

# Preface

Archaeologists for the first time in the history of the discipline are beginning to be faced with a wide variety of different theoretical perspectives on the past. The majority of these have only emerged during the last seven years and are currently having a major impact in breaking down the theoretical hegemony of positivism and functionalism which formed the twin pillars of 'new' archaeology. Despite the growing plethora of theories, archaeology still remains today a deeply empiricist and antitheoretical discipline. Yet it is quite clear that after 150 years of empiricism in one form or another we still have little more than a rudimentary understanding of the archaeological past. No amount of excavation, survey, ethnoarchaeological work or so-called 'middle-range' empiricism will cure the perceived fundamental isolation of past from present. This gap can only be dealt with adequately if we develop conceptual tools and theoretical structures with which to reinscribe the past into the present, to realize their interaction. This book is intended as an advanced introduction to some current debates which may help to achieve that goal.

The impetus to the development of fresh theoretical perspectives in archaeology has come almost entirely from outside the discipline and has brought archaeology into increasingly closer contact with wider debates in social theory. In the format of a single book we have neither attempted, nor do we claim, any degree of comprehensive coverage. Instead we have chosen to discuss a limited number of key areas for the reconstruction of archaeological theory. In the first chapter we discuss what theory in archaeology should be about, criticize the reduction of theory to methodology, and consider the dominant forms of textual production in contemporary archaeology. Chapters 2 and 3 consider the competing theoretical discourses of recent social archaeology, and the

relationship of the individual to society. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 focus on key areas that have been quintessentially archaeological concerns: the relationship of material culture to the social and the study of change over long time spans. Here the relative lack of theorization in the discipline has been quite striking - we might expect a discipline whose primary data base is material culture to have a developed theory of its meaning and significance. Similarly, archaeologists, although dealing with long time spans, have little questioned the concept of time, and reductionist, essentialist and ethnocentric notions of social evolution have long been dominant. If we achieve little more in this book we hope at least to initiate further conceptualization and debate in these vital areas. Chapter 7 situates archaeology as a cultural practice firmly in the present and argues that it needs to become fully self-reflexive, aware of itself as political practice. We do not think it either possible or desirable to attempt to achieve a fresh unification of archaeological theory within one all-encompassing framework. The only essential unity we propose is that all archaeology ought to be cultural critique, a practice both produced in the present and contributing to the present. Archaeological discourse is *a form* of power while at the same time being the *study* of power. The final chapter sets out in a formal way a number of theses which we regard as essential to the development of a fresh problematic for the discipline.

The book is partly based on two joint undergraduate and graduate seminar courses given in the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, during the spring and autumn of 1986. We would like to thank those people who kindly agreed to chair the seminars: Robin Boast, Grant Chambers, Ian Hodder, Matthew Johnson, Sandar van de Leeuw, Olivier de Montmillon, Ajay Pratrap, Colin Renfrew; and all those who participated in them and contributed to the debate. Parts of chapters 6 and 7 were also presented and discussed at the University of Tromsø. Michael Shanks would like to thank his history class of 1986-7 for their support. Grant Chambers, Tony Giddens, Ian Hodder and Mike Rowlands all kindly provided detailed comments on the text and suggested valuable improvements.