



The Trouble with Theory

The New Interpretive Dilemma

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, archaeological theory gets a bashing. In the 1980s, in the wake of nearly two decades of new archaeology and its progeny, many started to believe that archaeological theory had devolved into methodology for its own sake. James Moore and Arthur Keene, editors of a 1983 volume which attempted to reappraise the role and status of archaeological method, were critical of the way archaeology had borrowed methods and models from outside the discipline with little thought about whether they were actually viable with the aims of archaeology (Moore & Keene 1983: xiv). They were also especially critical of the way methodology, best exemplified through the growth of middle-range theory, had become increasingly detached from a theoretical base. Two decades later, Michael Shanks launched another major criticism of the direction postprocessualism was heading, in the way it was all too easily drawing on the writings of major French poststructuralists without proper concern for the way it connected to archaeology. ‘Where is the archaeology?’ he asked (Shanks 1990: 294). Whereas processualism was borrowing methods without thought to theory, postprocessualism seemed to be borrowing theory without thought to method. It appears, then, that the potential for a schism between theory and method has been a recurrent concern within

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01026-0 - Understanding the Archaeological Record

Gavin Lucas

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 • UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

archaeology, at least since theory became an explicit subfield of archaeological discourse in the 1960s, if not earlier. Such concerns are still with us today.

In a recent polemical piece for the journal *Archaeological Dialogues*, Matthew Johnson suggested that there was a real disjuncture between theory and practice – between what we say in theoretical papers and what we do in practice (Johnson 2006: 118). He identified various forms of this lack of correspondence, but the one he singled out was the undertheorization of the link between overt theory on the one hand and other elements of archaeological thought and practice on the other hand (ibid.: 120). Johnson took two examples to explore this, agency theory and phenomenology, which he argued revealed opposing trends. Thus, in the first case, practical applications were argued to be resistant to agency theory because basic archaeological concepts like culture, phase, and type worked against any easy incorporation of the theory. In the second case, it was the opposite problem – the uptake of phenomenology found an all-too-receptive audience in British archaeology because of its strong fieldwork tradition, such that adopting the theory of phenomenology was largely a question of terminological change without any substance behind it. Although one might disagree with Johnson's diagnosis in these particular cases (see, for example, the responses which follow the paper), no doubt most of us can relate to his general point: sometimes a theoretical approach just does not work with archaeological data, and sometimes a theory is so vague that it can work on any data.

Johnson's point can perhaps be restated as the hazards faced by any archaeological interpretation: vacuity and incommensurability. One could even see this as the contemporary version of the interpretive dilemma which plagued archaeologists in the 1970s and 1980s (DeBoer & Lathrap 1979; Wylie 1989). That dilemma, one may recall, invoked the opposition between a safe, yet dull description of the archaeological record (artifact physics) and a more speculative, yet exciting interpretation. It was based on a certain naive view of the relation between theory and data which has since been superseded (e.g. Wylie 1992b), a relation in which the entire burden rested on the role of evidence. The current dilemma – if one can call it that without sounding overly pessimistic about archaeological theory – is also based on the relation between theory and data (the updated postpositivist version), but here

The Trouble with Theory • 3

the burden falls squarely on theory. It is no longer a question of whether the evidence supports the theory: does the theory work in the context of the evidence? The classic symptom of this malaise is the case study, as when an empirical piece of research which is intended to illustrate a theoretical argument fails; the contemporary literature abounds with such instances, and no doubt we would not be hard pressed to find examples in which the case study simply does not live up to expectations raised in the theoretical part.

Admittedly, the difference between these versions of the interpretive dilemma is subtle, and in fact the opposition between theory and data, though still meaningful at one level (see e.g. Hodder & Hutson 2003), needs to be rethought. Indeed as Tomášková suggests in her reply to Johnson, theory is a practice too, and she alludes to other divisions of labour within archaeology, such as that between fieldwork and laboratory work (Tomášková 2006: 166). Turning this back onto the updated version of the interpretive dilemma, we might say that the hazards of vacuity and incommensurability arise not so much because of a lack of correspondence between theory and practice and/or data but because of a disjuncture between the metaphysical assumptions of different practices or discourses. In a way, the change might also be characterized in terms of a shift from a correspondence between theory and data to the coherence between different statements. In short, the current interpretive dilemma is not an epistemological one, as that framed in the 1970s and 1980s, but an ontological one, insofar as the metaphysical assumptions framing different discourses often remain unexamined. Does the reality posited in archaeological discourse about agency theory bear any correspondence to the reality posited through excavation or through artifact analysis?

