



Archaeology's Place in Modernity

Julian Thomas

Introduction

Archaeology, as an academic discipline and as a means of addressing the past, is a phenomenon that emerged in the modern era. For many commentators this is because some specific aspect of the modern experience has facilitated or promoted the study of the material traces of the past. These might include the rise of an educated and affluent middle class; improvements in transport, which rendered the antiquities of the countryside accessible; or the construction of canals and railways, and the consequent exposure of buried deposits. However, in this contribution I will argue that the link between archaeology and modernity is more than circumstantial. Indeed, I will suggest that modern philosophy, modern forms of political organization, and modern social practices represent the ground of the possibility of “doing archaeology.” I will hope to demonstrate that in some senses archaeology distills a modern sensibility, embodying conceptions of time, humanity, nature, and science that have been widely adopted over the past half-millennium. It is distinctive of the modern world that philosophy and science, while representing the discourses of specialized professionals, have contributed much to the everyday rationality routinely employed by lay people. This is in part because philosophy and science partake of a “ground plan” or set of fundamental assumptions that is hard to fully articulate, and is therefore metaphysical.¹ Archaeology, perhaps as much as any other discipline, is steeped in the implicit and explicit presuppositions of modern thought.

This argument presents us with a series of paradoxes. The project of archaeology, which uses material evidence to investi-

MODERNISM / *modernity*
VOLUME ELEVEN, NUMBER
ONE, PP 17–34.
© 2004 THE JOHNS
HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Julian Thomas is
Chair of Archaeology at
the University of
Manchester, and is a
Vice-President of the
Royal Anthropological
Institute. His publica-
tions include *Time,
Culture and Identity*
(Routledge, 1996),
*Understanding the
Neolithic* (Routledge,
1999) and *Archaeology
and Modernity*
(Routledge, 2004).



18 gate both prehistory and the historic past, is distinctively modern, and is often understood to involve a kind of conversation between different cultural or temporal horizons. Yet the very conditions that predispose us to work in this way, and encourage us to believe that a knowledge of the past is valuable, make it more difficult for us to comprehend that past. For the burden of my case is that the worlds that we address through archaeology are often ones in which archaeology would itself be inconceivable. One of the most distinctive characteristics of modernity has been the decline of tradition, and the corresponding growth of “mechanical” forms of social integration, such as state institutions. While traditional communities often have a knowledge of the past which is transmitted orally between the generations, and which is integral to social relations as a consequence, modern institutions require legitimation by reference to an empirically validated past.² This relation of exteriority to the past was one of the critical elements in the creation of archaeology. Equally important was the recognition that the past was different from the present in significant ways. It has often been pointed out that modern societies are *futural*, and that philosophical ideas take on the role of legislating and planning for the future in modernity.³ The search for perfection in the future is pursued through the design of objects and institutions, and through establishing new foundations for thought and action.⁴ Such a directional, non-reversible view of history implies a past in which contemporary technologies and social arrangements were less strongly developed.

Conventional histories of archaeology often point to activities that prefigure the practice of excavation: Nabonidus’s diggings in the temple of Larsa, classical Greek openings of earlier tombs, or Bishops Earldred and Eadmar’s recovery of building stone from St. Albans in the eleventh century A.D. But it is important to distinguish between *addressing the archaeological*, in the sense of recovering ancient artifacts for use as treasure or raw materials, and *practicing archaeology*. The latter requires the understanding that these objects can be studied in such a way as to generate new knowledge about people who are no longer present, and the development of an appropriate inferential framework. The need for this kind of knowledge was minimal during the Middle Ages in the West, where the dominant view of history was linear, yet extended between the Creation and the Judgment. The belief that the last days were at hand was widespread, and the Bible’s authoritative view of the past was that it was to be measured in a few generations, and had not differed from the present in social or technological terms. By contrast, Renaissance scholars were more likely to argue that human beings were able to change their own conditions of existence by action, thereby bringing about historical change.⁵ Yet this emphasis on human action was held in check by the powerful influence of teleology, and the attendant notion of the world as a kind of integrated body or organism. Michel Foucault has described the holistic conception of knowledge that prevailed within this cosmology: all things contained meaning and moral value, and all were networked together by connotation, sympathy, reflection and metaphor.⁶ All phenomena gravitated to their appropriate place in the world according to their moral worth, and the imbricated totality was continually in motion as each entity progressed toward its immaterial ideal form. Where this tendency toward

the telos was conceived as the principal cause of change in the universe, human acts were understood as “efficient causes,” and were thus thought relatively inconsequential.⁷

Nonetheless, the Renaissance enthusiasm for the classical world had inspired an appreciation of the difference of the past. This chimed with the humanist recognition of human diversity, even if historical change was often understood in terms of a continuous decline of human faculties since ancient times. The new attention paid to the classical past gave rise to the practices of antiquarianism, specifically the collection of ancient artifacts, and also to Marsilio Ficino's rediscovery of Plato. The latter would revive a mathematical conception of the world, in time providing a challenge to the dominant influence of Aristotelianism. Teleology was also to be confronted by a growing emphasis on individuality during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In their quite different ways, Erasmus would stress free rational action and creativity, while Luther developed a vision of the subject as wholly responsible before God for his or her own salvation.⁸ Yet both were to contribute to an intellectual climate in which personal action was placed above traditional authority and dogma. The consequence would be the Council of Trent, with its restatement of papal infallibility and the unquestionable character of the Church's teachings. Stephen Toulmin has elegantly demonstrated that it was the political, philosophical, and religious strife and instability of the later seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries that gave rise to a new desire for stability, truth, and certainty, which was manifested in rationalist philosophy and its confluence with empiricism in the Scientific Revolution.⁹ Religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, and the challenge to monarchic rule seen in the English Civil War, brought about a reaction against humanist skepticism and pluralism. But from the point of view of the argument being developed here the eventual creation of archaeology depended equally upon the acknowledgement of the importance of human agency and its products (artifacts, architecture and institutions), and the attitudes to evidence and materiality that were to be established in the Scientific Revolution. The specificity of archaeology is such that it was not a product of a single intellectual tradition, but of the contingent relations between what were in some cases opposed ways of thinking.

