

History and Theoretical Development:
The Importance of a Critical Historiography of Archaeology

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The purpose of the following discussion is to suggest that the history of archaeology, far from being an essentially irrelevant sideline for the disciplinary dilettante, has an important and even vital role to play both in understanding the development of archaeological theory and in constructively approaching the particular theoretical issues which have dominated recent debate. It also is suggested, however, that if the history of archaeology is to fulfill this potential role as an aid to understanding, and thus perhaps resolving theoretical problems, the historiography of archaeology must be considerably reformed and broadened in perspective in accordance both with accepted historical practice and with the continuing re-evaluation of philosophical views concerning the nature and development of knowledge. The resulting approach to the history of archaeology (referred to for present purposes as "critical historiography"), centres on the view that adequate historical understanding requires the consideration of events and ideas in relation to their specific contemporary contexts and the complex variety of factors which have shaped them, rather than as chronological isolates in a single-strand genetic chain. The intention here is to illustrate the lack of such adequate historical understanding in the accepted historiography of archaeology, to consider the philosophical grounds for the importance of such historical understanding, and to suggest the kinds of implications which a critical historiographical approach may have for our understanding of archaeological theory.

In specific terms, the discussion will divide into three primary sections. The first is a brief examination of how the history of archaeology has tended to be written -- and accepted -- by archaeologists in relation to accepted historical practice; the second considers this historical approach in the light of recent developments in the philosophy of science, with special reference to the work of T.S. Kuhn; and the third section briefly examines two issues which have figured in contemporary theoretical debates in archaeology -- archaeology as history vs. archaeology as science, and the significance of the "New Archaeology" -- as an illustration of the theoretical importance of critical historiography. Each section is necessarily brief, and the discussion as a whole is offered as a suggestive overview rather than as an exhaustive analysis. It also should be noted that the histories of archaeology considered are Anglo-American products dating from the mid-20th century or later, that the philosophical position explored has developed as part of an Anglo-American tradition, and that the archaeology under study is essentially Anglo-American and essentially prehistoric. The analysis offered is a product of this context as well as being concerned with its critical examination and thus is itself historically specific.

The history of archaeology as written

A consideration of the accepted history of archaeology specifically as historiography brings one into contact with a number of interesting and absorbing questions concerning the nature of historical understanding, and the manner in which history should or should not be written, some of which raise complex and difficult philosophical issues. This is the case, for example, with a question which has concerned some 20th century historians and which recently has been noted in archaeology (eg. Leone 1978:25): whether an historical account has any actual reference to the past at all or whether its relevance, like its construction, is simply a function of the present and the creative powers of the historian (Marwick 1970:77-83). Fortunately, the resolution of such broad philosophical questions does not appear to be essential in considering the desirability of a critical historiography of archaeology in that the point at issue is primarily a matter of scope and orientation. Thus, whether or not it is possible actually to know the past per se, current historical practice establishes a framework for historiography within which the accepted history of archaeology can be assessed. For purposes of the present discussion, one of the central pillars of this framework is of particular relevance: the general rejection by historians of the variety of historiography labelled "Whig history" (Butterfield 1965; Elton 1967:6, 14), which may be characterized as follows:

The whig historian reduces the mediating processes by which the totality of an historical past produces the totality of its consequent future to a search for the origins of certain present phenomena. He seeks out in the past phenomena which seem to resemble those of concern in the present, and then moves forward in time by tracing lineages up to the present in simple sequential movement. When this abridging procedure is charged with a normative commitment to the phenomena whose origins are sought, the linear movement is 'progress' and those who seem to abet it are 'progressive'. The result is whiggish history. Because it is informed by a normative commitment, its characteristic interpretive mode is judgement rather than understanding, and history becomes the field for a dramatic struggle between children of light and children of darkness. Because it wrenches the individual historical event from the complex network of its contemporary context in order to see it in abstracted relationship to analogues in the present, it is prone to anachronistic misinterpretation. Because it assumes in advance the progressive character of historical change, it is less interested in the complex processes by which change emerges than in agencies which direct it, whether they be great men, specific deterministic forces, or the 'logic' of historical development itself.

