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Archaeology yesterday and today

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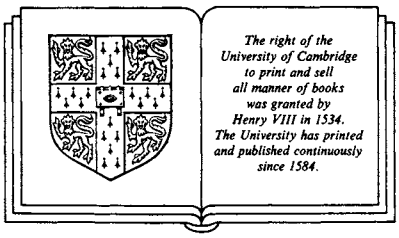
The development of archaeology in the sciences and humanities

JAROSLAV MALINA & ZDENĚK VAŠÍČEK

Translated and edited by Marek Zvelebil



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Foreword

by A. F. Harding

The appearance of a book on archaeological history and theory is today nothing unusual. Every year brings a considerable crop of these works, which the leading archaeological publishers in Britain and the United States have been promoting vigorously for some twenty years. It is a notable fact, however, that the vast majority of these works have been written by Americans, a few by British authors and other Anglophones (mainly edited conference volumes), and a few by those scholars from other countries who feel at home in the Anglo-Saxon world, notably the Scandinavians and the Dutch. There have been a few theoretical volumes in French (Gardin 1979, Courbin 1982, Gallay 1986), but apart from a long article by Manfred Eggert (1978) virtually nothing of book length in the main archaeological language of Central Europe, German. The socialist countries, especially Poland, have been more active in this field than is commonly realised in the West, but little of this has found a readership outside its homeland, a state of affairs for which problems of language are naturally much to blame. It comes as a great change, then, to see a theoretical book on archaeology by two Czech scholars, and in an English translation, though it would be wrong to imagine that this is the only theoretical work recently emanating from that country (see Neustupný 1983). *Archaeology Yesterday and Today* is, however, in many ways an unusual creation, even for its homeland, and a few words of explanation are in order.

The book falls into three quite distinct parts: the first, chapters 1 to 4, is a critical account of the development of the subject that we call archaeology from its perceived earliest beginnings in the works of the Greek philosophers up to the middle of the twentieth century. Chapter 5 is a discussion of more recent developments, from the last war up to the present, including trends of the sixties and seventies as represented by the work of 'New Archaeologists'. The third part, chapters 6–7, is a theoretical discussion of

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the intellectual and conceptual framework of archaeology, and though it draws on the work of many previous writers, is different in form and tone from most discussions of such matters that one can find today emanating from the Anglo-American sphere.

The authors' aim has been to write a new history of archaeology, and to combine it with an overview of the subject with which the baffled student can orientate himself. They believe this to be especially important at a time when 'Anglo-Saxon' (i.e. Anglo-American) and 'Continental' (i.e. European) archaeology know little about each other. They believe the work will point to a wider range of possibilities than most archaeologists currently recognise; will promote understanding between the various schools and factions of the subject; and set archaeology in the context of the wider scene of human intellectual endeavour.

Malina and Vašíček believe that archaeology's area of interest is represented by the gradual changes in human behaviour that arise unintentionally, unconsciously, even by chance when behaviour is reproduced. These are the changes typically seen in the development of artefacts and technological operations when they are tending towards a particular functional optimum; or changes typical for human behaviour over long spans of time (see the longue durée approach of the French Annalistes).

This concern with hypotheses stems from a desire to seek the specific forms of prehistoric development that influence the form and content of hypotheses: those of communication and organisation. They are also dependent on the form and nature of our picture of the past, i.e. they will differ according to whether we emphasise continuity or synchronicity, large or small spans of time, large or small spatial areas, and so on. In the authors' opinion, archaeology tries to create synthetic pictures of the past events, just as a description of artefacts is not a copy of them. An archaeological synthesis supposes a certain pattern to the whole, the description of which has its own rules that the archaeologist must be aware of, just as he must know the rules for describing artefacts.

Unlike many previous writers, Malina and Vašíček draw on a quite exceptionally wide field of human endeavour to support their discussion. The range of literature cited is enormous, and it comes from philosophy, history and historiography, sociology, anthropology, and the history of science. This makes the discussion quite different from that provided by most previous historians of archaeology, for example Karel Sklenář, a fellow Czech, who has provided us with a useful book (1983) summarising the main developments in the history of archaeology in Central Europe. The works of Glyn Daniel, which are more familiar to a British readership,

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point to many intellectual predecessors for the nineteenth-century scientists and investigators whom we now regard as the originators of the modern discipline of archaeology, but they are concerned with that ancestry as a matter of fact, of genealogy, of chronology. Malina and Vašíček, on the other hand, are concerned to point to broad trends of thought at particular periods of the past, not merely to detect the 'backward-looking curiosity' but to analyse it, to determine its cultural and intellectual milieu and its implications for the study of the past. This they have been able to achieve by encyclopedic reading, seemingly in all fields of the humanities and social sciences, in all the main European languages including Russian, and over a long period – the more remarkable when one considers the difficulties of obtaining access to books in the circumstances in which both Malina and Vašíček have found themselves over the last twenty years.

This means that the view of archaeology presented here is not the same as, or even very similar to, the prevailing perspective in the West. It is true that one would be hard put to tie a common label on all Western archaeologists, in an era of structural, processual, post-processual, neo-functionalist, and many other kinds of archaeologists. But the attitude to the raw data of archaeology tends to be similar between archaeologists of widely differing conceptual persuasions, so that a common concern with the potential of the data, of manipulation by various means, statistical or other, links us all, in the belief that while archaeological facts are artefacts, higher-order statements can only be made by the drawing of inferences. Many people do not realise that these perceptions are not widely shared in Central Europe. Let us leave aside the implications of practising archaeology in a Marxist state, where on the one hand archaeology is expected to be relevant to the daily concerns of the masses, and on the other it is expected to take into account those few indications that the founders of the Marxist canon provided for the proper orientation of the discipline. It is rather the widespread feeling that the aim of archaeology is to write a kind of history that is so striking, the belief that only differences of scale, or period, or detail separate archaeology from history, and that no worthwhile reconstruction of the past is possible unless it attempts to be history. Some of the main differences in these national schools of archaeology have been examined in a recent volume of *World Archaeology* (vol. 13, Nos. 2–3, 1981; see Trigger 1984b).

There have, of course, been criticisms of many aspects of the 'New Archaeology', some constructive, or at any rate formulated because the author's perspective was different (e.g. those by Ian Hodder); and some entirely destructive, reactionary and showing a complete lack of under-

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standing that archaeology even has a problem to overcome (e.g. Courbin 1982). The present account is critical in many respects, but it is written in such a disarmingly modest and readable way, free from jargon yet addressing itself to central theoretical problems of the discipline, that it hardly seems like criticism. Although the dramatic language utilised to describe the birth of New Archaeology, that of confrontation and war, is unaccustomed, one can appreciate how it might have seemed to dispassionate observers on the outside looking in. Would that more New Archaeologists were as self-critical, as frank in assessing their own intellectual leanings.

This book, however, does not pretend to comprise a complete résumé of all that New Archaeology has striven for. It draws on the work of New Archaeology only as far as is thought to be necessary to provide a picture of where it falls in intellectual terms. Its main areas of originality lie rather in its detailed work on classification and description, and in its assessment of the intellectual ancestry and present-day place of archaeology. It aims to treat all types of archaeology and archaeologist even-handedly; the contrasting pictures of archaeology in the USSR and the United States provide a striking example, and one which few, except perhaps Leo S. Klejn, could have adequately discussed. If it brings about a greater international understanding of and agreement on the nature of our discipline through this one thing alone, its authors will be happy; but it has the potential to strike chords in all sorts and conditions of archaeological practitioners.

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