This, in essence, is what this book is about. I want to ask, What is the ontological relationship between ‘methodological’ concepts like stratigraphy and typology on the one hand and current ‘theoretical’ notions like materiality and agency on the other hand? However, in approaching this question, a difficulty emerges: although our methodological concepts are relatively few and stable, the theoretical ones are diverse and ever changing. This difference in a way expresses one of the main reasons one can still talk about methodological and theoretical concepts as distinct, even though the former are of course theoretical, whereas the latter are operational – hence the inverted commas around

4 • UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

them. Yet my point is that to attempt an analysis of the connections between these two discourses would be a massive undertaking because of the pace of change and variety in theoretical practice – too massive for any single book or perhaps author. As an alternative, I could just select some theories, as Johnson did, for comparison – but even that seems daunting, as well as somewhat arbitrary. Instead, what I wish to do is explore this problem in terms of a very confined and specific discourse: the nature of the archaeological record.

One could describe this as an attempt to rewrite middle-range theory but from an ontological rather than an epistemological position. Binford's original conception of middle-range theory was to build epistemic links between what we observe in the archaeological record and our explanations of the past processes which created that record. It was his solution to the original interpretive dilemma. In this book, in accordance with the updated version of that dilemma, I thus want to explore the ontological links between our practical engagements with the archaeological record and the interpretations we produce. However, I would not insist on adopting a terminology developed during a very different period of archaeological thought – no doubt advocates of the Binfordian middle-range theory would dislike my appropriation of this term as much as those who think middle-range theory is an implausible fantasy of processualism. We can call it what we like, so long as the objectives are clear, and I hope they will become so as the course of this book unfolds. Nonetheless, to give the reader some sense of direction, I want to briefly outline the structure of the argument that is presented in this book.

In approaching the question of the archaeological record, I have tacitly divided the book into two parts. The first part (Chapters 2–4) treats what I call the received view of the archaeological record – that is, how it is currently depicted and its historical background. I find taking a historical perspective extremely useful, not only for enabling a better grasp of concepts and practices which inform what we do today but also for the pedagogical value of those concepts and practices in argumentation and debate. It is also a necessary corrective to an academic amnesia that often accompanies more theoretical texts. The chapters of the first part thus each treat a different conception of the archaeological record, which though related, are essentially distinct. The second part (Chapters 5–6) then presents a reassessment of the concept of the archaeological record and attempts to respond to the

The Trouble with Theory • 5

fragmentation of the concept presented in the first part – to ontologically suture what I see as critical ruptures between different domains of the archaeological record. Fundamentally, one could characterize such ruptures in terms of a broad schism between the archaeological record as something which is given (e.g. remains of the past) and something which is constituted by archaeologists (e.g. the archive). It is, if you like, an attempt to steer between a naive empiricism and social constructivism, yet to do this requires shifting from an epistemological to an ontological and operational perspective on the issue.

In this respect, the approach taken in this book bears some similarity to the work of the anthropologist-historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Trouillot 1995). Trouillot accepts the doubling of history as both past events and present narratives, and rather than get caught up in dichotomous thinking (e.g. past as real versus past as constructed), he focuses on history as a continuum, identified through four moments. These moments are the generation of documents, the collation of documents into an archive, the retrieval of facts from documents, and the construction of historical narrative. For Trouillot, focusing on these moments is critical to understanding the intersection of power and knowledge and how silences are created in history; to locate and contest such silences, historians need to adopt strategies which focus on these key moments. It is easy to see how the archaeological record can also be considered along these lines, and indeed Alison Wylie has explicitly connected Trouillot's division of four moments in the production of history to comparable moments in archaeology (Wylie 2008). In the same way – but with a less political agenda – in this book I explore archaeology as a continuum by examining the nature of the archaeological operation and archaeological entities deployed in our narratives. For me, the concept of the archaeological record is an obvious starting point insofar as it connects and encapsulates the duality of archaeology as process (what we do) and as remains (the past). By way of an introduction, then, I begin with an obvious question: what is the archaeological record?

What Is the Archaeological Record?