(Stocking 1968:3-4, quoted in Jones 1983:122-3)

The rejection of such historiography, and the expansion and development of views of history beyond great individuals and crucial events to encompass and integrate economic, social and intellectual history, provide an essential background against which the historiography of archaeology should be assessed.

Before examining the history of archaeology as it has been written and generally accepted by archaeologists, it must be noted that, at least within the limits of the present study, historical analyses of archaeology are neither many nor particularly various. Brief historical orientations are offered in elementary introductions to the subject (eg. Hole & Heizer 1973:40-69) or as background to other works (Clarke 1968:4-11), and specifically historical papers or books appear occasionally, often in the context of a major anniversary (Brew 1968) or, especially in the last 15 years, with reference to particular theoretical issues (eg. Sterud 1973; Fitting 1973). Generally speaking, however, the field of comprehensive history of archaeology is dominated by the work of Glyn Daniel in Great Britain and by that of Willey and Sabloff in the United States, and the resulting accounts (Daniel 1971, 1975; Willey & Sabloff 1974) appear to be accepted as definitive, if only by default. Daniel, certainly, tends to be quoted as an historical authority by other authors, and his views on the development of archaeology are clearly reflected in orthodox positions on the crucial components and events in that development (eg. the disparagement of antiquarianism, the centrality of the Three Age System, etc.). Willey and Sabloff have probably been challenged to a greater extent, though perhaps only with respect to their analysis of recent American archaeology. In any case, both offer comprehensive histories of archaeology, intended specifically as histories, and as such they should provide a basis for characterizing archaeology's view of the past.

The history of archaeology as presented by Daniel and by Willey and Sabloff is essentially a pattern of progressive growth and development, traced from point of origin to present status, and subdivided into more or less formal periods of developmental significance. The specifics of these accounts are not of particular importance here but, generally speaking, both cite crucial theoretical and methodological developments (eg. the Three Age System, Lyell's uniformitarian geology, Darwinian evolutionary theory, the introduction of stratigraphic excavation, radiocarbon dating, etc.), and the contributions of great men (eg. Thomsen, Worsaae, Pitt-Rivers, Uhle, Kroeber, Kidder, etc.), in establishing an apparently coherent linear progression. The essential point for present purposes is that the resulting pattern is in fact a linear progression, in both cases moving from the point at which archaeology, as it is now known, becomes minimally recognizable, to a particular level of conceptual organization and achievement, characterized in terms of both present-day archaeological thought and practice and the theoretical bias of the historian. Thus, for Daniel, archaeology was born among the antiquaries and dilettanti, underwent its formative development in early 19th century Scandinavia and England, came of age with Darwin and Boucher de Perthes, grew and expanded in the following decades to reach maturity around the 1930's, and later withstood the potential onset of a "new antiquarianism" (in the form of gathering and manipulating data for their own sake) to establish and maintain its truly "historical" identity. For Willey and Sabloff, on

the other hand, American archaeology has progressed through a series of stages of conceptual organisation, from "speculative" through "classifactory-descriptive" and "classifactory-historical", to achieve scientific "explanatory" status. These descriptions are, of course, over-simplified, but the essentially "whiggish" character of both accounts seems clear. It also seems evident that the development of archaeology is seen in terms of a largely internally determined evolution of inherent conceptual possibilities and limitations, tending towards "maturity" and a "correct" recognition and treatment of specifically archaeological knowledge. It is with this historical perspective, which seems to permeate the accepted history of archaeology, that the present paper takes issue.

