>**

'The theoretical and philosophical field of interpretation, the clarification of meaning and achievement of sense and understanding, is covered by *hermeneutics*.<sup>7</sup> Hermeneutics addresses the relationship between interpreter and interpreted when that which is to be interpreted is not just raw material to be defined and brought under technical control, but *means* something. The term traditionally applied to the reading of texts and the understanding of historical sources – Is the source authentic? What does it mean? What were the author's intentions? We do not propose a simple import of hermeneutic principles into archaeology, but will be noting their relevance to the topics and issues of this book.

Having unpacked the idea of interpretation, we will now develop some of the observations.

## UNCERTAINTY

Interpretation is rooted in a world which cannot be tied down to definitive categories and processes. Consider classification. Articles are grouped or a group divided according to their similarities. Each class or taxon contains those articles judged the same. There are two fields of remaindering or possible foci of uncertainty where judgement is required. First, it may not be absolutely clear where a particular article belongs, particularly if the criteria for inclusion in a class are not specific, if an article is approaching the edges, the margins of a taxon, or if it is somehow incomplete. Second, there is always a remainder after classification. Classification never completely summarises. There are always aspects or attributes of an article which are disregarded and which remain outside taxa, embarrassing classification.

Classification operates under a 'rule of the same'. Taxa are characterised by relative *homogeneity*. This is a legitimate strategy for coping with the immense empirical variety and particularity that archaeologists have to deal with. However, we should be clear that classification does not give the *general* picture; it gives the *average*. It is not a general picture because there is no provision in classification for assessing the norm, the taxa (where do they come from; they are supplemental or external to the classification), nor the variations within a class, nor the variability of variability. Classification is less interested in coping with particularity: Why are the members of a class of pots all in fact slightly different?

Things are equivocal. A pot can be classified according to its shape and decoration as of a particular type. But thin-sectioned under a polarising microscope it explodes into another world of micro-particles and mineral inclusions. The pot is not just one thing which can be captured in a single all-encompassing definition. There is always more that can be said or done with the pot. A single pot is also multiple. It depends on the trials we make of it, what we do with it, how we experience it – whether we attend to surface and shape or slice it and magnify it.

Instead of smoothing over, we can also attend to that which does not fit, to the rough and irregular, to the texture of things. Everyday life is not neat and tidy. History is a mess. We can attend to the equivocal, to the absences in our understanding, focus on the gaps in neat orders of explanation. Conspicuously in archaeology there can be no final account of the past – because it is now an equivocal and ruined mess, but also because even when the past was its present it was to a considerable extent incomprehensible. So much has been lost and forgotten of what never was particularly clear. Social living is immersion in equivocality, everyday uncertainty. What really is happening now? There are no possible final answers.

Uncertainty and equivocality refer to the difference of things: they can be understood according to a rule of the same, but difference escapes this rule, escapes homogeneity. Because an attention to texture which escapes classification is outside of qualities of sameness (the homogeneity of what is contained within the class), the term *heterogeneity* may be used. To attend to difference is to attend to heterogeneity – the way things escape formalisation, always holding something back.

Nietzsche's and Foucault's projects of *genealogy* involves revealing the difference and discontinuity, the heterogeneity in what was taken to be homogeneous and continuous. Nietzsche reveals the 'uncertain' origins of morality (1967). Sexuality is shown to be far from a biological constant by Foucault (1979, 1984a, 1984b).

The social world is thoroughly *polysemous*. This is another concept which can be related to uncertainty. That a social act or product is polysemous means that it can always be interpreted in various ways. Meanings are usually negotiated: that is, related to the interpersonal practices, aspirations, strategies of people. We repeat

the classic example of the safety pin, the meaning of which was radically renegotiated by punk subculture in the 1970s (Hebdige 1979).

The forms of social life are constituted as meaningful by the human subjects who live those forms. People try to make sense of their lives. This ranges from interpreting the possible meanings of a politician's speeches and actions to trying to make sense of the fact that you have been made redundant and may never work again even though you are highly skilled.

Giddens (1982, 1984, p. 374) has related this characteristic of the social world (that it is to do with interpretation and meaning) to the hermeneutic task of the sociologist. He describes the difficult *double hermeneutic* of sociology. First, it aims to understand a world of meanings and interpretations (society). Second, sociologists themselves form a social community with its own practices, procedures, assumptions, skills, institutions, all of which in turn need to be understood.

