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Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson
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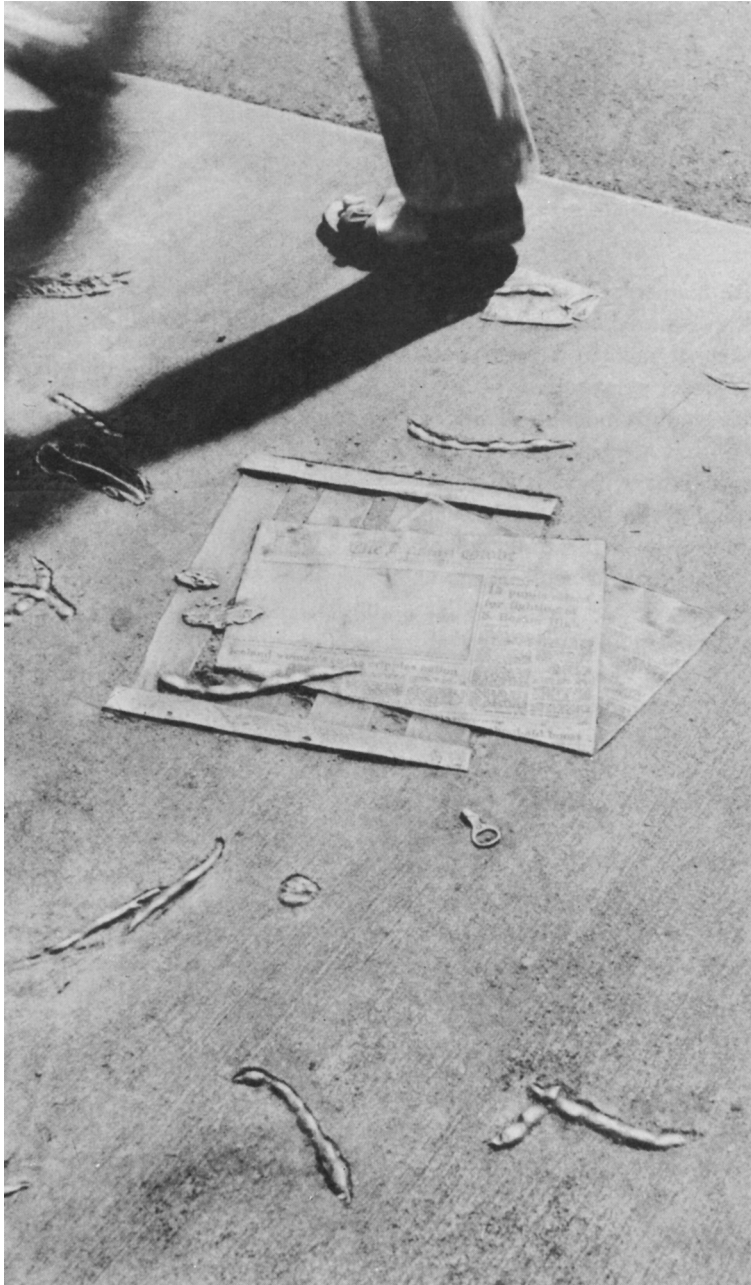
Reading the past

The third edition of this classic introduction to archaeological theory and method has been fully updated to address the burgeoning of theoretical debate throughout the discipline. Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson argue that archaeologists must bring to bear a variety of perspectives in the complex and uncertain task of constructing meaning from the past. While remaining centred on the importance of hermeneutics, agency and history, the authors explore cutting-edge developments in areas such as post-structuralism, neo-evolutionary theory and whole new branches of theory such as phenomenology. With the addition of two completely new chapters, the third edition of *Reading the Past* presents an authoritative, state-of-the-art analysis of contemporary archaeological theory. Also including new material on feminist archaeology, historical approaches such as cultural history, and theories of discourse and signs, this book represents essential reading for any student or scholar with an interest in the past.

Professor Ian Hodder is Dunlevie Family Professor in the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology at Stanford University, and a Fellow of the British Academy.

Scott Hutson is affiliated with the Archeological Research Facility, University of California, Berkeley.

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Reading the past

Current approaches to interpretation in archaeology

Third edition

Ian Hodder

and

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To Meg

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Preface to the first edition

In some ways I am surprised that a book of this nature, discussing widely varying theoretical approaches to the past, can be written. In an important article, David Clarke (1973) suggested that archaeology was losing its innocence because it was embracing, in the 1960s and 1970s, a rigorous scientific approach, with agreed sets of procedures, models and theories. The age of unreflecting speculation was over.

