

THEORY IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Summary

Concerns about theoretical issues have varied considerably during the history of archaeology, but have been particularly prominent during the past 50 years of Euro-American scholarship. Central issues have included whether archaeology has been, or should be, history or social science; whether humankind, past or present, can be investigated by the same means used in the natural sciences; whether archaeological interpretations can be expanded beyond narrow cultural history in which chronological and spatial distributions of material items are emphasized; whether archaeological inference should be significantly broadened, and if so how this can be done without severely eroding the empirical basis of archaeological knowledge; whether archaeology can be practiced in a socially responsible way, relevant to the general public in a world full of severe social and political problems; and whether unavoidably biased (by their individual characteristics of gender, economic status, class, educational background, etc.) contemporary archaeologists can ever know anything substantive and true about alien cultures now extinct.

There are no universally accepted answers to these questions, and in fact interest in them has varied with time and place, but there are discernible trends (sometimes resembling political movements) that have defined the shifting arena of theoretical debate through the past few decades. Concern about the essential nature of archaeology (as history or social science) and questions about appropriate methods for investigating the human past have been subsumed under broader issues about the place of archaeology in contemporary society. It is no longer possible for archaeologists to function within

insular scholarly worlds—they and their activities have been drawn into the larger and much more complex realm of activities associated with modern nation-states. These contain many groups that claim rights to the material and intellectual attributes of the archaeological record.

1. Introduction

Archaeology began as an object-oriented avocation and is still a discipline wherein empirical data are central. Nevertheless, archaeological practitioners have always been concerned to a greater or lesser degree with the various meanings potentially represented by the objects, features, and spatial distributions that make up the archaeological record. Issues of method (in the field and in the laboratory) as well as theory (concepts, models, and hypotheses to be addressed by archaeological research) are not routine but rather are quite actively debated. There is no explicit and universal consensus—nationally or internationally—about why and how to do archaeology. Traditionally, however, at least in Euro-American scholarship, there have been two major archaeological traditions: a humanistic, fine arts approach (Classical archaeology, Biblical archaeology); and a natural science, social science orientation (Paleolithic archaeology, prehistoric archaeology generally).

These two forms of archaeological scholarship are now less distinct than was the case previously, but significant differences in emphasis remain, one of these being the realm of theory. Classical archaeologist Stephen Dyson makes this point in an article comparing two major journals: *American Journal of Archaeology*, a well established mainstream outlet for Classical archaeology; and *American Antiquity*, a central journal for anthropological, prehistoric archaeology. He notes that during the 50 years since its inaugural 1935 issue, *American Antiquity* has devoted a large percentage of its pages to matters of archeological method and theory with somewhat lesser amounts of space given to excavation reports, accounts of various material culture categories, and to topics concerning relations between archaeology and society (site destruction, the antiquities market, archaeology and the public). For the *American Journal of Archaeology* he found only one theory article in the last 50 years, whereas epigraphy, iconography, and descriptions of material culture (including architecture) are robustly represented. As to society and archaeology, it appeared that the AJA had never published an article relating the problems of archaeology to those of society. In strong contrast to this state of affairs in classical archaeology, theory in archaeology has been an explicit and central concern for many Euro-American prehistorians during the past 50 years. The literature devoted to this topic is voluminous and extremely varied. It cannot be adequately summarized in an overview such as the present one, but major themes and trends can be described and discussed.

2. Fifty Years of Theory in Euro-American Archaeology: Historical Background

A convenient starting point for addressing current developments in thinking and writing about archaeological theory is the publication in 1948 of an influential volume entitled *A Study of Archeology* by the anthropologist and archaeologist Walter W. Taylor. Taylor was an experienced field and laboratory archaeologist, committed to a view of archaeology as a form of anthropology. That is, he conceived of prehistoric archaeology as an integral part of the general biological and cultural study of humankind from

origins to the present day. Taylor was dissatisfied with 1930s and 1940s archaeology because the field seemed to him to be much too narrowly focused upon chronology and geographic distributions of what were believed to be diagnostic artifacts and architectural features. Attention to the functions and intrinsic cultural meanings of these materials was almost completely lacking.

Because of the biting *ad hominem* style Taylor employed in his analysis, and because of his emphasis on constructing or reconstructing the cognitive worlds of ancient non-literate peoples (viewed at that time as a very tricky and virtually data-free procedure), his theoretical formulations were rejected or ignored by most of his colleagues in the Americas and in Europe. They were, however, taken up and partially incorporated in a later reform movement (in the 1960s and 1970s) impelled by another Americanist archaeologist, Lewis R. Binford. Binford is credited with founding an approach to the practice of prehistoric archaeology called “new archaeology” or “processual archaeology” that was internationally prominent for some 20 years, providing the basis for a great deal of contemporary archaeological method and theory, not only in the Americas, but also in much of the Old World.

As the ideas of Binford, his students, and younger colleagues were gaining currency in the United States, an influential young British archaeologist based at Cambridge University was also writing and speaking persuasively about methodological-theoretical innovations in prehistoric archaeology of the Old World. David Clarke’s *Analytical Archaeology* (stressing systems approaches and statistical modeling) appeared as Binford’s functionalist, paleoecological, paleoeconomic processual archaeology was attracting great attention in North America. These rapid transatlantic developments created a lively environment throughout the 1970s for discussions, disputes, and debates concerning archaeological theory. Tragically, David Clarke’s contributions were abruptly truncated by his sudden death in 1976, just as the first postprocessualist themes were beginning to be voiced. Those themes were quickly crystallized and vigorously advocated by a group of Cambridge University students and faculty initially led by Ian Hodder. Hodder had been persuaded of major deficiencies in the Clarian and Binfordian programs by his ethnoarchaeological research in East Africa during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and by his reading of contemporary European social theory. During the 1980s and 1990s, what came to be called postprocessual archaeology (also occasionally referred to as contextualist or interpretive archaeology) was central to discussions about archaeological theory. Some of the major issues highlighted by such discussions are indicated in the next section wherein old archaeology, new (processual) archaeology, and postprocessual archaeology are characterized and compared.

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Biographical Sketch

Patty Jo Watson is Edward Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor of Anthropology at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, USA. She earned both MA and Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Chicago, where she specialized in Near Eastern prehistory. She carried out archaeological fieldwork with Robert J. Braidwood's Oriental Institute expeditions to Iraq, Iran, and Turkey during the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, she undertook ethnoarchaeological research among Kurdish and Lakki agropastoralists in the Zagros Mountains of Iran (1959–1960). Watson helped direct archaeological research in west central New Mexico (1972–1973), and, since 1963, has directed the Cave Research Foundation's archaeological investigations in the Mammoth Cave System, Mammoth Cave National

Park, Kentucky. In addition, she is co-director of the Shell Mound Archaeological Project (1972–), also in west central Kentucky. Watson is a Fellow of the American Anthropological Association and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, as well as an Honorary Life Member of the National Speleological Society. She has been elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society. She was awarded the Society for American Archaeology's Fryxell Medal for interdisciplinary research in archaeology, and the Archaeological Institute of America's Gold Medal for distinguished archaeological achievement.

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