Shanks and Tilley (1987a, ch. 5 especially pp. 107–8) have described a fourfold hermeneutic in archaeology, four levels of interpretation and the need to develop understanding: understanding the relation between past and present; understanding other societies and cultures; understanding contemporary society, the site of archaeological interpretations; and understanding the communities of archaeologists who are performing interpretations. Thus, not only do archaeologists translate between 'their' and 'our' world, but they also have to deal with worlds separated in space and time. But it is difficult to argue that sociologists deal with a double hermeneutic, anthropologists with a threefold hermeneutic and archaeologists with a fourfold. Certainly the societies with which prehistoric archaeologists deal are often remote, and there are many social and cultural layers that have to be bridged. But a palaeolithic archaeologist is not dealing with more hermeneutic layers than a historical archaeologist, and it is inadequate to assume that some cultures in space and time are more 'like us' than others. It is better to assert with Giddens that all the social sciences can be contrasted with the natural sciences in that they face a double rather than a single hermeneutic. Certainly at the methodological level the problem is always one of fusing two horizons, the scientific and the past society. Other information from Western and other ethnographic contexts may be brought into the argument, but always through the scientific community. The archaeologist faces the distant past in the same way that any social scientist faces 'the other', even if the scanty nature of the evidence and the great spans of time involved greatly increase the uncertainty of interpretation.

When the uncertainty of an interpretation declines it is black-boxed and need no longer be subject to suspicion and negotiation. The controversy over an interpretation is settled and closed. What allows one interpretation to prevail over another? Archaeological cultures, for example, are no longer interpreted by many as racial groups; it is not something now usually entertained as a possible interpretation. What allows or brought about the closure? A common answer might be reason and the facts. Close examination of empirical examples shows that ethnicity is not reflected in what archaeologists call cultures. But the history and philosophy of science indicate that such an explanation for the closure of scientific controversy is not enough. The central principle is that of *underdetermination*. This is the Duhem-Quine principle which holds that no single factor is enough to explain the closure of a controversy or the certainty acquired by scientists. It is the philosophical basis of most contemporary history and sociology of science.<sup>8</sup> Theory is never fully determined by the facts or by logic. There is always something which sets off doubts about the certainty, always something missing to close the black box for ever.<sup>9</sup> David Clarke (1968) was very willing to relate material culture patterning to ethnicity after

his ethnographic investigations. Cultural and, by extension, racial identity are clearly established with reference to material culture, though perhaps not in the precise terms of the archaeological culture concept (Conkey and Hastorf, eds, 1990).

## CREATIVITY AND THE TECHNOLOGY THAT IS ARCHAEOLOGY

The equivocality, heterogeneity or multiplicity of the material world means that choices must be made in perception and to what we attend. The archaeological record is an infinity in terms of the things that may be done with it and in terms of how it may be perceived. Which measurements are to be made? Are some aspects of an artefact to be disregarded in coming to an understanding? How is justice to be done to the empirical richness of the past? How is an archaeological monument such as a castle to be represented? Measured plans may be prepared and descriptions made of masonry and sequence of construction from observations of structural additions and alterations. Here attention is focused upon certain aspects of the architecture deemed worthy by conventional archaeology. But what of other experiences and perceptions of such a monument? This is hardly an exhaustive treatment of architecture. A technical line drawing may direct attention essentially and almost wholly to the edges of masonry – a subjective choice. Turner, in his sequence of picturesque renderings of castles in the early nineteenth century, focuses upon situation in landscape and attempts to convey the passage of light across monumental features. Both approaches are selective; but both also, we suggest, attend accurately to the empirical, albeit in different ways.<sup>10</sup>

Archaeological interpretation requires that some things be connected with others in order to make sense of what remains of the past. Circular features in earth of contrasting colour are associated with removed wooden stakes, and then in turn associated with other post-holes to trace the structural members of a building. To interpret is in this way a creative act. Putting things together and so creating sense, meaning or knowledge.