However, archaeologists have always claimed to be rigorously scientific. Indeed, I argued (Hodder 1981) that archaeology would remain immature as long as it refused to debate and experiment with a wide range of approaches to the past. In grasping positivism, functionalism, systems theory and so on, and setting itself against alternative perspectives, archaeology remained narrow and out-of-date in comparison with related disciplines.

But over recent years, alternatives have emerged, largely from the European scene (Renfrew 1982), and one can now talk of Marxist and structuralist archaeology, as well as of processual, positivist approaches. Certainly such alternatives existed before, on the fringe, but they did not constitute a distinctive approach with a body of practitioners. The older normative and culture-historical schools also continue to thrive today. While many of these developments, and the erosion of the old 'New Archaeology' debates, have far to go, archaeology is now beginning to lose its innocence and is gaining maturity by being fully integrated into wider contemporary debates. This book seeks to capture this new spirit of debate and to contribute to it from a particular point of view.

At the same time, it seems to me that far from becoming submerged within other disciplines, archaeology has, through the wider debate, become better able to define itself as a distinct and productive area of study. The debate picks out the differences from other disciplines as well as the similarities.

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Archaeology is neither 'historical' nor 'anthropological'. It is not even science or art. Archaeology's increasing maturity allows it to claim an independent personality with distinctive qualities to contribute.

Archaeology no longer has to be 'new' and unidirectional, presenting a unified front. It has the maturity to allow diversity, controversy and uncertainty. From catastrophe theory to sociobiology, it is all being applied to the archaeological past. But through this onslaught a more reasoned genre emerges, recapturing the old and redefining the new to form a distinctive archaeological enquiry.

It has become difficult for any one person to grasp the variety of approaches now present in the discipline, and this is my excuse for the inadequacies in my own account. In particular this difficulty contributes to the limited coverage given here of the approaches offered by ecology or palaeoeconomy. Ecological approaches are examined here in relation to systems theory in chapter 2, but for wider-ranging discussion the reader is advised to turn to the excellent accounts provided, for example, by Bailey (1983) and Butzer (1982). I have necessarily adopted a particular standpoint from which to view archaeology. This position is outlined in chapter 1, which concentrates on the nature of cultural meanings and on material culture as meaningfully constituted. Where ecological paradigms have contributed to this debate they have been discussed, but the majority of the work which might fall under that heading is outside the scope of this volume.

That this book is possible is due to the explanatory efforts of numerous researchers, some of whose work I have tried to capture and summarize here. I can only thank them for their inspiration and apologize in advance for any inadequacies of understanding on my part. The criticisms that I have made of their work will, I am sure, be returned in good measure.

While some of the ideas described in this volume were aired to a generation of Cambridge undergraduates, the text initially took form as the content of a graduate seminar course at the State University of New York, Binghamton, in the spring of 1984. The group of students and staff was lively,

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critical and keen to contribute. The text owes much to the members of the seminar. It was tried out on them and it took shape through their enthusiasm. I thank them, and particularly Meg, for the opportunity and the stimulation.

The final writing was possible while I was a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Paris 1–Sorbonne in 1985. The congenial environment and the critical comments of my friends and colleagues there were invaluable in the preparation of the final manuscript. In particular I wish to thank Serge Cleuziou, Anick Coudart, Jean-Paul Demoule, Mike Illett, Pierre Lemonnier and Alain Schnapp.

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Preface to the second edition

The first edition was written as a personal account in an uncertain world in which post-processual approaches had hardly had any impact. It represented my musings in the dark. Since that time there has been so much other publication (especially the books by Shanks and Tilley 1987a and b, Leone and Potter 1988, Gero and Conkey 1990, Tilley 1990a and b, Bapty and Yates 1990) and so much evaluation in relation to processual archaeology (e.g. the debate in *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 1989, Watson 1986, Earle and Preucel 1987, Preucel 1990) that the book needed to be brought up to date and my views tempered with the opinions presented in the literature.

The book still falls short of presenting a unified post-processual position since there are many diverging points of view now being expressed in theoretical archaeology. Initially post-processual archaeology was held together in the critique of processual approaches. This critique is now well established and post-processual archaeologists have turned more to the construction of the past. In doing so differences have become more stark but the discipline has been enlivened by the variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, the number of substantive post-processual interpretations of the past remains relatively small although several are about to appear (e.g. Hodder 1990a; Tilley 1990b). As more work is done so the differences and arguments will be brought into focus.

