

CHAPTER I

Introduction: the place of historical archaeology

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Historical archaeology – a phrase used by archaeologists to describe the archaeology of the period from around AD 1500 up to and including the present – is unusual in its emergence as a new field of enquiry since the 1950s. This collection of contrasting chapters aims to capture the energy and diversity of contemporary anthropological historical archaeology, and to open up this material, which remains virtually unmentioned in conventional accounts of archaeological thought (e.g. Trigger 1990), to a wider archaeological and interdisciplinary readership. For some, the notion of ‘historical archaeology’ will appear tautological. Archaeology is often seen as the search for the remains of distant, prehistoric societies, or of Classical or Near Eastern civilisations. For others, the fact that archaeologists have neglected the most recent past – the periods studied most commonly by other disciplines, and from which massive quantities of materials survive – will appear perverse. Our commitment to this editorial project, however, derives from our understanding of archaeology as a contemporary project with a distinctive bundle of methods and practices, which works on the material remains of human societies from all periods.

The volume is offered as an open-minded and varied contribution to those interested in the role of material things in human social life, and in what survives from the recent past. We view the diversity of anthropological historical archaeology as a principal strength of the field, and therefore do not wish in an introduction to summarise the complex, sophisticated and sometimes contrasting arguments and approaches of our contributors. Instead, in this short introductory chapter we want to present some brief thoughts that have emerged during twelve months of editorial exchanges between the American east coast and the English west country. From this partial perspective, we consider how ‘the place of historical archaeology’ looks from here, underlining the creative and hybrid nature of this field

that freely crosses disciplinary boundaries and provides distinctive insights into the study of the material world.

A note on that phrase *historical archaeology* is a necessary starting point. It raises the field's potential location in interdisciplinary environments. Some archaeologists, among them John Moreland (2001), define historical archaeology by the presence of written documents in the society being investigated. This perspective draws upon a strong tradition of thought in archaeology and anthropology that has marked out literate societies, and especially those that write their own histories, as special subjects of enquiry. Thus, anthropologist Jack Goody has considered the importance of writing, first recorded in the urbanising societies of the second half of the fourth millennium BC in south-west Asia and Egypt (see Houston 2004: 1), as a material dimension of the human development of language and as a relatively uncommon phenomenon until the closing centuries of the second millennium AD. He observed how 'written cultures were' for most of the past 5000 years 'minority cultures' (Goody 2000: 134). Goody has argued that the presence of writing affected the whole of society regardless of whether all its members could write, changing senses of time and conceptions of temporality.

Separating out cultures with traditions of writing, especially of writing histories, as the subject matter of historical archaeology is problematic. As Laurie Wilkie (this volume) acknowledges, while the presence of documents offers unique opportunities for historical archaeologists, written sources represent simply another, albeit distinctive, form of material culture rather than a revolutionary change in the human past. In both literate and non-literate situations, oral traditions often produce deep senses of temporality, history and ways of recounting. As Eric Wolf (1982) observed, there is a political imperative to rejecting models of non-western or non-literate societies as being 'without history'. For many historical archaeologists, then, the presence of written documents does not define a special field of archaeological study. African historical archaeologists, for example, have long relied upon oral tradition and oral history as a key element in their study of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial African societies of the past 500 years (see e.g. DeCorse 1996; Schmidt 1978). Rather than claiming that historical archaeology is the study of 'people with history' (Little 1994), in this volume we use the term *historical* to refer broadly to the post-1500 period, strongly resisting any attempt to separate the field from the archaeology of earlier periods.

Of course, historical archaeology works on the material remains of situations from which no written records survive as often as it does at sites for which rich documentary sources exist. In all cases, historical archaeologists

bring an awareness of how much of daily life remains undocumented, unspoken, and yet is far from insignificant and often leaves material traces. Historical archaeologies are different from the work of our prehistorian colleagues only in the sheer diversity and quantities of materials that survive, and in the relative proximity of the material to the present: both of which bring distinctive opportunities rather than essential differences.