We are concerned to emphasise that the person of the archaeologist is essential in coming to understand the past. The past is not simply under the ground waiting to be discovered. It will not simply appear, of course, but requires work. Consider discovery. Discovery is invention. The archaeologist uncovers or discovers something, coming upon it. An inventor may be conceived to have come upon a discovery. Discovery and invention are united in their etymology: *invenire* in Latin means to come upon, to find or invent. Invention is both finding and creative power. The logic of invention, poetry and the imaginary is one of conjunction, making connections. It is both/and, between self and other; not either/or. The pot found by the archaeologist is both this and that (surface decoration and mineral inclusions). A castle is both technical drawing and romantic painting. It is there in the landscape and here in a painting. It is both of the past and of the present. Archaeology's poetry is to negotiate these equivocations and make connections. It is the work of imagination.

This is to deny the radical distinction of subjectivity and objectivity in that the subjective is simply the form that the objective takes.

Foregrounding the creativity of the interpreting archaeologist is to hold that archaeology is a mode of production of the past (Shanks and McGuire 1991, Shanks 1992a). This would seem to be recognised by those many archaeologists and textbooks which talk at length of archaeological techniques – archaeology seen as technology. The past has left remains, and they decay in the ground. According to

their interest an archaeologist works on the material remains to make something of them. So excavation is invention/discovery or sculpture<sup>11</sup> where archaeologists craft remains of the past into forms which are meaningful. The archaeological 'record' is, concomitantly, not a record at all, not given, 'data', but made. 'The past' is gone and lost, and *a fortiori*, through the equivocality of things and the character of society as constituted through meaning, never existed as a definitive entity 'the present' anyway. An archaeologist has a raw material, the remains of the past, and turns it into something – data, a report, set of drawings, a museum exhibition, an archive, a television programme, evidence in an academic controversy, and perhaps that which is termed 'knowledge of the past'. This is a mode of production.

To hold that archaeology is a mode of production of the past does not mean that anything can be made. A potter cannot make anything out of clay. Clay has properties, weight, plasticity, viscosity, tensile strength after firing, etc., which will not allow certain constructions. The technical skill of the potter involves working with these properties while designing and making. So there is no idealism here which would have archaeologists inventing whatever pasts they might wish.

To realise archaeology as cultural production does introduce a series of important illuminations. Technical interest in the empirical properties of raw material, the viability of a project, is but one aspect of production. Other essential considerations include purpose, interest, expression and taste.

Purpose and interest: products always attend needs and interests, serving purpose. Here is an argument for engaging with and answering a community's interests in the archaeological past, because a discipline which simply responds to its own perceived needs and interests, as in an academic archaeology existing for its own sake ('disinterested knowledge'), can be criticised as a decadent indulgence. Different archaeologies, different interpretations of the material past, can be produced. We suggest that a valuable and edifying archaeology attends to the needs and interests of a community, interpreting these in a way which answers purpose while giving something more, enhancing knowledges and experiences of the past and of the material world. Some issues and questions, a basis perhaps for discussion and establishing such interests, form the substructure to this book and are presented in the next chapter. Reference to publics and communities can be found particularly in Part 3. A strong political argument is that archaeology should attend to the interests of the diversity of communities and groups that it studies, works and lives among, and draws funding from (Potter 1990).

### Expression and taste

The expressive, aesthetic and emotive qualities of archaeological projects have been largely down-played or even denigrated over the last three decades as archaeologists have sought an objective scientific practice. In popular imagination the archaeological is far more than a neutral acquisition of knowledge; the material presence of the past is an emotive field of cultural interest and political dispute. The practice of archaeology also is an emotive, aesthetic and expressive experience. This affective component of archaeological labour is social as well as personal, relating to the social experiences of archaeological practice, of belonging to the archaeological community and a discipline or academic discourse. Of course such experiences are immediately political (Shanks 1992a, *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, 9:2).

The essentially creative character of production is also one of expression: taking purpose, assessing viability, working with material, and expressing interpretation to create the product that retains traces of all these stages. This expressive dimension

is also about pleasure (or displeasure) and is certainly not restricted to the intellectual or the cognitive. Pleasure is perhaps not a very common word in academic archaeology, but an interpretive archaeology should recognise the role of pleasure and embody it in the product made. This means addressing seriously and with imagination the questions of how we write the past, our activities as archaeologists and how we communicate with others.

