1 The search for *arche*

The same I am, ere ancient'st order was,
Or what is now received: I witness to
The times that brought them in, so shall I do
To th' freshest things now reigning, and make stale
The glistering of this present, as my tale
Now seems to it . . . Your patience this allowing,
I turn my glass.

Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

To us human beings the passage of winter into spring is imperceptible. But for nature it is a time of rebirth: she comes alive. A similar air of anticipation must have pervaded the world two and a half thousand years ago. Separated by enormous distances and independent of one another, the great men of the Old World – Lao Zi and Confucius in the loess plains of China, Buddha under the burning sun of India, Zarathustra in the endless mountain ranges of Iran and the prophets of the Old Testament on the shores of the Dead Sea – all initiated a new epoch in the development of mankind. The Greek miracle, whose offspring was one day to be the European and Atlantic civilisation, was beginning to take shape in the eastern Mediterranean.

Until that time, the world had the likeness of a myth, the activities of men were subordinated to mythical patterns and mythology represented almost the entire body of human knowledge.

But these men brought changes. Even though their thinking was influenced by myths, these myths could no longer encompass new thoughts. Thus, theoretical thinking, which could comprehend society and nature in an entirely new way, and which was capable of examining its own assumptions, came into existence. The teaching of each of the thinkers became a cognitive basis which attracted at first isolated followers, then an entire nation. Supplemented later by Christianity and Islam, these systems of thought became the foundations for the principal social systems of the world. Societies still in existence keep returning time and again to their fundamental sources, which issued forth during that remarkable period two and a half thousand years ago. In this way, the fifth century BC marks the end of the mythical era and the beginning of the history of mankind; it marks the beginning of a whole range of cultures and traditions of which we are the heirs. Appropriately, Karl Jaspers has called this period the 'Achsenzeit' (Jaspers 1966).

It was during this time in ancient Greece that concepts such as archae-

ology, history and philosophy originated within the context of the new pattern of thought which was then forming. Originally, these terms had a different meaning from those of today.

Let us begin with the notion of history. As every schoolchild knows, it was used for the first time by the 'father of history', Herodotus, in the title of his book *Historias Apodeixis*, in the sense of investigation and research in general. Subsequently, Aristotle defined the term more precisely as the investigation of all empirical events which can be observed through personal experience or traced through reports. Such a definition still manages to include all past events experienced or reported and, further, most of biology and geography. As the ancient Greeks gathered information about these subjects, mostly in the form of reports about distant lands, foreign peoples and curious natural events, the need arose for a more discrete categorisation.

Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* does not describe the history of nature, but talks about the curiosities of nature, and this approach persisted well into the modern age. For Francis Bacon, *historia naturalis* remained a descriptive account, the investigation of causes of natural events being left to the realm of theoretical sciences: physics. It was only in 1575 that J. Lipsius drew a distinction between *historia naturalis* and *historia narrativa*. Gottfried Leibnitz, writing around 1694, still included universal history, geography, antiquities, philology and history of literature all as a part of 'histoire humaine'.

In the past, therefore, history did not cover the same range of phenomena as today. Aristotle considered history in its chronological sense merely as a chain of political and military events. It did not occur to him that history could have a value of its own. Nevertheless, historical processes were becoming a part of political life among the Greeks just at this time (Meier 1973). The public administration of the Greek *polis* included contacts, through commerce, with other Greek settlements, as well as with barbarians abroad, and this made the compilation and organisation of historical and geographical facts an indispensable condition for responsible government. Furthermore, the development of abstract social relations liberated the arts from the constraints of religious activity and isolated beauty as a special, independent value. Similarly, the concept of good was divorced from its immediate societal context. In this way, Greek democracy became the basic condition of Greek history. Consequently all empirical knowledge was quite naturally recorded as history.