Order and epistemology

From the seventeenth century onward, scholarship was increasingly connected with the state, while religion was to some extent compromised by its identification as a source of fraternal strife. Learning had a growing role in the construction and maintenance of political authority, and this was particularly the case with history and antiquarianism. Where rulers like Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden sought to create bureaucratic and managerial monarchies, rather than rely upon divine right and dynastic inheritance, they began to provide patronage for antiquaries such as Johan Bure. Bure's investigations of early medieval rune-stones effectively documented the early history of the Swedes, providing a grounding identity for the new nation-state.¹⁰ This imperative to create historical foundations for the modern state can be compared to the contemporary drive to establish a secure ground for knowledge. The two separate strands

20 that were to contribute to this project, Baconian empiricism and Cartesian rationalism, shared a wish to reconstruct science from first principles. In the case of Francis Bacon, it was to be the immediate sensory experience of things that would provide a starting place. Innumerable experiments and observations should be catalogued to form a universal natural history, which would in time give humanity dominion over nature.¹¹ This argument overturned the Renaissance belief that since humanity was in decline, all worthwhile knowledge existed in the writings of the ancient authors.¹² By insisting that new knowledge, not contained in any book, could be created through the experience of material things, Bacon was putting in place one of the prerequisite elements of any archaeology. At the same time, Bacon's view that the incremental growth of human knowing was the means to progress was, once refined by Hobbes and Locke, to contribute to a historical narrative of social and technical evolution through the application of reason.

René Descartes's approach to refounding knowledge was to concentrate on pure, abstract reason, while doubting everything else. Descartes held reasoning to be an innate capacity, given to humanity by God, and therefore more reliable than the sense-evidence focused on by Bacon. Where Renaissance scholars had explored connections and resemblances, Descartes mistrusted appearances and sought to reduce reality to its elemental forms in mathematics and geometry. This demanded measurement and comparison, and the division of any complex entity into its component parts in order to render it comprehensible. Ironically, Descartes's means of rescuing human knowledge from skepticism was by way of skepticism itself, cutting away any supposition that could not be proven until he arrived at the rock-solid certainty that if a person is aware of her own thinking, her real existence is guaranteed. One cannot be tricked or deluded into thinking that one is thinking. Descartes takes consciousness as his foundation, and works outward to reestablish a method for investigating the world. This had a number of implications: conscious reason was understood as being the essence of humanity; epistemology gained priority over all other forms of knowing; whatever could be known was to be known by a human subject.¹³ Christianity had put in place a cosmology in which human beings were possessed of immortal souls, and inhabited a transient world that would be replaced by the coming of the kingdom of heaven. In contrast with the ancient Greek conception of mortals in an eternal world, this had established the view that creation was at the disposal of humankind. Descartes's philosophy built on this perspective by presenting humans as privileged interpreters of reality. Humanity now found itself at the center of a world to which it gave a structure. This view would be elaborated by Hobbes and Locke, who saw the universe as composed only of particular things, while order was imposed on it by human reason.¹⁴ While Renaissance thinkers had seen themselves as exploring the resemblances and associations that permeated creation, from this time onward the role of the scholar was one of classification and ordering.

From the point of view of archaeology, Descartes's influence was most profound in the role that he afforded to epistemology. Once one has argued that verifiable knowledge rests upon the subject's self-certainty and free will, while the material world

behaves according to invariant laws, the most fundamental problem of philosophy is that of how the mind can apprehend physical things.¹⁵ In this way of thinking the goal of any investigation is the representation of phenomena in the mind, and the purpose of epistemology is to make sure that reconstruction is achieved without the distortions wrought by prejudice and superstition. By implication, a coherent and uniform method has priority over any specific question that we might wish to ask concerning worldly phenomena: any particular understanding is secondary to the problem of the possibility of knowledge in general. This has meant, firstly, that the apprehension of the world through perception has been identified as a difficulty, and secondly that the positioning of a generalized methodology before any specific engagement with material things has become a virtually unquestionable assumption.¹⁶ This privileging of epistemology values a universalized and decontextualized logic over the particular or the contingent. It also construes knowing as a procedure, which can be conducted in a right or a wrong way, and which produces meaning out of things that are themselves without meaning.¹⁷