Concerns with the excess and temporal contiguity of the material remains of the recent past that we study in the present have often led to a certain nervousness over the status of the field (Hicks 2004). In the United Kingdom, this has been most visible in debates over terminology, where the alternative merits of the appellations *post-medieval archaeology*, *industrial archaeology*, *later historical archaeology*, etc. have been considered (e.g. Tarlow 1999a), in contrast with the term in international usage, 'historical archaeology', used in the present volume. Post-medieval archaeology has traditionally been defined as the archaeology of the period between c. AD 1450–1750, with later material being left to 'industrial archaeologists'. While many British 'post-medievalists' increasingly work beyond the mid-eighteenth century, this division is still visible in many places. Such terminologies derive in part from a definition of the period from the mid-eighteenth century in Europe as 'industrial society', but also from the fact that the material remains of industrial manufacturing sites have been a principal focus of archaeological interest in this period since the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile, debates over the relationships between 'medieval' and 'post-medieval' archaeology have also proceeded, especially in relation to models of an 'age of transition' (Gaimster and Stamper 1997). While such 'transition' is as much a product of contemporary institutional divisions as of any significant historical shifts (Courtney 1997), the archaeology of this neglected period is now receiving more attention – for instance through archaeological studies of the reformation (Gaimster and Gilchrist 2004).

Relationships between historical archaeology and the material remains of the most recent past have been approached in a number of contrasting ways. Some have aimed to bound off the field through 'cut-off' points, where archaeological attention must stop. For example, in his overview of 'the historical archaeology of Britain', Richard Newman argues that

The end of the Victorian Age makes much sense as a terminus. We are probably too close to the twentieth century's cultural detritus to be able to focus on the nature of its archaeology. Moreover, the development of the telegraph, the telephone, photography and, at the end of the nineteenth century, the internal combustion engine, all had profound effects on material culture and everyday life. (Newman 2001: 8)

Alternatively, in their edited volume *The Familiar Past? Archaeologies of Later Historical Britain*, Sarah Tarlow and Susie West seek to take up 'the challenge that American historical archaeology offers to British post-medieval archaeology' by producing 'theoretically informed and inclusive accounts of the recent past' (West 1999: 2). They argue that archaeologists mistakenly assume that they know and understand the recent past, and define a principal goal of contemporary historical archaeology as 'de-familiarising' the recent past (Tarlow 1999a: 264). However, here the 'familiar' past is limited to British material, and is actively distinguished from alternative traditions of historical archaeology, especially those developed in North America.

A third approach, and the one adopted in assembling and editing this volume, defines historical archaeology as a contemporary and creative practice, rather than trying to imagine recent pasts that are distanced, made unfamiliar, before being interpreted. By extending the limits of archaeology into the twentieth century (e.g. Buchli 1999; Schofield and Johnson this volume) and the contemporary world (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001a), historical archaeologists have been at the vanguard of archaeological contributions to the awareness of the contemporary nature of our work on material remains. In the reflexive study of the 'contemporary past' (Buchli 2002b; Buchli and Lucas 2001c; Lucas 2001; Olivier 2001), the contemporary dimensions of archaeological practice are emphasised, and any firm, linear narratives dividing 'history' from 'prehistory' are broken down (cf. Hodder 1999: 80–104). A scepticism towards models of the uniqueness of 'modernity' or of rupture from an archaic past emerges. By studying material culture to discern more complex situations – like others working to 'gather up dark, discarded scraps and peer into them' (Bennett 2001: 7) – historical archaeologists have developed approaches that problematise suggestions of a 'great divide' between premodern and modern, modern and contemporary, scholar and object (cf. Latour 1993: 10–12). Archaeologists no longer, as Bill Rathje has put it, have to wait until 'after the dust settles' (Rathje 2001: 67).

By underlining how they work in the present on what survives from the past, historical archaeologists are increasingly able to move beyond traditional arguments over the distinctive contribution of historical archaeology. In the United Kingdom, for instance, a focus upon objects and their production dominated 'post-medieval archaeology' into the 1990s, mainly because the individuals involved were often museum professionals or employed in urban rescue archaeologies. This led to sustained attempts to contribute material illustrations of normative economic histories. Thus, in his

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introduction to the major synthetic work in British post-medieval archaeology, David Crossley observed how

Without doubt, the economic history of the three centuries from 1450 is dominated by demographic recovery after the late-medieval epidemics, to which changes in agriculture, industry and trade as well as in individual wealth and status are related. The archaeological record provides ample material evidence for these developments. (Crossley 1990: 3)