Theoretical knowledge, on the other hand, was delineated as philosophy, which was held to encompass all theory. This left one remaining class of

phenomena: empirical events which are inaccessible to our immediate experience and which did not leave any personal records. This gap was filled by archaeology. In *Hippias Major*, Plato described archaeology as a science concerned with the most remote past, referring to it as 'pleasant fairy tales of old grandmothers' (285d).

In the view of the ancients, archaeology, if it was to have any value, constituted a chronological extension of history. As a result, early writers considered the more remote historical events as archaeology. This was the case, for instance, in *Biblioteke Historike* of the Greek historian Diodorus of Siculus, writing in the first century BC, or in the work *Romaike Archaiologia of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, describing the origins of Rome. Archaeology remained a somewhat questionable extension of the historical past until the end of the eighteenth century, when Immanuel Kant described his nebular hypothesis about the origin of the solar system as the 'archaeology of nature'. According to Kant, the 'archaeology of nature' included statements about the past which lack convincing evidence and therefore have to remain hypotheses, rather than becoming theories. It is evident that in terms of recognition as a serious, empirical discipline, archaeology has not made much progress in the intervening two thousand years.

Let us return to the meaning of archaeology. Originally, it was perceived as the knowledge about *arche*: beginnings, sources, origins. These left no record, save for their consequences. Origins preoccupied Greek thinkers ever after. According to Simplicius, it was Anaximander (611–547 BC) who first introduced the term *arche*. Aristotle characterised the water of Thales as the *arche* – the primeval matter, the original state of things. The intention of Empedocles was to explain 'the oldest beginnings of everything'. Plato noted that 'it is very important to begin from the very beginning'. And Aristotle judged that 'probably the best way to proceed would be to follow things from the beginning and observe how they come into existence and how they develop'.

Beginnings are taken for granted, for they must always have been. It is recognised that knowledge about beginnings is of great importance, for everything has its beginning, which predetermines further evolution. The enormous importance accorded to beginnings among past societies and cultures stemmed from their intimate relationship with the world of mythology – a connection from which we have not freed ourselves entirely even today. In the mythical world, the majority of human actions merely imitated the actions of a mythical hero, prescribed by fate. The past and the present merged, and when they were later separated, it was the connecting link – genealogy – which was accorded a special importance. Ancestry and

descent defined one's very existence, one's position in society and the quality of one's life, all of which could have been legitimately inherited only by descent.

At the very beginning of history, the distance in time between origins, for which there was no record, and the more recent past, which was preserved and recorded, did not appear so great. Origins, therefore, were rightly seen as having a decisive influence on contemporary life. Descent provided the link between the two spheres.

Cosmogonic myths aimed to explain the very beginning: how the world and man came to be created and how they reached their contemporary state. Religious ideas about predestination reduced everything to beginnings, the subsequent development being merely the growth of the original form, thus precluding any idea of evolution.

In antiquity and during the Middle Ages, the term 'archaeology' was used only rarely, for knowledge was developing in other directions. Rather than being viewed as the origin of all things, *arche* was considered as a beginning of something. The more specialised the knowledge became, the more *arche* itself became specialised as a part of the process. Correspondingly, the amount of effort spent on explaining the beginnings decreased, as each individual discipline defined its field of interest. The importance of origins began to be perceived as formal, rather than real.

European civilisation accepted history not only as a science but above all as a way of understanding society. Although historical knowledge in the genealogical sense still survived, a different function of history became prominent: one which examined its own assumptions. So from this point it evolved with history as a discipline concerned simultaneously with understanding and influencing society itself.

In the Middle Ages the beginnings of our civilisation were specified through the Old Testament. There was no need, therefore, to study the origins of mankind independently, indeed, to do so would have been blasphemous. The only problem which was felt to merit a legitimate enquiry was that of connecting biblical events with the recorded history of the ancient world, and of seeking descent for specific feudal polities from noble families or nations of antiquity. Moreover, according to the Jewish calendar only five thousand years had passed since Creation, leaving no time for more ancient, prehistoric beginnings. Hence no need was felt, nor was there a chronological or philosophical framework, to accommodate even isolated discoveries about the world beyond the biblical paradigm.