The position of epistemology as first philosophy is virtually constitutive of archaeology. The typological classification of artifacts and their chronological ordering through seriation, the construction of regional chronologies and stylistic sequences, the plotting of spatial distributions and the definition of "culture groups" all depend upon the view that an abstract method should be applied to entities before they are rendered meaningful. Indeed, following Descartes, these are all methodological procedures that fragment a relational world into discrete objects in order to render it malleable. In the "culture-historic" archaeology that dominated the discipline in both Europe and the Americas throughout the first half of the twentieth century the rigorous definition of traits, phases, components, and culture-groups on the basis of the stylistic variation of material culture was understood as a purely descriptive exercise.¹⁸ This methodical enterprise was nonetheless presumed to give the archaeologist access to real sociocultural entities that had existed in the past. Assemblages of pots could be equated with past "peoples." The assumption here was that human beings always divide themselves into bounded communities identifiable through mutually exclusive artifactual repertoires. When culture-history came under attack from a generation of more anthropologically oriented archaeologists in the United States during the 1940s, it was on the grounds that archaeology needed greater epistemological refinement. Revealingly, Walter Taylor was to argue that archaeology is not exclusively related to either history or anthropology.¹⁹ Rather, archaeology is simply a methodology which can be used in the service of either discipline. By implication, archaeology is a technology for the extraction of data, which can be absolutely distinguished from the attribution of meaning that might be performed at a later stage by anthropologists or historians.

Taylor's call for archaeologists to refound their discipline by returning to epistemological first principles is characteristic of modern thought, carrying echoes of both Locke's wish to clear the ground for new understandings and the early pronouncements of logical positivism. The same imperative was restated by the "New Archaeology" of the 1960s, which set out to create a new foundation for the discipline, separat-

22 ing the discovery of archaeological remains from their evaluation, and in the process removing subjectivity from archaeological reasoning.²⁰ Far the most profound thinker in this school, Lewis Binford has spent much of his career constructing ways of assessing the significance of statements about the past. While early practitioners of the New Archaeology attempted to apply the hypothetico-deductive method to their arguments, Binford was to point out that hypotheses about the past could not be tested on material evidence in the present.²¹ The past is not available for testing. Binford's eventual answer to the problem lay in "middle range theory," which sought to typify the signatures of mechanical and physical processes observable in the archaeological record on the basis of observations and experiments in the present. He described this process as one of giving meaning to archaeological observations, the implication of which is that archaeological evidence in the present is simply dead, meaningless matter.²² Moreover, this approach construes events (the butchering of an animal; the breaking of a pot) in an atomized way, as context-free happenings that bring about discrete material outcomes.²³ Crucially, both the New Archaeology of the 1960s and Binford's more recent work follow the Cartesian formula of constructing methods in abstraction, while understanding that meaning only arrives on the scene when the analysis is complete.

Artifacts, atomism, and the social contract

Bacon's argument that new knowledge could be created from things was to have a critical significance for the way that artifacts were understood, including those deriving from the distant past. If objects were the equivalent of books that could be studied, rather than simply representing illustrative examples of phenomena, collections of things might be compared to libraries. This is the conception that lies behind the modern museum. In this sense the museum was a product of the seventeenth century, but histories of archaeology have tended to underestimate the importance of the Renaissance "cabinets of curiosity" that predated museums. While the significance of personal collections that occasionally contained antiquities is acknowledged, cabinets are sometimes dismissed as haphazard and disordered. In particular, they generally failed to discriminate between cultural artifacts and "natural" geological and biological samples. This neglects the point that cabinets were often structured according to an Aristotelian system of knowledge, in which entities were connected by sympathy, allegory, correspondence, and reflection rather than typology and tabulation.²⁴ Cabinets of curiosity represented a microcosm of the world at large, and in some cases were even understood as an apparatus for the practice of a form of sympathetic magic. The emergence of museums thus amounts to a transformation of the cultural practice of collecting, but was also a symptom of a shift to a modern mode of knowing, which changed the status of artifacts. This change was crucial for the development of archaeology in its contemporary form.

If the cabinet was an array of objects that one could manipulate from within, the museum was a world-picture, whose order could be appreciated from without. Museums were increasingly organized according to what Foucault describes as the table or

grid, the dominant figure of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century knowledge.²⁵ Taxonomic classification emerged as a means by which the order of nature could be made apparent: an imposition of human reason upon nature, which nonetheless betrayed the first glimmer of a suspicion that there might be underlying structures beneath the visible surface of reality. Significantly, Edward Lhwyd, one of the early keepers of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, developed a typological ordering of fossils, which he later applied to antiquities.²⁶ Once the classificatory table had replaced a holistic vision of nature, it was more than likely that a typology of artifacts would develop, as the work of Caylus and Winckelmann was to demonstrate.²⁷

If museums provided the context for the identification of ancient artifacts as nodes within a classificatory grid, seventeenth-century thought inclined more generally to the view that objects were free-standing entities which logically preceded any structure in which they were implicated. This facilitated a mechanical conception of the universe such as that of Newton, in which a single set of laws applied to all phenomena throughout the cosmos.²⁸ This mechanism insisted that material things cannot move themselves: there is no tendency toward a telos and only external causality. The isolation of material things as autonomous entities fits closely with the removal of meaning from the physical world. Things are not inherently meaningful, and meaning is created in the mind. The valorization of a knowledge that was decontextualized and universal can be seen as part of the project of severing it from religion, politics, and ethics.²⁹ The supposed universality of the ideas of the new science and the new philosophy indicated that the same kinds of regularities that had been identified in nature might also be found in human societies.³⁰ As a consequence, arguments about the human past that can present themselves as scientific and value-free have been able to claim a degree of legitimacy, while those that address questions of ethics, legality or aesthetics have been placed on a par with rhetoric, superstition and fantasy. These arguments continue to be rehearsed today, with claims for the absolute separation of science from other forms of archaeological knowledge.³¹