While Crossley aimed to illustrate and supplement broad economic histories, in the United States historical archaeology's relationship with cultural anthropology led to an emphasis on cultural evolution, adaptation, cultural differentiation, shifting world views, and capitalism (e.g. Deetz 1977; Leone 1999; South 1977a). Attracted to the generalising traditions of modernist anthropology, which aimed to address what were seen as the 'big questions' about culture and culture change, historical archaeologists emphasised studies of global contexts. Trying to say something of broader use, such contributions to grand narratives in economic or social history, especially through 'archaeologies of capitalism', have primarily focused upon normative accounts of the recent past (e.g. Leone 1999). Through their interest in themes such as meaning, ideology and structure, in critical theory and structural Marxism, and in theorists such as Foucault, Bourdieu and Giddens, scholars associated with the 'Archaeology in Annapolis' project drew inspiration from the 'postprocessualism' of Ian Hodder, Daniel Miller, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (Shackel 2000b: 769). Meanwhile, a reciprocal process occurred, through which work of Annapolis archaeologists came to the attention of a new British audience (see e.g. M. Johnson 1996; Tarlow 1999b). The influence of the Annapolis school, especially through the work in the 1990s of Mark Leone and Charles Orser, has for some become 'so pervasive that many archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike have come to consider historical archaeology synonymous with the archaeology of capitalism' (Wilkie and Bartoy 2000: 748). The repercussions of this work will be felt by the reader in this volume's repeated punctuation by discussions of Annapolis.

However, alternatives to such normative accounts have developed across the field, and Marxist archaeologists (McGuire this volume) and some of those associated with Archaeology in Annapolis (Leone 2005; Matthews 2002; Palus 2005) have developed more nuanced studies of capitalism. Such shifts have been driven especially by the emergence of 'interpretive' historical archaeologies out of interpretive and critical anthropologies (Beaudry 1995, 1996; cf. Geertz 1973; Hymes 1972; Marcus and Fischer 1986;

Rabinow and Sullivan 1987), and the rejection of the ‘totalising’ approaches within processualism, structuralism and structural Marxism – rather than simply illustrating or supplementing other disciplines, as ‘handmaiden to history’ or sociocultural anthropology (Noël Hume 1964).

Interpretive historical archaeologists have focused upon the close relationships between people and things in the past, revealing ‘the intimate and unheralded details of day-to-day life’ (Beaudry 1996: 496) in a similar fashion to anthropological studies of consumption and material culture (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; J. Hoskins 1998; D. Miller 1987; see Cochran and Beaudry this volume). Such approaches are particularly visible in studies of households (King this volume; O’Keeffe and Yamin this volume), of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and of children (Gilchrist 2005; Wilkie 2003), in studies of the contingency of archaeological knowledge upon situated engagements with what material remains happen to survive (Hicks and Horning this volume; Holtorf and Williams this volume), or in studies that explore storytelling as an interpretive practice (Joyce this volume).

The power of such studies does not, however, simply derive from the imaginative and theoretically sophisticated work of interpretive scholars: it emerges from a bundle of distinctive archaeological attitudes, methods and practices in relation to materiality. As Barker and Majewski (this volume) point out, descriptive and typological work in ceramic studies continue to construct strong empirical foundations for broader interdisciplinary studies. Indeed, we suggest that it is this combination of interpretation and method, developed especially in this hybrid field that goes unmentioned in so many archaeological textbooks, that distinguishes the place of historical archaeology.

In many fields of the arts, humanities and social sciences, a refocusing upon the material dimensions of social life is taking place. Material things are increasingly discussed in cultural geography (P. Jackson 2000), visual studies (Edwards 2002: 69), social theory (Pels et al. 2002; cf. Latour 2000a), economics (Fine 2004: 337), or literary theory (B. Brown 2001), bringing, in the words of one historian, a ‘material turn’ (Joyce 2001, quoted by Spicksley 2003: 87). Contemporary artists like Cornelia Parker explore the transformations of material objects (J. Pollard 2004). Historical anthropologists revisit notions of fetishism and reification (Pels 1998), cultural geographers increasingly emphasise the importance of heterogenous materialities (Whatmore 2002), and increasing attention is paid to early work in science and technology studies which ‘underline[d] the importance of material elements’ (Latour and Woolgar 1979: 238), ‘material constraints’ (Star 1983: 206), or

‘the wide range of things’ (Zenzen and Restivo 1982: 457; see also Schleckler and Hirsch 2001: 82, note 11).