In archaeological interpretation the past is designed, yet is no less real or objective. (We can expect some to dispute the reality of a past produced by such an interpretive archaeology which realises the subjective and creative component of the present: such a product cannot be the 'real' past, it might be said, because it has been tainted by the present and by the person of the archaeologist. This is precisely like disputing the 'reality' of a television set. Here is a technological product which looks like a television set. To ask whether it is real is a silly question. A far better question, and one that applies to the product of archaeological interpretation, is: Does it do what is required of it – does it work?) The question of archaeological design is: What kind of archaeology do we want?

A product of technology is both critique and affirmation; it embodies its creation, speaks of style, gives pleasure (or displeasure) in its use, solves a problem perhaps, performs a function, provides experiences, signifies and resonates. It may also be pretentious, ugly or kitsch, useless, or untrue to its materials and creation. In the same way each archaeology has a style; the set of decisions made in producing an archaeological product involves conformity with some interests, percepts or norms, and not with others. As with an artefact, the judgement of an archaeological style involves multiple considerations, many summarised by the term 'taste'. We need to consider its eloquence: that is, how effective and productive it is. We should also make an ethical appraisal of its aims and purposes and possible functions. Technical matters are implicated, of course, including how true it has been to the material past, the reality and techniques of observation that it uses to construct facts. Judgement refers to all these aspects of archaeological production: purpose, viability and expression.

## PROJECTS AND NETWORKS

The 'objective past' will not present itself. The remains of a prehistoric hut circle will not excavate themselves. A pot will not thin-section itself and appear upon a microscope slide beneath the gaze of a cataplectic archaeologist. Work has to be done in the sense that the remains of the past have to be incorporated into *projects*. An archaeological project has a temporality of presencing (Heidegger 1972, p. 14): the past is taken up in the work of the present which is projecting forward into the future, planning investigation, publications, knowledge, whatever. There is here no hard and fast line between the past as it was and the present. This temporality also refers us back to the character of dialogue. On the basis of what one already knows, and on the basis of prejudgement, questions are put, answers received which draw the interpreter into further prejudged questions. This is an ongoing *hermeneutic circle* (see note 6 for references) better termed, perhaps, a spiral as it draws forward the partners in dialogue.

Archaeological projects are about connecting past, present and future, but what empirical or concrete form do they take? An archaeological project involves the mobilisation of many different things or resources. Landowners are approached, funding needs to be found, labour hired, tools and materials convened, skills operated to dig, draw and photograph, computers programmed and fed with data,



finds washed and bagged, workforce kept happy, wandering cows chased off site. This is a great and rich assemblage of people, things and energies which achieve what are conventionally termed data. An archaeological project is a *heterogeneous network*.<sup>12</sup> A network because different elements are mobilised and connected, but unlike a bounded system there are no necessary or given limits to the network; it is quite possible to follow chains of connection far beyond what are conceived as the conventional limits of archaeology (in pragmatic terms think of the ramifications of funding; in institutional terms the relations with the education system; in affective terms all the associations of 'working in the field' (Shanks 1992a)). These networks are heterogeneous because connected are entities, actors and resources of different kinds: interests, moneys, academics, career trajectories, volunteers, landowners, wheelbarrows, JCB mechanical diggers, cornfields, decayed subsurface 'features', laboratories. . . .

All these are brought together in an archaeological project which constitutes the reality of the past, makes it what it is. It is within such contingent (there is nothing necessary about them) assemblages that the past comes to be perceived and known. If we were to report objectively the detail of an excavation, all the resonances and associations, all the thoughts, materials and events, the result would be very confusing and of perhaps infinite length. This is again the paradox that specificity of detail brings into doubt the validity of sensory evidence, and points to the necessity of creative choice.<sup>13</sup>

That data are constructed or crafted in (social) practices is the central contention of 'constructivist' philosophy of science (see note 8). Anthropological attention has been focused on communities of scientists and how they work with the physical world. In archaeology Joan Gero has recently considered the role of recording forms (basic now to excavation practice) in constructing archaeological facts.

