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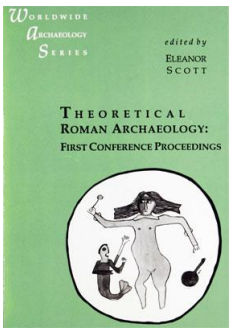

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FOREWORD

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: A COMMENTARY ON THEORETICAL ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Ian Hodder

Archaeology incorporates and attempts to integrate both sides of the science/humanities, anthropology/history divide. The division is perhaps most clearly expressed in the differences between prehistoric archaeology, which has increasingly attempted to use a philosophy modelled on the natural sciences and to be anthropological, and classical and medieval archaeology which may have embraced scientific techniques but which have been less happy to endorse a natural science epistemology. The division between prehistory and historical archaeology (Renfrew 1980) is also associated with differences in the scale and nature of theoretical debate. The emphasis on theoretical discussion in prehistoric archaeology is only recently becoming evident in historical archaeology.

It is certainly the case that the introduction of theoretical debate in Britain and North America is associated with processual archaeology. In contrast to empiricism according to which it is thought necessary to stay close to the facts, which will 'speak for themselves' if described in adequate detail, the positivism of processual archaeology recognises the theory-laden nature of 'facts', and tries to avoid bias by the separation of theory and data. Theory construction becomes self-conscious. The stage is thus set for theoretical debate in archaeology and for fora such as TAG (the annual Theoretical Archaeology Group conference). But this theoretical debate has been mainly associated with prehistoric archaeology, and not so much with Roman, classical or other branches of historical archaeology.

I would argue that if there is a culprit here it is the one- sided embracing of anthropology and science by Anglo-American archaeology in the 1960s

and 1970s. The embrace itself already had a morbid character at its inception, since anthropology and science as perceived by archaeologists were undergoing demise at that time. Archaeologists saw anthropology as generalising, cross-cultural and ahistorical, and they saw science as deductive positivism. But in fact anthropology was increasingly incorporating history (e.g. Said 1978, Sahlins 1981) while the critique of positivism was well underway (e.g. Kuhn 1970, Feyerabend 1975). Archaeology thus assumed an outmoded, law-and-order, non-reflexive, and ahistorical anthropology and adopted a disappearing, objective, universal and neutral science. The form of processual archaeology which resulted was thus difficult to integrate with historical archaeologies, which have always been committed to history and specific interpretation. So while theoretical discussion burgeoned in prehistoric archaeology, it remained slight in historical archaeology.

Processual archaeology of course has had its impact in historical archaeology, but theoretical discussion in historical archaeology has tended to increase only recently (e.g. Smith 1978, Burnham and Johnson 1979, Rahtz 1980, Greene 1986, Reece 1987, Hingley 1989, Millett 1990). This tardiness may be due to more than the ahistorical positivism of processual archaeology. It may also derive from the fact that classical and medieval archaeology are more closely tied to larger disciplinary frameworks (classics and history) than is prehistoric archaeology. The latter has, for institutional reasons, perhaps more room to manoeuvre than the disciplinary giants from which it has largely broken free. The smaller and more independent prehistoric archaeology can perhaps more easily incorporate and discuss new theoretical ideas.

Roman archaeologists may have been starved of substantial theoretical debate, but the papers in this volume show an enormous thirst for new ideas and a delight in the avenues that have recently been discovered. Despite Reece's (chapter 4) caution, most contributors seem to accept the need for theory and to be attracted by the new horizons that theoretical debate opens up in our interpretations of the past. Such debate need not involve moving very far beyond the bounds of classical scholarship as Simon Clarke's (chapter 6) reference to Moses Finley testifies. And very often much can be done by simply taking a fresh and critical look at the stereotypes which we have come to take for granted in our discussions of, for example, Roman technology (as Greene shows in chapter 5). At other times, the excitement and sense of freshness found in these papers derive from the application of theory from outside, as in Hunter-Mann's (chapter

7) use of a Marxist perspective to take a refreshing look at the old chestnut of the end of Roman Britain.