One development which might be expected to produce significant changes in such an approach to the history of archaeology is the recent popularity and extensive employment, particularly in American circles, of Thomas Kuhn's analysis of scientific development in terms of paradigm change (Kuhn 1970a,b,c; 1977). The attraction of this analysis and its apparent relevance to the current theoretical status of archaeology were realized early in the period of debate and attempted innovation most clearly associated with the work of David Clarke in Britain and with that of Lewis Binford in the United States (eg. Adams 1968; Clarke 1972; Fitting 1973b). Aside from Clarke's analysis of the paradigmatic structure of archaeology, however, in which he uses Kuhn's notion of paradigms as exemplars or accepted methodologies (Clarke 1972), the primary impact of Kuhn's work appears to have been concentrated in the concept of revolution, which has been seen as the central relevance of the Kuhnian account for archaeology both theoretically and as a basis for historical analysis. Thus, if archaeology is experiencing theoretical upheaval; if archaeologists are advocating apparently irreconcilable archaeological approaches, with a divide between groups of advocates identifiable largely according to age; if philosophy has been introduced into the debate; then archaeology must be undergoing a Kuhnian revolution. The focus of historical and theoretical concern has tended to be on whether there has been a revolution (eg. Meltzer 1979), and paradoxically on how to build a new constructive paradigm which will "succeed" where the old, supposedly superceded one has "failed" (Binford & Sabloff 1982). The paradox arises in part from the notion that a paradigm -- the arbiter of theory and method which seems by definition, on Kuhn's account, to materialize rather than being consciously developed -- can be built; but, given the acknowledged ambiguity of the concept (Masterman 1970; Kuhn 1970b:271, 1977; Meltzer 1979), this point may be allowed to rest. For present purposes the important point, and the essential paradox, is that the Kuhnian account of the development of knowledge has been incorporated by archaeologists into precisely the kind of historical approach which it was in part intended to combat. Writers of the history of archaeology may have introduced such terms as "normal science" and "revolutionary change" into their historical accounts, but the implication remains that the new "paradigm", should one emerge, will be a better one in the sense of being more "correctly" archaeological, hence coming closer to fulfilling

the inherent conceptual potential of archaeology.

In fact, Kuhn's work in the history and philosophy of science has done much to help in undermining the understanding of the growth of knowledge which is reflected in standard approaches to the history of archaeology, and in archaeologists' employment of Kuhn's own ideas (Fahnestock 1981). Indeed, it is arguable that archaeologists have tended to miss the fundamental thrust of Kuhn's analysis in their pursuit of revolutions and paradigms, the two concepts which have been perhaps the central causes of philosophical criticism of the account. The continuing interest and fruitfulness of Kuhn's ideas are reflected in the fact that they continue to be referred to and employed in the rapid and diverse development of philosophical thought, as well as in other areas of inquiry. This continuing impact does not derive, however, primarily from the concepts of paradigm and scientific revolution, despite the considerable attention these have received. Rather, the wider significance of the Kuhnian account has been a function of its emphasis of the essentially social character of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, such that its development cannot be understood simply in terms of logical structures of thought evolving in conjunction with empirical observation. On Kuhn's account it is necessary to consider how a body of knowledge appears at a particular time, not in terms of an absolute and inherently determined developmental progression, but in relation to its total contemporary historical context. These considerations have helped to cause major rethinking in the philosophy of science, and they also serve to support the view, offered above on specifically historical grounds, that the accepted historical understanding of archaeology is inadequate. They will be developed briefly below.

The philosophical case for critical historiography

As a first point in examining the philosophical case for a critical historiography of archaeology, it may be useful to consider the reasons for Kuhn's rejection of the received understanding of the growth of scientific knowledge as a cumulative, progressive process. It is here that the concepts of paradigm and revolution are important, for they were developed in an attempt to make understandable the actual patterns of scientific development Kuhn had found in doing detailed historical research. In the context of this research, Kuhn had discovered, first, that science in fact did not appear to grow simply by progressive accretion, and second, that it was actually quite difficult to distinguish between science and non-science (eg. superstition) on the basis of such accepted criteria (Kuhn 1970c:1-2). In addition, it became evident that strictly empirical concerns and methodologies were insufficient to dictate the unique conclusions science apparently provides, with the resulting implication that other considerations must be instrumental in determining scientific development (*ibid*:3-6). Theoretical change also was not simply a matter of incremental growth in the conceptual furniture available but rather involved a re-evaluation both of theoretical positions and of supposedly incorrigible and