Given this situation, the emergence of archaeological evidence capable of being examined and analysed was the decisive factor in the establishment of

the discipline. The process of enquiry then formed the basis of methodology, which installed archaeology at a level above mere speculation. In this, archaeology followed other disciplines which had established their data base earlier, such as botany or geology Thus, for instance, the whole system of classification of Montelius, which rendered scientific archaeology possible, amounts to no more than a modification of the approach through which palaeography qualified as a science.

The examination of the cathedral library in Verona, where a continuous library of manuscripts has been preserved since the fifth century, enabled S. Maffei in 1713 to establish palaeography as the science of the development of writing. Writing was an artefact of human culture and its changes created an evolutionary chain. One hundred and fifty years later, in establishing the evolution of prehistoric artefacts on the basis of their shape, O. A. Montelius applied a similar method to archaeology. In contrast to the former case, however, he was not guided by the comparative method, but by the Darwinian theory of evolution.

Stratigraphy and typological classification formed the means by which archaeological artefacts could be ordered in time. The interpretation of the chronological sequence, however, was the subject of ideas about evolution which have been carefully monitored by nearly all disciplines since the eighteenth century. Rather than developing their own concepts of evolution, scholars concerned with the remote past depended on, and provided supporting material for, approaches developed by other disciplines.

Within archaeology itself, remarkable regional differences developed in the application of concepts and theories. There were, and still are, entire national schools of archaeology which excelled in their collection of artefacts and compilation of data, but failed in theoretical applications. The theoretical and methodological advances in archaeology were achieved to a greater extent by prehistoric rather than protohistoric or historic archaeology. Similarly, it was the archaeologically impoverished North, rather than the richer South, which stimulated advances in archaeological method and theory. Flinders-Petrie, compelled to excavate difficult sites in the Egyptian Fayum, was forced to develop original and delicate methods, which those with rich and easily excavated sites at their disposal failed to attain.

Today archaeology is understood as a science investigating the past on the basis of material culture, such as artefacts, monuments and other remains. The emphasis is placed, therefore, on the nature of the material finds. From the beginning, the methodology of the discipline was built up by the selective adoption of methods and experiences from other disci-

plines. The conceptual framework of archaeology has developed in a similar way. Only today do we witness a deliberate and extensive methodological and theoretical reorganisation, the aim of which is to maintain pace with the general progress of science. Nevertheless, the investigation and retrospective assessment of the *arche* itself remains neglected.

Just as the history of individual nations would be incomprehensible without noting the historical events in the world at large, the history of archaeology cannot be understood without the history of science and knowledge. For the study of the discipline, therefore, the relations with other subjects and the general philosophical climate are as important as its specific methods and theories.

The fact that archaeology came into existence in the nineteenth century does not mean that the old approaches can be written off, or that they can be regarded as naive or worthless. On the contrary, reflective contemplation of the *arche* did not vanish, it merely received a new direction. In fact, it remains a constituent element of archaeology, in the same way as the investigation of finds. This is especially the case for the contemplation of the *arche* within different subjects (with implications for archaeology and for the investigation of past remains), and the examination of scientific methodology and theory in general; in other words, the analysis of one's own discipline's assumptions. Prehistory remains open not only for archaeology, but also for the *arche* of all other subjects and for scientific knowledge in general.

In focusing on the material phenomena, archaeology provides a general ground for the investigation of the *arche* not only by organising prehistoric events in time and space, but also by the continuous examination of artefacts, thus creating opportunities for their use in the testing of hypotheses. But where do the hypotheses come from?