Often, these developments have involved the ‘appropriation’ of ethnographic practice by scholars working outside social anthropology (Strathern 2004: 554), or its extension in historical archaeology (Beaudry 1995). For many, the attraction of material and ethnographic approaches lies in their potential of simultaneously putting into practice a reflexive awareness of the situatedness of sociological knowledge (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Haraway 1991; Strathern 1991) while also moving beyond the post-structural concerns with ‘reading meaning’. Where an almost exclusive focus upon the immaterial and the ideational accompanied many incarnations of the ‘cultural turn’ of the 1980s, in historical archaeology critiques of an emphasis upon textual meaning have emerged (Buchli 1995; Graves-Brown 2000; Olsen 2003; cf. Boivin 2004). In what Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas have termed ‘critical empiricism’ (Buchli 1999: 11; Buchli 2002b: 133; Buchli and Lucas 2001d; Lucas 2001), historical archaeologists have aimed to bring together scientific method and interpretive practice. Unlike some fields of archaeology, in historical archaeology scientific, processual or ‘new’ archaeology has persisted alongside more interpretive approaches, which have developed since Geertz (1973), and especially since Hodder (1986). Rather than ‘two cultures’ – a materials-based science and an interpretive, theoretical field concerned with meaning – historical archaeology has, unusually perhaps, remained a hybrid field (cf. A. Jones 2002, 2004: 329). As such, and especially through its ‘unfolding’ into broader archaeologies of the contemporary past (Hicks 2003), historical archaeology is in a unique position to combine ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ concerns: folding together broader narratives (geographical or temporal) with rich and nuanced local stories, and exploring the permeabilities between human and material worlds.

We wish to conclude with a note on ‘companionship’. This volume has emerged from many conversations, excavations, conferences and friendships. We wanted to introduce the reader to the energy and richness of historical archaeology around the world, through a variety of themes that have been important in the emergence of the field. The overwhelming potentialities of archaeologies of the recent past have led us to underline, indeed to celebrate, the partiality of the snapshot presented here: presenting a series of coherent themes as essentially provisional and contestable. This is a volume of passionate and personal essays rather than contributions to ‘adequate archaeological theory’, or periodisation. Such an approach is a necessary response to the material complexities of the recent past, and the



Figure 1.1 Idris Khan's *Every . . . Bernd and Hilla Becher Gable Sided House* (2004)
(courtesy of Idris Khan and the Victoria Miro Gallery www.victoriamiro.com).

contemporary and political nature of archaeological practice. In editing *The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology*, then, we wanted to place 'companionship' at the heart of the volume. The term nicely combines *collegiality* with *journeying*. Collaboration lies at the heart of all archaeology; the collegiality developed through excavations, field trips and

post-excavation research in groups spills over into conferences and lecture theatres, teaching and administrative practices and communication and partnerships with non-archaeological groups of all kinds (cf. Finn and Henig 2001). At the same time, archaeology is always itinerant; it demands in the words of W. G. Hoskins, as Hicks and Horning (this volume) remind us, that we ‘look over hedges’. Through fieldwork, the archaeologist engages with materials and place in a distinctive manner – travelling to sites, excavating or surveying. As Thomas Yarrow has observed, in these processes the features and finds that are recorded or discovered ‘modify the thoughts and actions’ of the archaeologist (Yarrow 2003: 69; cf. Chadwick 2003; Edgeworth 2003). Our combination of collaboration with itinerancy brings creative iterations, as we repeatedly apply archaeological methods in new contexts. We want to illustrate our point with reference to the photographic practice of visual artist Idris Khan.

In his series ‘*Every . . .*’, Khan takes photographs of every image from a particular body of work, and combines them in a single photograph. He photographs every page of his father’s Koran, every stave from his mother’s copy of Frederick Chopin’s nocturnes for the piano and every William Turner postcard from Tate Britain. Most vividly, he photographs every gable-sided house, spherical-type gasholder and prison-type gasholder previously photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher in their documentation of European and American industrial buildings (Figure 1.1; Becher and Becher 2004). These layered images aim to encourage the viewer to spend ‘a long time unravelling . . . ambiguity and . . . authorship’ (Khan 2004). A part of their quality lies in the temporality of the process of photographing each image, developing, combining, and presenting. Most striking, though, is their vivid depiction of how adding up ‘every’ image results in quite the opposite of a neat, uniform depiction: the photographs instead are richly textured.

Similarly, historical archaeology’s repeated engagements, investing long periods of time in applying its methods in the contexts of households, industrial landscapes or its many other themes and places, result in complex and evocative stories, rather than neat, closed accounts of prime movers. We hope that this volume will inspire yet more open-minded, creative and collaborative explorations of the material remains of the recent past and to the place of historical archaeology.

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