A CONVENTIONAL WAY to answer the question 'What is the archaeological record?' would be to turn to some standard dictionary and quote the definitions therein of 'archaeology' and 'record' – or even better to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01026-0 - Understanding the Archaeological Record

Gavin Lucas

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 • UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

go to their etymological roots, in this instance, to Greek and Latin, respectively. We all know about archaeology ('the study of ancient things', from the Greek), but the etymology of the word 'record' may be less familiar. Although originally from Latin ('to remember'), it more directly comes to us through Old French, meaning 'testimony committed to writing'; however, since the 1890s, it came increasingly to cover other recording modes in relation to the new technologies. I am not terribly fond of dictionary definitions or etymologies, although I admit such recourse can be (and most often is) a rhetorical move to legitimize a certain approach, a fact no less true in my instance. Thus, one of the reasons I focus on the term 'archaeological record' is precisely because it connotes an ambiguity about the nature of archaeological evidence – as something which is its own testimony, an autoarchive (the fossil), as well as something which archaeologists testify to in the archive they produce (the text). Although superficially similar, this bears no resemblance to Patrik's distinction of the physical and textual models of the archaeological record discussed later in this section (Patrik 1985). 'Record' thus evokes something of the semiautonomous nature of modern recording devices such as tapes and cameras, as well as the primacy of human agency in the production of written testimony. Nonetheless, I am aware that the term may still be problematic for some (see e.g. Barrett 1988, 2006; Edgeworth 2003: 5–6).

Perhaps more important than etymology, though, is the context and timing of a word coming into common parlance; the recurrent use of the term 'archaeological record' may have originally come to archaeology via geology and palaeontology, although in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a variety of terms, including both 'source' and 'record', was used interchangeably (see e.g. Newton 1851). Indeed, the transference of more broadly literary or textual concepts to characterize all histories from the earth, including archaeology, was common practice in the nineteenth century. Referring to material remains – whether fossils, rocks, or artifacts – as documents, archives, testimonies, records, and sources was a standard device, and one which remains with us today. However, the first persistent reference I find to the term 'archaeological record' is by Childe (1956a), but I freely admit this is not based on any systematic search on my part – although it would not surprise me if the 1950s was when the term first became more common, like the associated term 'material culture' (Childe 1956a;

The Trouble with Theory • 7

Table 1. *Patrik's Five Meanings of the Archaeological Record*

1	Past objects and events (e.g. systemic context)
2	Material deposits (e.g. layers, stratigraphy)
3	Material remains (e.g. objects, assemblages)
4	Archaeological sample (e.g. excavated area, retrieved finds)
5	Archaeological record (e.g. archives, publications)

Source: Patrik (1985).

see Chapter 4). Whatever the origins of the term, however, it is clear that it encapsulates more than one meaning, and this is where I really focus my attention.

The various meanings of the term ‘archaeological record’ were made very clear in Linda Patrik’s seminal article on the subject, published a quarter of a century ago (Patrik 1985). In the beginning of her paper, Patrik identified five different meanings used by archaeologists (Patrik 1985: 29–30; see also Table 1). The first is the material context in which past events and/or processes occurred – in short, what is variously called the ethnographic past or the systemic context. The second and third meanings refer, respectively, to the material deposits and material remains left behind by these past processes; the fourth concerns the part of these remains recovered by archaeology (i.e. the sample), and the fifth, the record archaeologists themselves create of these remains (e.g. archives, reports). It is a pity that Patrik ignores the last two meanings in her paper; nowhere does she discuss the role of the archaeologist in the constitution of the archaeological record, but rather she focuses her attention on the first three meanings. Moreover, her distinction of the physical and textual models conflates the differences among these three meanings, which I think actually aids the confusion surrounding the concept – a confusion she acknowledges at the end of the paper.

The physical model, according to Patrik, asserts that there is a causal and physical connection between past events or processes and the record itself – the prototype being the fossil record. The textual model, in contrast, asserts that the record encodes information about the past – the prototype being a historical document. Patrik’s paper was an extremely balanced and considered piece insofar as it was a review of the then-current theoretical positions; indeed it was an attempt to create a bridge

8 • UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

of understanding between the rifts of processualism and postprocessualism. However, it did not really offer a constructive or different view on the archaeological record. Her concluding call for a synthesis of the two models has largely been ignored, yet it revealed an interesting schism in the concept itself:

Perhaps the two models apply to different levels of archaeological evidence: the physical model seems more appropriate for archaeological remains, and the textual model for the original material artifacts, in use and as deposits. They should be synthesized by treating one as the temporal, causal consequence of the other.

(Patrik 1985: 55)

What seems accurate about this observation is the distinction between two levels of evidence, which might be better characterized as two ontological conceptions of the archaeological record: one which treats it as comparable to a contemporary material context, yet one from another time, and the other which treats it as fundamentally historical. In other words, it is the difference between the archaeological record as synonymous with material culture on the one hand and the archaeological record as a set of remains or residues on the other hand. What is misleading about this observation however, is the ascription of the textual and physical models to these respective ontological representations. I would argue that both the textual and the physical models of Patrik's scheme are in fact examples of the same ontology, one which sees the archaeological record in terms of material culture in a past 'present', and that there is in fact no model in contemporary archaeology which adequately covers the second ontology – a historical ontology of residues. This is the key theme of the second part of this book.