The assumption that hypotheses depend solely on induction has long been discredited. Moreover, the difference between the formulation of a hypothesis and the deduction and testing of the results has often not been fully appreciated in archaeology, where the usual procedure is to adopt hypotheses from other disciplines, modify them to suit archaeological problems, and only then attempt solution. Once the structure of such hypotheses is accepted in archaeology, they soon come to be regarded as routine procedures. Another approach, common in archaeology, consists of the classification and seriation of finds. Here the rules defining types and typological series are given, albeit intuitively, and each concrete typology constitutes, in fact, a test of their validity. Today when we use cluster or

factor analysis, we are in fact testing the assumptions of the analyses themselves; for instance, the suitability of the coefficients of similarity employed.

Finally, hypotheses from such different sciences as sociology, social and cultural anthropology, folkloristic studies or psychology enter into archaeology because of their chronological dimension. For these disciplines, or, rather, their aspects related to the *arche*, archaeology remains a subject concerned with events for which there is no real evidence. This will probably never be otherwise. Of course, this in no way disqualifies them; it is a mere fact. After all, these sciences cannot do without their extrapolations into the past and in fact they play an important, active role in the development of their other aspects. Neither palaeopsychological hypotheses, nor hypotheses about primeval languages, have within their disciplines any testable indicators, but are verified only by their implications for the contemporary state of science and by logical consistency. As hypotheses, they are not developed on the basis of concrete knowledge of the past, but are constructed within the particular framework of their discipline's theory and methodology. They can, however, profit from the artefacts and the knowledge accumulated through archaeology, and, at the same time, provide tests for archaeological reconstructions of the past.

Contemplation of the *arche* as beginnings for which there is no evidence is in fact a sort of prediction backwards, the 'foretelling' of the past. When we consider the future of mankind, we usually begin with the contemporary state of affairs and with historical knowledge. From this information we then attempt to define the range of probabilities. The *arche* is explored in the same way. We can begin with the same assumptions, but proceed in the opposite direction. From this it is evident that our contemporary state and our understanding of it is the determining factor in our interpretation of the *arche*. Even if we managed to get rid of all contemporary views, we would still be left with the present-day methods of research. In this sense archaeology has always been and remains an extrapolation of the present into the past. The history of ideas about the *arche* is therefore the history of methods and ideas about the whole world.

2 The earliest history

Sed fugit, interea fugit irreparrbile tempus.
Ovid

A resolution

The purpose of the following summary is to illustrate how the individual disciplines formed their ideas about the *arche*, what results they achieved, and what methods they used. Only with this background in mind will it be possible to comprehend the position, the significance, as well as the evolution, of archaeology as an independent science, for archaeology is but one among several disciplines which deal with prehistory.

Examples from language, and folkloric expressions in particular, when they are taken to be the remnants of the past, can be used to illustrate the methodological similarities between these approaches and archaeology. Unless we wish to postulate, as in biology, some 'preformistic' theory of archaeological development, we must accept that these similarities stem from the general state of knowledge and from mutual influences.

The picture we may get will certainly not be comprehensive, if only because our task is complicated by the existence of many schools of thought, subjects and disciplines concerned with *arche* which interconnect and mutually influence each other. Moreover, the articulation of problems and research tasks does not always correspond with the accumulation of knowledge. Our account aims, therefore, at overall clarity of exposition rather than at reconstructing the strict chronological order of events. It is not by chance that we emphasise the initial phases in the exploration of the past, when archaeology as we comprehend it today did not exist. In so doing we can discuss the state of society which served as a model for the development of the discipline. It is during this formative period that we can isolate certain basic tenets of archaeology, which were subsequently obscured, yet remained influential. In a nutshell, we shall investigate how the theory and methodology of archaeology absorbed the changes in our ideas about prehistory, about society and about knowledge in general, how it evolved under the influence of the broader social and philosophical

context, and how it was modified by its own discoveries, and, in turn, how it functioned, itself, as a paradigm in social evolution.