In the 1980s archaeology saw the gradual emergence of studies concerned with interpreting past cultural meanings in relation to such issues as power and domination, history and gender. In this move archaeology was taking part in wider changes in the humanities and social sciences. As Trigger (1989, p. 776) has noted, 'in anthropology and the other social sciences there has been during the 1980s a renewed appreciation of the complexity of behaviour and an increasing

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interest in the idiosyncratic, the particular, and the contingent'. Archaeology is involved in this new contextualism and such developments are likely to increase in the 1990s (Watson 1986). Yet we have not escaped the 'colossal, polyhyphenated, multi-systemic monsters' (Ingold 1986) which stalked the pages of processual archaeological writing. The attractions of a distanced, number-crunching method brought us first catastrophe and then chaos theories. Science-based funding of archaeology threatens to nudge archaeology not towards a fruitful integration with science (see chapter 9) but towards a narrow scientism. Nevertheless such trends are increasingly being countered by integration of science, humanism and critique, by a vibrancy and variety of theoretical position and by social engagement.

People have often asked me the meaning of the pictures on the front cover and frontispiece of this book. Perhaps it is best to leave the pictures open to multiple readings in the way described in chapter 8. But my own comments may serve to open up the meanings rather than to close them. I was attracted to the Mags Harries work partly for reasons described at the end of chapter 9, and partly for superficial reasons like the newspaper embedded in the pavement – a pun for 'reading the past'. Also, the scatter of artifacts, durable on the pavement, seemed an appropriate metaphor for an archaeology brought into the present and made active. But somehow it was the fleeting foot that was most evocative, like Magritte's feet which are set below a poster on the fence, amongst stones and dirt, but uncertain and in the process of transformation. The boots of the archaeologist, feet of clay, often appear bogged down in the reality of the past. Would that foot simply pass by leaving an empty trace or would the boots be filled with the person of the archaeologist and with the meaning of the past? It is my hope that the archaeology of the 1990s will grasp the issue of interpretation more fully and more critically, and this book is my contribution to that task.

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Preface to the third edition

In this second revision we have decided to make major changes, removing some chapters, adding new ones, and completely revising others. In reading through the text published in 1986 and revised with minor changes for the 1991 edition, it was clear that the book no longer adequately discussed the contemporary theoretical field in archaeology. There have been so many changes that we felt that substantial revisions were needed in a book which attempts to comment on theory in archaeology from a particular point of view. There has been a burgeoning in the discipline of discussions of post-structuralism, agency theory and neo-evolutionary theory, and whole new branches of theory such as phenomenology have emerged. It seemed necessary to cover and comment on these areas of debate, as well as to respond to the many changes and developments in debate within feminist archaeology (third-wave feminism), historical approaches (such as cultural history), theories of discourse and signs (semiotics, dialogical models) and so on. The book is now longer and covers more ground. It thus can still be used as an introduction to archaeological theory in general terms. But it retains a distinctive position, based on a commitment to meaning, agency and history, and it reviews the theoretical debates from that position.

The book has always catered to a rather hybrid audience and we have sought to rewrite so as to respond to a number of different interest groups. On the one hand, we have tried to write for undergraduates in archaeology and anthropology, and we believe that the book offers a still relatively short and understandable account at that level. We have also continued to provide a wide range of examples for students in different parts of the world. On the other hand, the book seeks to contribute to theoretical debate by arguing from a particular

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position, and it thus also talks to those directly engaged in theoretical research.

For the new cover illustration we have again turned to Magritte. *L'art de la conversation* seems full of ambiguity – it needs a careful reading and it can be read in various ways. Is the conversation between the two figures, or is it with the monument, Stonehenge-like, that hides words in its stones? Is the past, the words set in stone, to be read, and is reading like a conversation? The figures seem dwarfed and yet they stand there, trying to work it out. In this book we too have tried to work out how to make sense of the monuments and artifacts that survive from the enormity of the past. We have tried to contribute to the conversation.

We would like to thank Cambridge University Press for its continued belief in this book. Scott Hutson would like to acknowledge conversations with Byron Hamann, Arthur Joyce, Rosemary Joyce and Lisa Stevenson that have contributed to some of the perspectives in this third edition.