The first manifestation of a Newtonian conception of human relations is found in the “social physics” of Hobbes and Locke. Here, the singular human being is envisaged as the social atom, who is a fully formed agent before his insertion into the social field. This means that society is a kind of contract, an artificial arrangement constructed by human beings, and it follows that it can be redesigned for the better. This is what we would now describe as “social engineering.” While the notion of a “social contract” is one that goes back to classical times, its articulation by Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), and the quite different version presented by Rousseau (1762), have been singularly influential in the development of modern political ideas.³² Most importantly, the growth of the nation-state as the characteristic political formation of modernity has involved a change from sovereign rule to government as a management of populations that has required a degree of consent.³³ The designed and managed state has both drawn on and contributed to the philosophy of social contract, and has generated the widespread expectation that national identities, bounded territories, a shared language or culture, and state organization, should all be congruent. That is to say, the belief in a

24 sutured and internally homogeneous ethnic or political community, which can be retrospectively imposed on the past, is in part a product of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political philosophies. We have seen that the existence of such units in the distant past has been a fundamental assumption of particular forms of archaeology. Equally important, though, has been the way in which these ideas concerning the “naturalness” of bounded “peoples,” and the belief in their existence in a golden age in the past, contributed to the creation of popular nationalism at the start of the nineteenth century.

We have already seen that once the monarchs of Europe began to cast themselves as the chief executive of the nation-state they could no longer rely on their dynastic inheritance for legitimacy, and turned instead to the historical authenticity of the political community. The role of the early antiquarians in substantiating the early histories of the European nations was not a precocious nationalism, but scholarship in the service of the state. By contrast, the archaeology of the nineteenth century drew upon and was promoted by the notion of a “national past,” which occasionally played against the interests of the ruling classes by demanding the preservation of ancient monuments and relics. Nationalism essentializes the past, seeking an origin for the present in a prelapsarian state of pristine ethnic uniformity. Nationalism generally presents itself as being hostile to new-fangled, cosmopolitan, hybrid, miscegenatory modernity. It celebrates tradition and the wholesome peasant existence of the imagined past, and yet it is a profoundly modern phenomenon.³⁴ Archaeology has supported this agenda by helping to construct idealized pasts. However, while some authorities have presented nationalism as a layer of distortion that has been imposed onto the evidence by practitioners with an atavistic bias,³⁵ this view represents a retreat into a belief that “the truth about the past” can be readily separated from interests and prejudices. Even at a methodological level, archaeology is permeated by modernist assumptions regarding the character of the past, as we have seen in the case of culture-history.³⁶ It is worth pointing out that the “processual,” ecological, functionalist archaeologies of the 1960s and 1970s were equally attached to the notion of “societies” or “communities” as naturally occurring human units, which existed in an adaptive and homeostatic relationship with their environments. This conception is equally indebted to the social philosophies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Reason, progress, and metanarratives

That the Newtonian framework could be generalized to cover human society was axiomatic for the Enlightenment, which built on Locke’s belief that knowledge is acquired and Descartes’s emphasis on free will and the exercise of reason to claim that humans can transform their own conditions of existence and achieve worldly perfection. The acquisition of greater understanding is thereby a route toward social progress. For Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, reason was universal, and all human beings were equally capable of perfecting their rational conduct, providing that the shackles of tradition, authority and superstition can be cast aside. Yet the implication

of this argument is that there is a single universal condition and type of society that all human beings should aspire to, that human diversity is superficial, and that Western civilization is superior to any traditional society. This amounts to a denial of human finitude, the condition of being positioned in contingent circumstances as the mortal inheritor of a particular cultural tradition. Many would insist that this is actually the source of our humanity.³⁷ Given the diversity of humankind in the present and the possibility of perfection in the future, Enlightenment thinkers proposed a series of conjectural historical sequences by which humanity might be in the process of progressing from savagery to civilization. In most cases these replaced the Christian narrative of the fall from grace followed by salvation with a story of the progressive freeing of the human individual from the state of nature.³⁸

These philosophical histories were often stadial in character, composed of progressive phases of savagery, barbarism and civilization, or hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce.³⁹ Implicitly or explicitly, such schemes suggested the progressive evolution of technology over time.⁴⁰ These arguments were constructed entirely in isolation from any material evidence, but they nonetheless provided the inspiration for Christian Thomsen's organization of the material in the collection of the Royal Commission of Danish Ancient Monuments in Copenhagen into finds from the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. This was the first use of the "three age system" in archaeology.⁴¹ A less obvious way in which Enlightenment conceptions of history have been critical to archaeology has been in the distinction between history and nature. While historical change was directional, nature was, until the beginning of the nineteenth century, generally considered to be inert. Consequentially, human progress depended upon an escape from the state of nature at some time in the past, resulting in a preoccupation with origins. This still casts a shadow over archaeology, where "the origins of anatomically modern humans," "the origins of the human mind," and "the origins of agriculture" remain topics of debate.

