



The Past Is in the Present: On the History and Archives of Archaeology

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Archaeology quite obviously deals with the past, as its name indicates, but it is also the case that it does so in the present. It is very much in the present, as and when it is practiced, that archaeology produces knowledge about the past; it is in the present that this past is itself appreciated and appropriated; and it is in the present that the many values and uses it presents—for the present—are recognized and pursued by its practitioners and promoters. That much we know: the challenge is to translate this broad statement of principle into some dedicated line of inquiry, one which would help us understand in much more tangible and sensitive ways just what archaeology is all about, and why is it of such interest in so many ways.

One way to do so, adding some complexity but also much-needed enlightenment, is to turn to the history of archaeology. But not, of course, just any history. Ever since the emergence of archaeology as a field of scientific research, its practitioners have been interested in their disciplinary past. All too often however this interest was motivated by a concern for the creation of lineages and the legitimation of authority. Encompassing the heroic accounts and accredited milestones of discoveries, such internalist appreciations of the discipline have often reduced themselves to a chronicle of the inexorable progress of scientific knowledge. On the contrary, to delve fruitfully into the disciplinary past, to appreciate the double lesson of familiarity and alterity that it brings, to understand that at each of its moments archaeology is practiced in the present, we need at the onset to adopt a perspective that is both highly attentive and immune to veneration, neither overly dazzled by the achievements of our

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166 “genial founding fathers,” nor, at the other extreme, dismissive towards the supposedly “unscientific” errors of our predecessors. Alongside the great discoveries, together with the persevering men (and sometimes women) of genius, the history to be sought is that of the science in action, of the half-forgotten controversies and errors of yesterday, of the routine operations so fundamental as to be self-evident, and indeed of all these episodes and practices deemed unfit for inclusion in the official or authorized histories of the discipline.

This last point, regarding the sources for the history of archaeology, is indeed an important one. In terms of their contents, accessibility and sheer quantity, archaeological publications obviously constitute an important historical resource. But it must not be forgotten that articles and monographs, regional syntheses, and interpretative essays all constitute a literary genre in their own right, made to abide by patterns of reference and authority, their scientific contents recast according to ideal standards of objectivity and demonstration, their rhetoric channeled into a retrospective succession of facts and theory, methodology and results, solid knowledge and volatile speculations. To reach the science in the making as much as the applauded result, to grasp the quotidian as much as the extraordinary, historians of archaeology need to turn to another essential resource, namely the archives of the discipline. These are the various papers, correspondence, manuscripts, drafts, internal documents, field-notes, inventories, sketches, illustrations, prints, etc. produced as part of the archaeological enterprise and accumulated since at least the seventeenth century in museums, libraries, archaeological services, and archival repositories. Archives constitute this crucial resource for re-collecting and researching the history of archaeology—a resource all the more valuable if, for all its inherent fragility, occlusion and neglect, it could be made known and accessible to a greater number of archaeologists and historians who would then exploit and valorize these archives.

In effect, access to such archives makes it easier and more compelling to appreciate the proposition that archaeology is, and has always been, practiced in the present. And that, at each of the past events or episodes of its practice that one may select: the 1930s quest for the cradle of humankind in Africa, the sixteenth-century questions over *naturalia* and *artificiosa*, the circumstances surrounding the opening of the *Musée des antiquités nationales* in 1862, the running of the schools of archaeology in Rome and Athens before the Second World War, the schemes of artifact-based interpretative frameworks proposed by C. J. Thomsen, Gabriel de Mortillet, Oscar Montelius, or William Flinders Petrie, the background to the Folsom controversies in North America, the debate over quaternary stratigraphy and its uses in nineteenth-century Europe, the structuring of archaeological research in India and the Far East after independence, the contemporary reception of Johann Winckelmann and of the Comte de Caylus, etc.—the chronological jumping back and forth of these examples is of course deliberate, to remind us that history really need not be a linear or teleological chronicle.

All this constitutes the rationale and modus operandi of the AREA (ARchives of European Archaeology) network, a European Commission–funded research project dedicated to researching and documenting the history and the archives of archaeology. Leading institutions from across Europe—universities, museums, archaeological services, research centers—unite to encourage research on the history of archaeology, to study and catalogue in a dedicated online database the main archival fonds bearing on the history of the discipline, and to explore the relations between the development of archaeology and the challenges of cultural and political identity. More information about the AREA network, its partners, activities, and productions can be found at *www.area-archives.org*. Besides several publications, the activities of the AREA network will focus for the coming months on the organization of a major international conference, “Histories of archaeology—archives, ancestors, practices,” which will be held in Göteborg, Sweden, 17–19 June 2004. Further preliminary information on the aims and scope of the conference, and contact coordinates, can be found on the website *www.historiesofarchaeology.org*.