objective factual observations (*ibid*:6-7). From these points, Kuhn derived the need to consider the development of scientific knowledge within its integral historical context (if actual differences in the nature of knowledge are to be ascertainable), as well as the concepts of paradigm (as the received beliefs and commitments shaping the configuration of knowledge and the pattern of research), and revolutionary change (as the process, based ultimately in the individual, by which the evident re-sorting of both fact and theory takes place). Although these concepts are themselves problematic, their development has been a major contributing factor in effectively undermining the supposed epistemological priority of science by questioning its accepted distinctive status as a rational and empirically justified structure of logical inference (Fahnestock 1981). Thus, in concentrating on defining paradigms and identifying revolutions, archaeologists have essentially failed to notice a major restructuring of approaches to knowledge which is potentially of considerably greater import for understanding archaeological development.

There are several strands of thought and directions of investigation involved in this restructuring of approaches to knowledge, all of which are potentially relevant to understanding archaeology, although not all relate directly to the present subject. For example, science can no longer be simply accepted or rejected as the unquestioned paradigm of knowledge but rather appears as one form of knowledge to be understood in relation to other possible forms. On a more general scale, it is evident "... how very little we know about learning, about credibility, and about our modes of inference ..." (Barnes 1982:x), and that to a considerable degree investigation in these areas must be a matter of empirical research, as opposed to abstract analysis and systematization. It is also evident that a considerable proportion of such research must take place in the sociology of knowledge, an area in which Kuhn's work provided a needed stimulus (Barnes 1982:x; Jones 1983:126), and one in which interesting results are being produced, although the complexities of the necessary analysis and understanding are still a major focus of concern (eg. Lemaine *et al.* 1976). The central implications of Kuhn's account for the present discussion, however, are its demonstration of the need for adequate historical understanding, which requires preservation of the integrity of historical contexts, and its emphasis of the social character of knowledge. In light of these two points, taken together with those mentioned above, the accepted historical understanding of archaeology at least requires re-evaluation and must benefit from a broadening of historical perspective.

To demonstrate the need for re-evaluation of the history of archaeology given these dual concerns, one need only consider recent work on the development of disciplines, which has been an area of attention for both sociologists and philosophers of science. Since the notion of a "discipline" often plays an important role in historical and theoretical discussions of archaeology -- which frequently deal with

questions concerning the nature of archaeology as a "discipline" and whether it is or can be an "independent discipline" -- it is interesting that the concept of a discipline in any abstract, inherently determined sense seems to play little part in these philosophical and sociological studies. The units of development identified in sociological work are instead the research community, made up of socially interacting individuals who share general research interests and networks of communication, and the speciality, a particular limited research problem or area which attracts a segment of a research community and which may or may not develop into the kind of entity commonly called a discipline. In the philosophical sphere, on the other hand, Dudley Shapere considers the development of knowledge not in terms of integrally developing and internally defined "disciplines", but rather on the basis of changing "domains" of associated phenomena which are recognised at particular times as generating problems that are both currently significant and potentially open to theoretical and practical solution. The development of a domain again proceeds through the formation of specialities around particular accessible problems as they are identified (Shapere 1977a,b).

Thus, philosophical and sociological study suggests that a perspective which, like standard histories of archaeology, deals with the development of knowledge in terms of inherently definable and discretely evolving "disciplines" may be at least overly restrictive and very possibly misleading. The implication is that, if the problems and conceptual structure which constitute an area of inquiry are to be understood, it will be necessary to consider their development within the appropriate contemporary social and intellectual context as a basis for understanding why some associations of phenomena generate questions and why some problems are addressed while others remain in abeyance or are not identified. The development of knowledge thus appears to be considerably more fluid than was previously thought; and, while abstractions such as defined "disciplines" may serve a useful purpose in some contexts, they should be recognised as such to prevent conceptual ossification.