Despite offering a possible reconciliation between the models, a deeper sense of misgiving emerges from Patrik's paper, and her final paragraph questions whether the concept of the archaeological record is at all useful – she asks us to consider whether 'archaeological evidence may not form any kind of record at all' (Patrik 1985: 56). Indeed, subsequent reflections on Patrik's paper tended to reject either of her models as a suitable way of understanding the archaeological record.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01026-0 - Understanding the Archaeological Record

Gavin Lucas

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Trouble with Theory* • 9

John Barrett's answer to Patrik's concluding suggestion was quite emphatic in its assertion that the concept of record was inadequate and preferred the use of the term 'evidence' (Barrett 1988, 2006). For Barrett, the problem with the term 'record' is that it encourages us to see material remains as representations of past events rather than evidence of the material conditions structuring and structured by people. I have a lot of sympathy with Barrett's position, but as I have already articulated, I think the concept of record can be thought of in more complex ways (see also Thomas 1996: 55–64). Indeed, the problem is not really about the utility of the concept of record but rather about the recognition of the ontological constitution of archaeological remains *qua* remains, not as something else, such as material culture. This is especially ironic, as in the following year, Patrik published another paper on just this aspect, but from an art historical perspective; her paper titled 'The Aesthetic Experience of Ruins' is probably unknown to most archaeologists (Patrik is a philosopher, not an archaeologist), but it addressed the importance of the fragmentary and incomplete nature of antique art to its aesthetic appreciation (Patrik 1986). It would have been interesting if she had considered the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record in relation to its status as historical evidence; indeed, the notion of incompleteness is something which takes on great significance in Chapter 2. However, the immediate point I wish to emphasize is that, in articulating these two models, Patrik felt the need at the end to invoke her original five meanings of the archaeological record – or rather the first three. Yet it is the full list which is important, because it clearly shows that the concept of the archaeological record can – and perhaps ought to – entail both the physical remains themselves and the work archaeologists perform on them to constitute them as archaeological evidence. This is a theme that is central to this book and consequently results in a very different view to the one that Patrik gave in her otherwise stimulating paper.

I begin by redrawing up Patrik's original list and condensing it to just three meanings, which also form the basis of the following three chapters (Table 2). The first refers to the archaeological record as composed principally of material culture or the human material environment. In short, this is the archaeological record conceived of as material culture or artifacts, in the broadest sense of the term (see the next section) and is equivalent to Patrik's first meaning. The second meaning

10 • UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Table 2. *Three Meanings of the Archaeological Record as Used in This Book Compared to Patrik's Scheme*

<i>Patrik's Fivefold Division</i>	<i>Threefold Division Used in This Book</i>
Past objects and events	Artifacts and material culture (Chapter 4)
Material deposits	Residues and formation theory (Chapter 3)
Material remains	
Archaeological sample	Sources and fieldwork (Chapter 2)
Archaeological record	

refers to the archaeological record as the remains or traces of a past material environment, and here I discuss both her second and her third meaning in terms of an oppositional tension – between deposits and assemblages in relation to formation theory. The third and final meaning refers to the archaeological record as something we encounter and construct in the present, and once again, the tension here is between Patrik's fourth and fifth meanings. I want to elaborate on each of these in a little more detail before I treat them more fully in their respective chapters.

Artifacts

When we think about the objects that archaeologists deal with – their immediate object of study – a central notion is that of the artifact. 'Artifact' can mean just small and/or portable objects made and used by humans, although the term is also more generally employed to cover any material object or construction, such as a pit or a building. Textbooks, however, are also quick to point out that the archaeological record is composed not just of artifacts but also of a variety of non-human objects, such as seeds, bones, and soils, which are commonly called ecofacts (for a typical example of such a discussion, see Renfrew & Bahn 1996: 45–6). However, the distinction of ecofacts from artifacts is a little spurious – seeds and bones have in many cases been used by humans and even modified (i.e. domesticated), and more generally, almost all such remains have been influenced by or are associated with human action in one way or another; otherwise, archaeologists would not be interested in them. Indeed, the artifact-ecofact distinction is really a manifestation of a deeper culture-nature dichotomy which has been under constant critique for decades. Nonetheless, there is a