The earliest forms of archaeology

Although the description of archaeology as 'speculation about empirical events for which there is no evidence' defined the scope of the discipline in antiquity, archaeology in fact became a marginal field of philosophy. Philosophy was intimately connected with myths, towards which it has adopted a critical approach: mythology came to be viewed as a model and as an opportunity for comparative investigation.

Initially, philosophy concentrated on the study of the origins of the universe, a subject which it shared with mythology. The origins, the formation and the working of the universe were at first only in part, but later in their entirety, explained as arising from their own existence. Consequently, the philosophers of antiquity aimed at describing the form and the rules of operation of the forces within the universe. Although explanation remained enveloped in the form of a tale, the emphasis shifted from mere narration to the definition of causalities.

As with myths, no need was felt to verify philosophical reasoning. No clear distinction was made between the possible and the real, nor was it necessary to demonstrate an immediate correspondence between reality and thought. Every proposition which was logical and was not contradictory, and which did not violate common sense, was held to be valid: words about that which persists, that which is constant and that which is elucidated by mind are persistent and ineradicable, states Plato. There was no mechanism for bringing hypotheses to test, however, nor was there an adequate amount of specific observations, supporting hypotheses or theories at a specific, rather than general, level. This meant that a gap emerged between general statements about the origin and the nature of the universe and empirical observations, a gap bridged only much later by specific scientific disciplines (the existence of which would not have been possible, of course, without the generalised hypotheses which render the universe a rational and harmonious phenomenon. This process is paralleled today in the development of new approaches, such as evolutionary theory or functionalism, which also create a gap, a void, which has to be filled.)

Myths were gradually being replaced by a whole range of ideas about the origins of the universe, man and society. Plato's philosophy, the philosophy of the new, detribalised human being, serves as a good example of the new approach. Plato examined the development of conceptual thinking, erecting at the same time a hierarchical framework of abstract concepts. The

essential validity of the mythological and concrete, cosmogonic model was not questioned by Plato. Consequently, towards the end of his life, he accepted the mythical view as the real aim of his investigations in the *Timaeus* and *Kritias*, dialogues which in fact constitute not only perfect archaeology but also perfect cosmogony.

Plato was searching for the natural, the eternal, the abstract and the general, which would form, at the same time, a certain basic substance, a substratum. These concepts are contrasted against the individual, the concrete, the diachronic and the derived. The whole scheme is brought into the present through generalisation, and it is also through synchrony that the differences between the general and the particular are emphasised. Change is consequently perceived as a progression from the general to the particular, and is thus endowed with meaning and direction. This is the first concrete philosophy of evolution. At the same time, however, it was felt that every particular time in the past could only have been composed of concrete events – this is the subject of *Timaeus*. This dialogue traces the rise of the original human society from primeval chaos, from the beginnings, through the development and actions of elements, 'demiurgy', heavenly bodies, plants and animals. In this it represents the earliest archaeology.

In antiquity, the general starting point of philosophical considerations was speculation about the natural. The natural and the *arche* were held to be similar and often overlapping. But the idea of what is natural can be meaningful only in relation to the unnatural. It can exist, therefore, only from the time when something is felt to be unnatural and usually also negative. These concepts, in turn, can be defined only at the level of society as a whole, especially if we are dealing with early societies.

The concept of the natural in antiquity was, however, very different from our own today. It was identified with the ideal, the norm, the state of accomplished perfection, which had existed in the past. Thus Hesiod speaks of the Golden Age at the beginning of human society, Diogenes of Sinope considers as unnatural everything except the existence of beasts and barbarians. The unnatural, being identified with evil, is then seen as a deviation from the natural state. Because of its presumed existence in the past, the natural state is connected with the *arche* or *principium*.

In considering the human condition and society in general, we can distinguish several interpretations of the natural, some of which are contradictory. In particular, the interpretation of the natural, based on some innate understanding of what is natural human behaviour, can be contrasted with the view stressing the existence of society and social control