The fixity of nature began to come into question in the later eighteenth century, when biologists like Buffon started to argue that the physiology of animal species can change over time. Foucault has pointed to the particularly important role that Cuvier played in replacing the view that creatures were place-holders within a massive classificatory table with an emphasis on the functional character of anatomy and the behavior of animals.⁴² This introduced a discontinuity into nature, while indicating that there were important aspects of the character of creatures which could not be ascertained from their surface morphology. After Cuvier it was easier for the notion of biological evolution to develop, and with it a dynamic conception of nature. A natural world that was constantly in motion threatened to displace the division between culture and nature, but the conceptual danger was overcome by distinguishing between "processual" change (which might be cyclical) and historical change (which remained directional and irreversible). Within archaeology this has led to some confusion over the particular kind of change that characterizes specific phenomena in the past. For instance, does the development from hunting and gathering to herding and cultivation constitute a "natural" or a "historical" process? In practice, different generations of

26 archaeologists have argued for either option at different times. Occasionally, archaeologists have sought to collapse history into nature, effectively echoing the materialism of Gassendi and La Mettrie.⁴³ A spectacular example of this is found in the “palaeoeconomy” school of the 1960s, which argued that all prehistoric developments could be understood using the conceptual tools of animal ethology and ecological succession.⁴⁴

Archaeology appears to be addicted to metanarratives, whether historical or processual in character. These might concern themselves with the rise of the state, the descent of *homo sapiens*, the development of metallurgy, or the growth of urban society, but in each case they propose that history can be understood as a seamless directional flow, made comprehensible through the trajectory of a single variable. In this respect, the visions of history that stem from the Enlightenment have the modern characteristic of seeking to reduce ambiguity and impose patterned order. Yet it is also arguable that the experience of modernity is one of increasing heterogeneity, hybridity, and instability.⁴⁵ Modern science and philosophy sought to separate human knowledge from human interests, thereby guaranteeing its objectivity. But developments in the twentieth century appear to have undercut this project. In the First World War the emergence of military technologies that far outstripped the capabilities of the strategists into whose hands they had been placed (mustard gas, tanks, railways, heavy artillery, aircraft) gave rise to concerns over the social role of science. The result was a series of initiatives to cleanse, evaluate or refound scientific and academic practice: logical positivism, critical theory, and transcendental phenomenology. Yet this “crisis of knowledge” was less profound than that which followed the Second World War, and in particular the Holocaust. Given that a highly civilized and technologically sophisticated nation had undertaken systematically to murder part of its population, using the full resources of bureaucracy and science, the belief that the Western world was moving inexorably toward universal perfection was difficult to sustain. Indeed, Jean-François Lyotard has identified the principal characteristic of a postmodern era as an “incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁴⁶ After Auschwitz it is impossible to believe in universal progress. This raises an important question for archaeology: where does its own predilection for grand narratives stand in this new intellectual climate?

Interiority and the individual

We have seen that Cuvier’s comparative anatomy established that the outward appearance of an organism might not provide all of the salient information about it. Foucault presents Cuvier’s ideas in the context of a more general explosion of “structural” thinking at around 1800 A.D., which also encompassed the study of language and the analysis of wealth.⁴⁷ However, it is possible to argue that this horizon was prefigured by a growing tension between the classificatory mode of knowing and a developing sense of human interiority. Charles Taylor has suggested that the notion of an “inner self” first developed within Christianity, and was made explicit by Augustine.⁴⁸ Augustine proposed the inward turn into introspection as a way of approaching God,

so that the truth is located deep within ourselves. Later, the inner world became a space in which hidden desires might lurk, and which needed to be carefully monitored through the confessional. Arguably, this concern with interiority was elaborated in the modern era, in which human beings came to be understood as having “two insides”: a body interior composed of organs and tissues, and a mind. This is very much what Heidegger refers to when he describes the modern conception of the person as a creature “built in layers”; a biological body to which a mind or soul has been added.⁴⁹ On this view the mind is a separate entity from the body, and could exist independently from and prior to it. There is an obvious parallel between this Cartesian mind that precedes the body, and the Hobbesian individual, who precedes his or her involvement in social relations.

Throughout much of the twentieth century archaeology has been dominated by perspectives which emphasize the social whole. Culture-historic archaeology relied upon the norms and values that are passed from generation to generation, and collective identities rather than human action, while the ecological functionalism of the 1960s and 1970s presented communities as adaptive totalities. Unfortunately, the eventual reaction against these views has involved the identification of the autonomous individual as a universal category. Recent arguments have argued that the individual is a self-contained, embodied consciousness, and have advocated the identification of distinct personalities and biographies in the past.⁵⁰ One might object that “individuality” is in any case only a cultural fiction of modernity, a condition to which modern Westerners aspire, even if complete personal autonomy is a practical impossibility. Given the strong ethnographic evidence that many people neither understand themselves nor act as “individuals,”⁵¹ the concept is one which may be both anachronistic and ethnocentric when applied to the distant past. However, the way in which a model of the person that grew up in the period following the Renaissance is so easily resorted to as an alternative to undifferentiated social totalities again points to the way in which archaeology finds itself immersed in modern ways of thinking.

