

THE HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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Most studies in the history of science ... have been 'internal' in their scope and objectives, plotting progress within the different branches of science as the frontiers of knowledge ... get pushed back by intellectual advance. The history of science is thus seen primarily as a record of progressive intellectual discovery at the hands of individual genius ... The 'internal' history of science, in its simpler manifestations, has also tended to emphasise the logical coherence of intellectual structure and the steady accretion of knowledge (if not a progressive revelation towards a latter-day absolute truth) over time. Such Whiggish, historicist tendencies in the historiography of science will be made more difficult to sustain as the growth of science is analysed within its historical context, philosophical no less than material.¹

It is, perhaps, a measure of the maturity of a discipline that its practitioners show an interest in their intellectual ancestry. In the Sciences such an interest is well established; the History and Philosophy of Science has become a major field of study and one capable of providing important insights into the nature of the scientific endeavour. In many of the Humanities, too, disciplinary history is accorded considerable importance and prestige. Archaeology, however, stands out as being rather less aware of its own history than might be desirable.

The reasons for this may not be hard to find. Archaeology is, after all, one of the younger academic subjects. Perhaps it simply has not reached that stage of maturity which permits of backward glances: the follies of youth are felt to be too recent for dispassionate contemplation. A more accurate diagnosis, however, might be that archaeologists do not yet feel themselves to be sufficiently well established to hazard a serious study of their ancestry. The Sciences have climbed high enough on the mountain of achievement to warrant a look over their shoulders at their starting place; but Archaeology still struggles on the lower slopes and there is no time nor reason to cast an eye back over the path until we have climbed a little higher.

If this image adequately portrayed the state of development of Archaeology then it would, indeed, be a powerful argument for the most peremptory consideration of the subject's history. Fortunately it is the product of self-deception. The problem is, ironically, one created by Archaeology's hazy perception of its past; and, unfortunately, History of Archaeology, in its traditional form, encourages that haziness by guaranteeing its own relegation to the side-lines of

research. Typically, Archaeology is viewed as a model of the progressive pushing back of the frontiers of knowledge by intellectual advance; the subject is seen to have developed almost as it were through some internal dynamic. This, at any rate, is the tenor of the standard texts and essays on the History of Archaeology (Daniel 1950; 1969; 1975) and one which is reinforced in the discipline's self-image. It is believed that Archaeology is still in the process of being born. Its past, then, is a catalogue of failures and errors, and of bankrupt lines of enquiry (Kendrick 1950). At best it offers warning lessons and a heart-warming chronicle of an ever progressing field of study (Renfrew 1974). A History of Archaeology which was concerned with this kind of disciplinary past would, quite rightly, be something of a luxury: an after-dinner pastime to be indulged in lightly or something to 'flesh out' the methodology training given to undergraduates. Indeed, on this account Archaeology is only now escaping into the realms of academic respectability and productive research: it is, thus, not surprising that History of Archaeology should be treated as the preserve of the intellectual dilettante.

But such an approach to the history of the discipline is both limiting and seriously inadequate. It may, quite validly, be castigated for being whiggish and overly teleological in orientation: it emerges from, and finds reinforcement in a scientistic conception of Archaeology in which disciplinary progress is accorded great importance and Progress is treated as a dynamic force in itself. Such a stance is likely to lead to a serious distortion of our understanding of the past for it encourages a one-sided analysis in which 'successful' ideas are effectively disassociated from 'unsuccessful' ones. In this way the discipline's history appears to recount the effortless emergence of Archaeology from the twin swamps of superstition and credulity. This is clearly an interested viewpoint and a questionable one; both 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' ideas -- in a teleological sense -- emerge within the same context and exert an influence upon each other. There is no a priori (though, on a whiggish account, adequate a posteriori) reason why any group of ideas should 'naturally' succeed or become accepted as 'valid', especially when those ideas deal not with the physical world but with an image of its past. An adequate historical account must, then, be capable of explaining their co-existence as well as the reasons behind the widespread adoption (and hence, with hindsight, 'success') of any particular idea. It simply cannot be assumed that ideas possess some inherent virtue which guarantees their long-term success -- that would amount to an insupportable tyranny of the present over the past. We must seek to comprehend how a complex of ideas emerges and why it attains, or does not attain currency and persistence.

The adoption of this position necessarily brings with it an appreciation that modern, scientific Archaeology is merely the latest episode in the history of studies of the past which make use of artefactual remains. Tudor Antiquarianism, for example, is not to be seen as failed Archaeology, nor indeed as simply a step on the

developmental road to Archaeology: it must be understood in its own terms and assessed within its historical context; antiquarians were not credulous idiots, even if we would judge them as such if they were alive today; they were on the whole highly intelligent men working within a very different environment from our own. The whole approach starts from the unashamedly relativistic view that we may not assume that we are 'better', more enlightened, or possessed of a more secure grasp of the past than our ancestors; rather it emphasises, to paraphrase Jacquetta Hawkes, that each age gets the past which it deserves. It aims, furthermore, to study that 'past' as an element within the total context of its time -- social, economic, political and intellectual -- and to discover why it took on its particular form.