This discussion has been necessarily brief, but it seems more than adequate to suggest that the accepted history of archaeology is in need of reconsideration, and that critical historiography, in the sense of basing historical understanding on an analysis comprehending contextual social and intellectual factors, can and should play an important role in the production of new historical accounts. The practical value of such a critical perspective for understanding issues in the theoretical development of archaeology remains to be considered, however, and it is to this that the next section will turn. The discussion offered is based primarily on material derived from a complete survey of Antiquity and American Antiquity covering the period 1925-1975, work which has been extremely suggestive concerning both the need for a more adequate historiography of archaeology, and the relevance of critical historiography for understanding recent theoretical issues. The present analysis is necessarily limited and also centres on the intellectual and

philosophical context of archaeology's theoretical development, thus giving little immediate insight into the social factors which are equally essential in establishing a critical historical understanding. However, as will appear below, even such a limited view may be of assistance in identifying contextual factors which appear to be significant in shaping a particular development or developmental pattern, and thus may offer an avenue of escape from apparently endless and unconstructive internal theoretical debates.

Examples of the theoretical value of critical historiography

As an illustration of the value of critical historiography for understanding archaeology's theoretical development, two questions will be considered, both of which have given rise to considerable theoretical discussion during the past two highly eventful decades. The first of these questions is whether archaeology is properly to be placed under the conceptual aegis of history or under that of science; the second concerns the theoretical and historical significance of the development known as the "New Archaeology". These two questions illustrate somewhat different dimensions of critical historical analysis, but both indicate the need for an historical understanding which preserves the historical integrity of theoretical development and takes contextual factors into account, if only for purposes of historical accuracy. Both also serve to indicate that a critical historical perspective can be of considerable value in the constructive assessment and understanding of contemporary theoretical debates.

Whether archaeology is properly history or properly science is a question which has been credited as being conceptually central not only to achieving an adequate understanding of archaeology as a "discipline", but also to correctly directing its theoretical and methodological development (eg. Trigger 1970). In light of the discussion above, the issue appears to represent an essential misunderstanding of the nature and development of knowledge; but, as it has played a definite historical role in theoretical debate in archaeology, it equally cannot be simply written off. Given the recent conceptual importance accorded by archaeologists to the question, then, an obvious first step in historical analysis would be to ascertain how long it has been a subject for debate and whether there is historical evidence favouring one side over the other. It is at this point that the need for critical historiography makes itself apparent. At least in the context of Antiquity and American Antiquity, the material suggests that the opposition between history and science has not been a permanent central feature of archaeology, but that during roughly the first half of the 20th century, "history" and "science" could be cited as facets of the archaeological enterprise in the same breath and without any evident sense of contradiction. One is therefore faced with an apparently crucial theoretical debate in the present for which a purely internal historical analysis in terms of intrinsic "disciplinary" progress (or regress) offers little understanding, and no solution.

A broadened contextual perspective indicates, however, that since the beginning of the 20th century, accepted concepts of science and history have undergone changes which would make the development of a conflict between the two as alternative explanatory models quite understandable. Thus, in the early decades of the century, both science and history predominantly viewed the generation of knowledge in terms of the essentially unproblematic accumulation and systematic treatment of facts. Subsequent development in both fields has led away from this view, however, towards a more relativistic view of history and, ultimately, towards a converging, more relativistic understanding of science (Marwick 1970:10,52). This convergence is for many a reluctant and difficult change, however (see eg. Hollis & Lukes 1982); and its impetus derives in part from the undermining, as noted above, of the dominant mid-20th century Anglo-American philosophical view of science as the archetype of knowledge, directly empirically based and concerned with producing generalizations and universal laws. This account placed history on an uneasy epistemological footing (Fain 1970: 9) and would make unthinkable the kind of uncontroversial juxtaposition of science and history evident in earlier archaeological work. Thus, although the present analysis is grossly oversimplified, it does serve to suggest the relevance of critical historiography in understanding theoretical development. By shifting attention away from whether archaeology is properly fulfilling its "disciplinary" destiny (a destiny which would be extremely difficult to define in any case if history and science also undergo conceptual change), to why, in wider terms, a particular debate should be present or absent, and seen as conceptually central or as a subsidiary issue, it may become possible not only to achieve a broader and more constructive understanding, but also to move beyond an essentially unproductive theoretical conflict.