Depth and surface

The vision of a body exterior containing a bundle of organs, or concealing a mind, expresses a relationship between inside and outside which became increasingly prevalent after 1800. Importantly, it was at precisely this point that antiquarianism was transformed into archaeology. It is broadly accepted that the innovation that enabled this change to take place was the introduction of *stratification*.⁵² In geology, James Hutton's *Theory of the Earth* (1788) and William Smith's *Strata Identified by Organised Fossils* (1816) were together responsible for a view of the earth as continuously changing through the actions of heat, pressure and weathering, and in the process building up sequences of strata which contained chronologically diagnostic fossil remains.⁵³ The lesson that was learned from this was that the pattern of topography could be understood through the stratified rocks beneath the surface, just as the pathology of human bodies could be grasped by opening up corpses. Archaeologists now began to appreci-

28 ate the sequences of events represented by the accumulation of layers of soil and debris on ancient sites, and a relationship between the depth of time and the depth of deposit became a critical element in the archaeological imagination. It is of enormous significance that archaeology became identifiable as a discipline at precisely the point when, according to Foucault, “man” as a discursive object first appeared on the scene.⁵⁴ “Man,” in this sense, is what occurs when human beings cease to be one species amongst others, and become the point at which biology, history, and statecraft meet; at once an object of empirical observation, a problem of population, order and management, and the knower of knowledge. As such, “man” is the meeting point of historical process and human finitude, and this is just what archaeology has concerned itself with, from its earliest appearance. Archaeology identifies the cultural works and physical remains of human beings, and places them in the context of a temporal sequence established through a relationship between depth and surface.

Fredric Jameson has argued that “depth models” are the hallmark of modern thinking.⁵⁵ The examples that he provides include the relationship between speech and grammar in structuralism, essence and appearance in Marxism, authenticity and inauthenticity in existentialism, and superficial reading versus deep meaning in hermeneutics. Perhaps because the depths of the person are connected with the mind, the soul, and the route to the deity, depth is often equated with profundity and surface with superficiality. Archaeology was integral to the development of this “depth thinking,” and its embodiment of the recovery of hidden truths from below the earth and from the distant past has provided a powerful metaphor in other areas of thought. In this sense, the idea of archaeology has been central to later modern thinking. This metaphorical use of the concept of archaeology is possibly clearest in the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud. Freud was an enthusiastic collector of ancient artifacts, and was fascinated by the discoveries of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and Arthur Evans at Knossos. He compared the task of the psychoanalyst to that of the archaeologist, clearing away debris (the repression) in order to uncover neglected treasures. Freud wrote often of the “depths” of the mind, and literally considered the psychic apparatus to be stratified.⁵⁶ Just as successive occupation layers build up over time on an ancient settlement, so the deeper layers of the id contained the collective psychic history of the human race, which was recapitulated in the suppression of sexual feelings for the parents and the formation of the ego ideal.⁵⁷ Freud’s “topographic” model of the mind equated stratigraphic depth with the collective and the instinctual, and elsewhere in his work there are connections between prehistory, myth, and the mental lives of contemporary non-Western “primitives.” It remains a burden that the discipline has to contend with that depth and hiddenness are associated with mystery, insight and truth. This undoubtedly colors the popular conception of archaeology, but it also arguably has a role in the valorization of various forms of archaeological research. Our field practices are often geared toward the establishment of a linear temporal sequence through the deposits on a site, working back toward a point of origin. Equally, the uncovering and recovery of hidden deposits and artifacts is sometimes held in greater esteem than the interpretation and appreciation of ancient things that are al-

ready fully visible. It is as if by bringing things into the light the past itself is being recovered. Forms of archaeology that concern themselves with that which is readily accessible (rock art, standing buildings, industrial archaeology) sometimes struggle to attract the same attention. Yet there is a real sense in which we inhabit a past that is all around us, and the uncovering of hidden depths provides more evidence, but not evidence of an ontologically different kind.

Mind, body, and substance

We have seen already that the seventeenth-century project of overcoming ambivalence through rigorous method was connected with an increasing separation of subject and object, and mind and body. As a result, the mind came to be imagined as a space within which representations are generated, quite distinct from worldly objects. At least for Descartes, the mind was a thinking thing, quite different in kind from the substantial things of the world. These formulations have given rise to views of materiality and mentality which still dominate archaeology. In the first place, the recent fashion for “cognitive archaeology,” increasingly allied as it is to cognitive psychology and directed toward explaining the “evolution of the modern mind,” rests on the belief that there is a discrete and objective entity that we can call a mind. This mind can be observed through the consequences of its functioning, which are manifested in the archaeological record as the traces of problem-solving events.⁵⁸ Cognitive archaeology proposes that the mind is an information-processing device, and has an “architecture” which appears to be only indirectly related to that of the brain. As with Descartes’s immaterial consciousness, it is unclear where this mind resides (other than being immanent in the brain), suggesting that it is a metaphysical concept.

For cognitive archaeologies, the mind is like a computer, which makes the world intelligible by inputting atomized fragments of information and processing them.⁵⁹ Yet there is an evident circularity about saying that the mind is like a computer, when a computer is a device that has been created to simulate the processes of thought (or rather, a limited selection of them). What cognitive approaches neglect is that human beings do not simply process information: they deal with significant phenomena in a world of meaning. Only in a Cartesian world that has been declared free of meaning does the notion of information processing make any sense. Computers do not “have a world,” they do not have background practices, and they do not have shared skills and traditions.⁶⁰ The way in which human beings operate in their contexts of significance cannot be made explicit, cannot be represented, and cannot be reduced to calculation.⁶¹ Yet the forms of evolutionary psychology that are currently being used to address the actions of early humans rely on the understanding that the mind is an entity that has a particular form, which is a product of natural selection, and which is more or less successful at performing particular tasks.⁶²

It is readily apparent that the division between mind and matter has had a harmful effect on the way that we understand human beings in the past. The implications of modern views of materiality are perhaps more subtle. Where meaning has been ban-