This contrast between an historical approach which is contextual, that is, which gives equal weight to 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' intellectual developments by seeking to understand them in their own right within a particular historical context, and one which is whiggish has, moreover, already been discussed at length in the History and Philosophy of Science; in general the contextual approach has been favoured both by historians and scientists (see Fahnstock, this volume). The implications of this for the History of Archaeology should be obvious: if the Sciences, which have been the major proponents of a progressionist approach to disciplinary history, are now seeking a re-analysis of their development in terms of a contextual history then should not archaeologists seriously reconsider their approach to the history of their own subject?

There are, then, good reasons to suspect that the History of Archaeology which has been written up to now may, in some important senses, be inadequate; this is discussed at greater length elsewhere in the volume. However, this does not, of itself, suggest any pressing need for a re-analysis. Even if a contextual approach is advocated for future studies there still appears to be no particular reason to move this kind of historical work from its currently peripheral position to the forefront of archaeological research. Or is there?

I have already tried to suggest that Archaeology's disciplinary self-image, and its understanding of its past are, in some sense, mutually reinforcing. At an intuitive level it seems inherently likely that an archaeologist's conception of what it means to be an archaeologist (with all the accompanying implications for attitudes towards archaeological data, covert and overt theory building, decisions concerning research priorities, and so on) is, in large measure, linked to (one might say validated by) his or her consciousness of the subject's past. Hence, the way in which the History of Archaeology is presented and written will most probably have a considerable influence over the way in which Archaeology is actually practised, and vice versa. One only has to consider the debate over the last two decades concerning whether Archaeology is a Science or a Humanity, and the contrasting views which the two parties have taken of the discipline's developmental history, to appreciate the truth behind this. Yet if Archaeology's

perception of the past, and that of its own disciplinary history, are more or less closely interconnected then this has major implications for the role played by History of Archaeology in the subject's development. For it follows that as the discipline's self-image changes, so there will be a requirement sooner or later for a new disciplinary history; equally, a change in the discipline's view of its past will promote a re-evaluation of its self-image. The upshot of this is that disciplinary development necessarily involves a process of historical as well as methodological re-evaluation.

It is altogether ironic that the New Archaeology, which emphasised the necessity of critical self-examination through the explicit baring of assumptions, should have missed this point. The New Archaeologists argued that disciplinary evolution must stem from theoretical debate and self-analysis; but they seem to have been completely oblivious to the fact that such debate cannot take place, nor can it claim to be self-aware unless it takes into account the historical contingency of Archaeology itself. Attempting to lay bare the assumptions behind Archaeological thinking in an historical vacuum is a sublimely vain act: for those assumptions are historically conditioned. A truly self-critical Archaeology which fully recognises the weight of its history and attempts to carry out internal debate in the light of this is necessarily one which accords the same status to historical analysis and re-evaluation as it does to theoretical discussions; indeed, they are effectively inseparable.

It is this conception of History of Archaeology both as contextual history as well as an essential part of the subject's goal of self-analysis which has been termed "Critical Historiography";² and it is as a first (admittedly faltering) step towards a Critical Historiography of Archaeology that the papers in this volume have been assembled. They do not, as such, seek to present any unified approach though each one emphasises an aspect of the contextual/critical conception of history. Chamber's paper concentrates on delineating the intellectual context within which Romantic Antiquarianism developed in eighteenth century England, paying particular attention to the ideological tensions inherent within it and their potential for religious controversy. My own paper, by contrast, attempts to show how the development of Antiquarianism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was inextricably linked to the rise of the English gentry as an important part of the ideological basis from which their political actions emerged. Sørensen, in a very different vein, tackles the problem of the part which historical analysis should play in theoretical debate and disciplinary development by stressing the futile repetitiveness of ahistorically based self-criticism in Scandinavian archaeology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fahnestock's paper, like that of Chambers, aims to show the influence of the intellectual environment upon the development of Archaeology. She insists, too, on a contextual approach to historical analysis though in a slightly more restricted sense: that internal histories of Archaeology are incapable of explaining the subject's development and that this must be done in

relation to the wider intellectual environment. Finally, Girdwood presents an overview of the imaginative response to the past as witnessed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century English novel. This is a particularly fascinating line of research and one which has rarely been followed: to explore the image of antiquity prevalent outwith the confines of the discipline of Archaeology. Such material on the broader response to the past and its remains is essential if we are ever to arrive at a satisfying understanding of the history of our subject.

This introduction started out by asserting that the History of Archaeology written up to the present has been 'inadequate'; and, from a certain perspective, this is undoubtedly true. On the other hand, it would be unforgivably churlish not to acknowledge the debt which many of us owe to Professors Daniel and Piggott for their pioneering work on a much overlooked subject. Their scholarship does not date, and we have found their writings and lectures a constant source of inspiration. Without their contributions to the history of the discipline we could not even have contemplated a volume such as this; nor the prospect of writing our own 'inadequate' histories of archaeology.

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Notes:

1. Introduction to Mathias (1972), pp. vii-viii.
2. The idea of a 'Critical Historiography' of Archaeology emerged during discussions for a Symposium at the Fifth Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference held in Cardiff in December, 1983, and was used as the 'banner' under which earlier versions of some of the papers in this volume were delivered.

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