## CONTEXT AND DIALOGUE

A pot without provenance is of limited value to archaeological interpretation. It has long been recognised that placing things in context is fundamental to understanding the past. Much of conventional archaeological technique is about establishing empirically rich contexts of things.

A 'contextual archaeology' makes much of the associations of things from the past (Hodder (ed.) 1987b, Hodder 1986). Meanings of things can only be approached if contexts of use are considered, if similarities and differences between things are taken into account. It is often argued that, since the meanings of things are arbitrary, archaeologists cannot reconstruct past symbolism. There are two ways in which archaeologists avoid this impasse. First, artefacts are not like words in that they have to work in a material way and are subject to universal material processes. Thus, an axe used to cut down a tree must be made of rock of a certain hardness and the cutting action will leave wear-traces. An axe made of soft chalk and without wear-traces can thus be identified, on universal criteria, to be of no use for tree-cutting – an aspect of its meaning has been inferred. Archaeologists routinely think through why prehistoric actors built this wall, dug this trench, using common-sense arguments based on universal criteria. In all such work universal characteristics of materials are linked to specific contexts to see if they are relevant. Interpretation and uncertainty are involved in deciding which aspects of the materials are useful in determining meaning. Hence, and second, the archaeologist turns not to universal characteristics of materials but to internal similarities and differences. Thus, perhaps the chalk axes are found in burials with female skeletons, while the hard stone axes are found in male burials.

Such internal patterning not only supports the idea that stone hardness is relevant to meaning in this case, but it also adds another level of meaning – gender. The task of the archaeologist is to go round and round the data in a hermeneutic spiral, looking for relationships, fitting pieces of the jigsaw together. Does the patterning of faunal remains correlate with the two axe types or with male and female burials? Is there any difference in axe-type deposition in different parts of the settlement system? And so on. The more of the evidence that can be brought together in this way, the more likely is one able to make statements about meaning – for example, that chalk axes were of high value and were associated with women in ritual contexts.

It is important to recognise that a contextual emphasis does not mean that archaeologists can interpret without generalisation. It is impossible to approach the data without prejudice and without some general theory. But the interpretive challenge is to evaluate such generality in relation to the contextual data. So much of what archaeologists assume in a general way is ‘black-boxed’. But even terms like ‘pit’, or ‘ditch’ or ‘wall’ or ‘post-hole’ should be open to scrutiny to see if they are relevant in each specific context. Archaeologists always have to evaluate relevance – are there aspects of this context which make this general theory relevant? However well defined the theory, some contextual judgement has to be made.

The same or similar things have different meanings in different contexts. It is context which allows a sensitivity to diversity and to local challenges to social meanings. But, if context is so important, is not each context, each pit different with different meanings? Certainly, at a precise level this is probably true. But most contexts are grouped together in larger contexts – a group or type of pit, a site, a region and so on. The problem then becomes one of defining the context relevant for each question. Context itself is a matter of interpretation, based on defining similarities and differences. Thus a group of pits might be described as a context because of their spatial clustering, or because they are a distinctive type, or because they have similar contents. By searching for similarities and differences some contextual variation can be identified as more relevant than others, but context and content are always intertwined in a complex hermeneutic spiral. The meaning of an artefact can change the context, but the context can change the meaning.

Thus, archaeologists, working in their own contexts, are likely to pick out certain types of context in the past and look for patterning in relation to them. There can be no context-free definitions of context. A pit, ditch or post-hole is not a ‘natural’ context. As already stated, archaeologists have to evaluate such general assumptions in relation to specific similarities and differences in the data.

Interpretation, in its concern with context, can also be described as being to do with *relationality* – exploring connections in the way we have been describing.<sup>14</sup> However, an important point to re-emphasise is that context cannot only refer to the things of the past. They are inevitably bound up in archaeological projects. We will clarify with some points from hermeneutics.

Involved here is the context (historical, social, ethical, disciplinary, whatever) of interpretation itself. In coming to understand we always begin with presuppositions. There can be no pure reception of a raw object of interpretation. We begin an interrogation of an historical source with an awareness of its historical context – we view it with hindsight; the flows and commixtures of earths, silts and rubbles in the archaeological site are understood as layers. As interpreters we have to start from somewhere; what we wish to interpret is always already understood *as* something. This is prejudgement or prejudice. And it is essential to understanding. Prejudgement and prejudice are legitimate in that they furnish the conditions for any real understanding.