30 ished to the mind, the physical world comes to be understood as composed of objects that have spatial extension and spatio-temporal motion; material entities and the causal relations between them.⁶³ Once the world has been reduced to these terms, modern science is highly successful in explaining the behavior of matter. However, what this reduction demands is that all relationships between people and things be object/subject relations, in which consciousness engages with discrete entities. This is the mode of engagement that Heidegger defines as “present-at-handness,” where humans observe worldly things in an objectified, distanced and disinterested way.⁶⁴ Crucially, there is another way in which people deal with things, the ready-to-hand, in which we are barely aware of the entity at all, and yet our relationship with it may be much closer and more profound than gazing in an analytic fashion. Heidegger’s classic example of the ready-to-hand is the act of using a hammer to drive in a nail, in which the hammer “recedes” from our notice in the act of hammering. It is certainly easier to grasp this unthematized way of being with material things in the case of a tool that withdraws into the project at hand, but for the most part people “get on with things” in just this nonanalytic way, and only occasionally stand back and contemplate objects from a position of disengagement.

The problems that an atomistic conception of materiality sets up for archaeology are profound. First, it points to one of the distinguishing conditions of modernity: an attitude in which we understand our surroundings as if they were composed of a series of free-standing objects, which are at our disposal as resources to be used up. We cannot assume that people in the deep past shared this attitude to the world. Further, our ways of addressing prehistoric material culture are overwhelmingly analytic: typology, seriation, measurement, quantification, graphs, and distributions. But if our archaeology takes a form that is principally analytic, objective, and scientific, we may learn very little about the habitual, experiential, and involved character of everyday life in the past. People in antiquity did not live their entire lives as disengaged subjects, gathering information from abstract objects. They dwelt in sensuous worlds of meaning, desire, suffering, and labor. It is impossible to construct an understanding of the past on the basis of artifacts and structures viewed as analytic objects and to hope to somehow *unfold* a world of meaning out it. Meaning never arrives on the scene as an afterthought, after the structures of material existence have been put together.

Conclusion: Archaeology as ethical knowledge

In this article I have outlined some of the arguments made in my book *Archaeology and Modernity*.⁶⁵ In this abbreviated form, positions that were already broad-brush may lack substantiation and nuance. However, the principal point that I have been hoping to demonstrate is simply that archaeology is bound to the modern condition at a variety of different levels. In some cases all that is implied is that archaeologists have employed theories or frameworks that are distinctively modern, or that their preconceptions have been formed by the modern experience. This much could presumably be argued for any discipline. But there is also a sense in which archaeology would be

inconceivable under other historical conditions. Archaeology emerged from a nexus of modern ideas: the recognition of the difference of the past; the replacement of teleology by a classificatory mode of knowledge; the formulation of narratives of social and technological progress; the rise of the belief that new knowledge can be made from material things; the view of materiality that arose from superimposing the distinction between mind and matter on that between form and matter; the emphasis on depth models; and the belief in the naturalness of bounded human groups that arose alongside the nation-state. This is why not all societies practice archaeology.

Yet if archaeology could only have been generated in the context of the modern world, where does that leave it today? It remains a matter of debate whether we have entered a postmodern era, but if modernity were indeed to have come to an end, would archaeology find itself moribund and obsolete? Is the subject so intrinsically tied to a particular set of conditions that it can only be of use (or interest) to a particular kind of society? It is perhaps heartening that archaeology is undergoing a phase of unprecedented interest in the media, but it could be suggested that television programs on digs, mummies, and lost cities do no more than feed a postmodern economy of groundless images and spectral nostalgia. Could archaeology transform itself into a different kind of discipline, to make itself significant to a new kind of world? Such an idea immediately suggests the distinctively modern strategy of a return to first principles, the creation of another set of new foundations. This would certainly be inappropriate. A more modest proposal is that although archaeology might not have come into being without modernity, it could be changed by augmenting its present concerns with those kinds of knowledge that modernist thought tends to excise: ethics, politics, aesthetics and rhetoric. This is not so much a case of leaping onto a postmodern bandwagon as of realizing a set of countermodern potentials.

That archaeology could be defined as ethical knowledge might appear surprising. For decades, the discussion of "ethics in archaeology" has been limited to questions of the propriety of excavating particular sites as opposed to preserving them, professional standards of recording, the trade in illicit antiquities, and so on. But it is also worth considering that our relationship to the past people about whom we write is an ethical one. Archaeology conventionally separates the present and the past, and often considers its evidence (including human remains and the products of human labor) to be meaningless until they have been interpreted. Moreover, the people whom we study are dead, and feel neither pain nor shame. Yet in using past human beings as the raw material for creating narratives of historical process, we treat them as if they were fully comprehensible. It makes little difference that the people that we study through archaeology cannot look or speak back to us. If we reduce them to the atoms of a past social system, or to rational foraging organisms, we subject them to a totalizing logic. By failing to recognize that human lives exceed our conceptual schemes, we do not learn from the past so much as organize it.⁶⁶ This kind of totalization is close in spirit to totalitarianism. If we find ourselves willing to organize the lives of people in the past according to grand conceptual schemes, we are that much more likely to find it acceptable to do the same to people in the present.