The question of the historical and theoretical significance of "New Archaeology" raises somewhat different historical issues, although it too indicates the potential fruitfulness of critical historiography. In the first place, it must be noted that "New Archaeology" is an ambiguous term, and the significance assigned to it will vary according to how it is interpreted. No absolute definition will be offered here, however, because the aspect which is of present concern is not a particular theoretical configuration or area of methodological emphasis, but rather the essential, central claim of "New Archaeology" to embody a major theoretical break from archaeology as it was previously (and inadequately) practised. This claim has been both supported and challenged on historical grounds; but, as the historical accounts offered are cast essentially in the standard mould outlined above, as well as being put to polemical use (Wylie 1981:13), one is left simply with a choice between "New Archaeology" as a major progressive theoretical break, and "New Archaeology" as embodying new development but "... with visible antecedents that make it something short of miraculous ..." (Willey & Sabloff 1974:189), or merely as a rhetorical complication of no real theoretical import (eg. Hogarth 1972:301). It should be emphasized that the suggestion here is not that critical historiography can play the role of privileged historical arbiter in

this situation, but rather that the broader contextual view that it provides may alter understanding of the situation itself. Thus, if a critical historical approach to the recent history of archaeology is pursued, a "new perspective" on "New Archaeology" may result.

For brevity's sake the present discussion will focus on the claims of American "New Archaeologists", working from material derived from the survey of American Antiquity according to Kuhn's historical guidelines for preserving the historical integrity of developments and interpreting statements according to contemporary usage (Barnes 1982:2-3). From this material it appears that American archaeologists were consistently and uncontroversially formulating and testing hypotheses, offering interpretations which were not strictly limited to identifying culture distributions in time and space, and quite explicitly producing and employing theories, for decades prior to the "New Archaeology" revolution of the 1960s and '70s. It therefore seems that the claimed theoretical and historical significance of "New Archaeology" which centres on these points is at least open to doubt, and in any case in need of reassessment. At the same time, however, an examination of the wider context of this alleged revolution in archaeology indicates roughly contemporary conceptual unrest in a number of other fields, not least the philosophy of science, in which the demise of logical positivism gave rise to a still continuing period of philosophical reassessment and exploration. A critical historical perspective suggests, then, that in fact the theoretical upheavals associated with "New Archaeology" may be indicative of a broader conceptual upheaval, whose effects on the structure and understanding of knowledge in Western culture are only now being explored, and which may have considerable significance for the theoretical development of archaeology (Fahnestock 1982). Again, this analysis is over-simplified and it is offered primarily to suggest the constructive possibilities of critical historiography. The intention is not to assign any specific significance to "New Archaeology" but rather to indicate that a change in historical perspective allows an expansion of the question of significance which may prove to be theoretically fruitful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a by now obvious point should be acknowledged: that critical historiography transforms the history of archaeology into a highly complex matter, open to any number of approaches and interpretations. Indeed, the historiography of archaeology clearly becomes "... a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past..." (Carr 1961:24), and it seems highly unlikely that a final, definitive understanding will be reached, either of archaeology or of its development. As the discussion above suggests, however, this lack of finality and certainty may be a considerable constructive force in understanding and perhaps resolving archaeology's apparent theoretical difficulties. It has been suggested, in a comment regarding a recent article concerned yet again with formalizing archaeological explanation

(Read & LeBlanc 1978), that archaeology would be better off if archaeologists "... worried more about creative theory building and less about being right ..." (Bertram 1978:319). The removal of archaeology's historical straitjacket, through the judicious application of critical historiography, should help to bring such creative theoretical activity at least one step nearer, not as a "worry" but as a form of "correctly archaeological" exploration.

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