Another aspect of this is that the acts of looking, sensing and posing questions of things always involve intentional acts of giving meanings. These meanings (rubble as layers, for example) derive from the situation of the interpreter. So the archaeological past is always *for* something. At the least an archaeological site under excavation is part of an archaeological project, and, as we have just argued, *would not exist* for us if it were not. It is understood in terms of its possible applications and relevances in the present. So the 'prejudice' of the interpreting archaeologist's position (ranging from social and cultural location to disciplinary organisation to personal disposition) is not a barrier to understanding, contaminating factors to be screened out; prejudice is the very medium of understanding – indeed, *objective* understanding.

Prejudgement and prejudiced assumptions regarding what it is we seek to understand bring us again to the hermeneutic circle introduced above. Realising that interpretation is about establishing connections and contexts involves realising interpretation as dialogic in character.

This is partly recognised by the idea of *problem orientation*, strongly supported by processual methodology. This maintains that research projects, archaeological observation and study should be designed around meaningful questions to be posed of the past. The correct methodological context is one of question and answer. Questions are considered meaningful if they fit into an acceptable (research) context. So, rather than digging a site simply to find out what was there, archaeological projects should be organised around questions which fit into a disciplinary context of progressive question-and-answer. Theory: complex society can be observed in settlement hierarchy. Hypothesis: region R has a settlement hierarchy at time T. Question: Does site S display features correspondent with a level of the supposed hierarchy? Investigate. Do the data require modification of the hypothesis? This is indeed a dialogue of sorts with the archaeological past: the archaeologist questions the past in relation to their accompanying 'assumptions' of theory and hypothesis; the response of the past may demand the archaeologist thinks and questions again.

But we hope that the notion of interpretation as dialogue suggests a more sensitive treatment and awareness of the relationship between interpreter and interpreted. There is much more to interpretive context. First, the interpreted past is more than something which exists to supply responses to questions deemed meaningful by male and middle-class academics of twentieth-century Western nation states (as most processual archaeologists are). The past has an independence of research design, procedures of question-and-answer (this independence is accommodated in the notion of heterogeneity). It overflows the questions put to it by archaeologists. It may be recognised (Charles Redman, in discussion) that strict problem orientation may miss a great deal, and that simply being open to what may happen to turn up in an excavation is a quite legitimate research strategy. There is nothing wrong with sensitive exploration, being open to finding out.

Second, the past is constituted by meanings. By this is meant that the past is not just a set of data. Some archaeologists have responded to the Native American request for respect for the spiritual meanings of their material pasts with a cry 'They are taking away our database.'<sup>15</sup>

This relates closely to our third and most important point: a dialogue with the material past is situated in far more than *methodological* context. The means of archaeological understanding include everything that the interpreting archaeologist brings to the encounter with the past. The context includes method, yes; but also the interests which brought the archaeologist to the past, the organisation of the

discipline, cultural dispositions and meanings which make it reasonable to carry out the investigations, institutional structures and ideologies. We repeat that the archaeological past simply could not exist without all this, the heterogeneous networking of archaeological projects.

## MEANING AND MAKING SENSE

Interpretation may suggest meanings for things from the past. A sociological argument is that social practice is to do with interpreting the meanings of things and actions; society is constituted through meanings ascribed and negotiated by social agents (Giddens 1984). So an understanding of the past presupposes that interpretation is given of past meanings of things.

*Meaning* is a term which requires examination. For example, archaeologists have tried to distinguish functional from symbolic meanings, primary from secondary, denotative from connotative (Shanks and Tilley 1987a, ch. 7, Conkey 1990). In practice, however, it is difficult to separate functional, technological meanings from the symbolic realm, and conversely symbols clearly have pragmatic social functions. In the material world function contributes to abstract symbolic meaning. Much symbolism is entirely ingrained in the practices of daily life, in the rhythms of the body and the seasons, and in the punctuated experience of time. The notion of abstract symbolic code, arbitrarily divorced from practice, has little role to play in current understanding of meaning and its interpretation. There has been a gradual shift in archaeology from a consideration of material culture as language, to a concern with material culture as text and then to an emphasis on practice (see the discussions in Part 5).