32 The ethical task of archaeology is to bear witness to the other human being in his or her difference. However, modern ethical schemes have tended to follow the Enlightenment belief in the universality of a particular kind of humanity. Thus, they have focused on the definition of universal rights. The alternative is to concentrate less on the autonomy of universal individuals, but rather on the relational connectedness that arises from difference.⁶⁷ Archaeology may have arisen from modernity, but it has the unique capability to bring us into contact with lived worlds that are utterly alien from our own, *even if they at one time occupied the same space* as ourselves. This encounter gives us the possibility of recognizing the particularity and contingency of our own way of living. Learning more about the past expands our understanding of ourselves, but it is essential that in doing so we recognize that there is some element of the difference of the past other that will always elude us.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World-Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 119.

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 21.

3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), 119.

4. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

5. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860; New York: Modern Library, 1995), 226.

6. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970), 57.

7. Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 35.

8. John Carroll, *Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture* (London: Fontana, 1993), 67.

9. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1990; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12.

10. Ole Klindt-Jensen, *A History of Scandinavian Archaeology* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 15.

11. Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 139.

12. Richard Foster Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Rise of the Scientific Movement in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Dover, 1961).

13. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 278.

14. Brian Morris, *Western Conceptions of the Individual* (New York: Berg, 1991), 35.

15. Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 1999), 56.

16. Heidegger, "World-Picture," 125.

17. Charles B. Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1983), 39.

18. Gordon R. Willey and Philip Phillips, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (1958; Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 5.

19. Walter W. Taylor, *A Study of Archaeology* (1948; [Carbondale]: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 43.

20. Lewis R. Binford, "Objectivity—Explanation—Archaeology 1981," in *Theory and Explanation in Archaeology: The Southampton Conference*, ed. Colin Renfrew, Michael J. Rowlands, and Barbara Abbott Graves (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 128.

21. Lewis R. Binford and Jeremy A. Sabloff, "Paradigms, Systematics, and Archaeology," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 38, no. 2 (1982): 137–53.
22. Lewis R. Binford, "Middle-Range Research and the Role of Actualistic Studies," in *Working at Archaeology* (New York: Academic Press, 1983), 413.
23. Gavin Lucas, *Critical Approaches to Fieldwork: Contemporary and Historical Archaeological Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 182.
24. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 47.
25. Foucault, *Order of Things*.
26. Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: Essays in Antiquarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), 20.
27. Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past: The Origins of Archaeology* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 266.
28. John V. Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing: A New History of Science, Technology and Medicine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 87.
29. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 21.
30. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), 6.
31. E.g., Fekri A. Hassan, "Beyond the Surface: Comments on Hodder's 'Reflexive Excavation Methodology,'" *Antiquity* 71, no. 274 (1997): 1021.
32. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (1651; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right*, trans. Henry J. Tozer (1762; London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1916).
33. Lois McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 1994).
34. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 57.
35. E.g., Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, "Archaeology in the Service of the State: Theoretical Considerations," in *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*, ed. Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.
36. Siân Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 11.
37. Christopher Falzon, *Foucault and Social Dialogue: Beyond Fragmentation* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 11.
38. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 121.
39. Mark Pluciennik, "Archaeology, Anthropology and Subsistence," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, n.s., 7, no. 4 (2001): 741–58.
40. Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 60.
41. Alain Schnapp and Kristian Kristiansen, "Discovering the Past," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Archaeology*, ed. Graeme Barker (New York: Routledge, 1999), 32.
42. Michel Foucault, "Cuvier's Position in the History of Biology," *Critique of Anthropology* 13/14 (1979): 125–30.
43. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 66.
44. Eric S. Higgs and Michael R. Jarman, "Palaeoeconomy," in *Palaeoeconomy: Being the Second Volume of Papers in Economic Prehistory by Members and Associates of the British Academy Major Research Project in the Early History of Agriculture*, ed. Eric S. Higgs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1–8.
45. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), 9; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).
46. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.
47. Foucault, *Order of Things*.
48. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127.

- 34 49. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 2d ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 225.
50. Lynn Meskell, "Intimate Archaeologies: The Case of Kha and Merit," *World Archaeology* 29, no. 3 (1998): 363–79; Ian Hodder, "Agency and Individuals in Long-Term Process," in *Agency in Archaeology*, ed. Marcia-Anne Dobres and John E. Robb (New York: Routledge, 2000), 21–33.
51. E.g., Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
52. Glyn Edmund Daniel, *A Hundred Years of Archaeology* (London: Duckworth, 1950), 29.
53. James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth* (1788; Edinburgh: Cadell and Davies, 1795); William Smith, *Strata Identified by Organised Fossils* (London: W. Arding, 1816).
54. Foucault, *Order of Things*, 312.
55. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984), 62.
56. Donald Kuspit, "A Mighty Metaphor: The Analogy of Archaeology and Psychoanalysis," in *Sigmund Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities*, ed. Lynn Gamwell and Richard Wells (London: Freud Museum, 1989), 135.
57. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), 46–8.
58. Erwin M. Segal, "Archaeology and Cognitive Science," in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, ed. Colin Renfrew and Ezra B. W. Zubrow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 23.
59. Charles Taylor, "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles Guignon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 324.
60. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).
61. Frederick A. Olafson, *What is a Human Being?: A Heideggerian View* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 104.
62. See, for example, Peter Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain, "Introduction" to *Evolution and the Human Mind: Modularity, Language, and Meta-Cognition*, ed. Peter Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–12.
63. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 40.
64. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 98–9.
65. Julian S. Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2004).
66. Edith Wyschogrod, "Language and Alterity in the Thought of Levinas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.
67. Emmanuel Levinas, "Beyond Intentionality," in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 100.