It thus often becomes difficult to ask 'What does this pot mean?', since it may not 'mean' in a language-type way (a point well illustrated by Maurice Bloch in this volume). There may be no signifieds tied to the signifier in a code. Rather it may be the case that, even if people cannot answer what the pot means, they can use the pot very effectively in social life. This practical knowledge of 'how to go on' may be entirely ingrained in practices so that the meanings cannot be discussed verbally with any readiness – the meanings are *non-discursive*. This does not, of course, preclude verbal meanings being construed by an outside interpreter. And at other times – for example, in conflicts over uses and meanings – non-discursive meanings may be brought into 'discursive consciousness', although in doing so actors often embellish and transform.

The meanings that archaeologists reconstruct must on the whole be assumed to be general social and public meanings. Archaeologists have sufficient data to identify repeated patterning within large contexts (sites over many decades, regions over centuries or even millennia). The meanings reconstructed must be public and social in nature. Individual variation may be expressed in variability in the archaeological record, but it is rare that the data allow repeated patterning in an individual's action to be identified. Nevertheless it is important at the theoretical level to include the dialectic between individual and social meanings since it is in such terms that the negotiation of change is conducted (Barrett 1988, Johnson 1989).

There is also the question: Whose meanings? We have argued for a fusion of horizons as being characteristic of effective interpretation. A fourfold hermeneutic places great distance and interpretive problems between past and present. There are problems with defining the concept of meaning, and some of these are elaborated in Part 2 which deals with (cultural) meaning in relation to early hominids and primates.

Archaeological interpretation deals with the meanings of the past for the present, so it is perhaps better to think of *making sense*. Emphasis is again placed on the practice of interpretation. As a go-between, guide or interlocutor, the archaeologist makes sense of the past, providing orientations, significances, knowledges and, yes, meanings, relevant to understanding the past. The question of whose meanings is superseded.

## PLURALISM AND AUTHORITY

A guide interpreting a map and the land can follow equally feasible paths which may offer different returns or benefits, different vistas. There are different ways of achieving the same ends. Interpretations may vary according to context, purpose, interest or project. Interpretation, we have argued, implies a sensitivity to context. With the equivocality and heterogeneity of things and the underdetermination of interpretation, there are many arguments for pluralism.

But pluralism introduces the problem of authority. On what grounds are different interpretations of the same field to be judged? The problem arises because finality and objectivity (residing in and with the past itself) have been abandoned for an attention to the *practice* of interpretation (making sense of the past as it presents itself to us now). Charges of relativism have been made (Trigger 1980). Relativism is usually held not to be a good thing. If interpretations of the past depend on present interests and not on objectivity, then there is no way of distinguishing a professional archaeological explanation from the crazed views of cranks who may interpret archaeological remains as traces of alien visitors (Renfrew 1989).

The issue of relativism crops up in Part 3. Part 1 deals with this issue of truth, objectivity and knowledge, and argues that the real issue in the debate over pluralism and relativism is that of *absolutes*. Truth and objectivity are not abstract principles inherent in the past, but have to be worked for. That Anglo-Saxon cemetery in the countryside will not excavate itself. It needs the archaeologist's interest, efforts, management skills, excavation teams, finds-laboratories and publisher to be made into what we come to call the objective past.

There are very important issues here to do with the value of interpretation in relation to what science is commonly taken to be. Relativism has not been adequately dealt with, so we present some possible lines which can be taken regarding judgement, authority, objectivity and science.<sup>16</sup>

### Objectivity

It is argued that objectivity is not an absolute or abstract quality towards which we strive. Objectivity is constructed. This is not to deny objectivity, but rather, ironically, to make it more concrete. So let it be agreed that an objective statement is one which is, at the least, strong; and that, indeed, we would wish our interpretations to be full of such strong statements. What makes a statement strong? The conventional answers are that strength comes from logical coherence, or because the statement corresponds with something out there, external to the statement, or because of some inherent quality called objectivity. But who decides on how coherent a statement must be? How exact must correspondence be? And in historical and sociological studies of scientific controversies there appear many other sources of strength such as government or religious support, good rhetoric in convincing others, even financial backing.

We have been arguing that the archaeological past will not excavate itself but