The rise of theoretical debate in historical archaeology, and conferences such as a Roman TAG, often show characteristics which might be termed post-processual (e.g. Carver 1990, Leone and Potter 1989, Johnson 1989). In fact, I would argue (Hodder 1992) that there has been so much movement and accommodation of each other's positions by both processual and post-processual archaeologists that it is no longer helpful to maintain the processual/post-processual distinction. Rather, archaeological theory is incorporating a diversity of debate which mirrors that in social theory more generally. One aspect of that debate which is of relevance for this volume, and for the growth of theory in Roman archaeology, is the distinction between explanation and interpretation. To some degree or other, all the authors in this volume are trying not only to explain but also to interpret.

The term 'explanation' has tended to be used in archaeology with reference to the search for causality. In addition, the causal relationships invoked in any particular case are expected to be instances of more general cross-cultural regularities. The variables leading to a particular outcome are thought to be universally identifiable. Thus, one might argue from this position that the French Revolution or the Roman invasion of Europe north of the Alps are to be explained by reference to cross-cultural knowledge about the factors that lead to revolutions and military invasions in general. The explanatory task is to identify the factors (population increase, economic disarray and so on) in the particular case which can be shown to be causal cross-culturally.

Interpretive positions tend to accept the value of such understanding but only as identifying certain necessary *conditions* for revolution or military invasion. But there are perhaps three further arms to an interpretation. The first is that the emphasis on causal variables is deemed to be inadequate because it does not allow for the intentionality of social agents. Population increase does not lead to the need for invasion on its own - thinking people are involved, monitoring population, determining the wisdom of invasion, competing for power and so on. In other words, variables do not affect variables in simple chains. Rather, the variables are monitored and evaluated by sentient agents. An adequate interpretation needs to take into account intentionality and meaning from the actors' points of view.

The second direction in which interpretation takes us is towards the notion that different people in society perceive and act on the world from different and often conflicting positions. This emphasis on situated

multivocality is also extended to archaeology itself. Different people read and write the past differently. Some alternative to an objective past studied by neutral scientists is needed, and various options have been suggested in the recent theoretical debate in archaeology. My own view (Hodder 1992) is that it is necessary to avoid an extreme relativism. The past is objectively patterned and this patterning contributes to our subjectively constituted understanding of it. We may all come to different interpretations, in both the past and the present, but our interpretations are informed and even transformed by the encounter with patterned data.

The third strand of an interpretive approach is that if we expect the first and second points, then there is always some uncertainty in the relationship between actor or analyst and the material world. We can never know with certainty how people will act or write since the act or the writing are themselves interpretations - they involve interpreting the relationship between the general and the particular. Acting or writing involve deciding whether a particular case is an example of a general relationship, deciding whether other people understand the case in similar ways, trying to decode the intention behind the act and so on. There is always a creative and uncertain moment in any act of interpretation, and some degree of judgement is always involved.

Aspects of these three points are evident in all the chapters in this volume, indicating the commitment to interpretation as opposed to explanation, as befits a branch of archaeology closely allied with history. For example, Rippengal (chapter 8) makes use of Bourdieu's theory of action to suggest new ways of looking at villa spatial organisation. He argues that villa space was actively used by social divisions. Alcock (chapter 13) suggests that the geography of cult was actively manipulated in Greece to serve the interests of Roman imperial power. S. Scott (chapter 9) recognises that different people come to different interpretations, and in her consideration of mosaics argues for an approach that includes the viewpoint of the interpreter, situated within an active social context.

If these papers show the need to consider intentional human agents in the past, they also acknowledge that we need to be critical of the way our interpretations are situated in the present. Perhaps particularly in classical scholarship there is a need to battle against certain entrenched images and against the assumptions which underlie them. As Scott implies (chapters 1 and 2) a discourse has grown up about what can be said about Roman archaeology (military campaigns, politics, villas etc.) and what cannot. But now the unspoken, such as issues of gender, resistance and ideology are

being increasingly debated. Hingley (chapter 3) argues that we need to criticise the benign 'civilising' view of the Roman empire which itself derives from the model of the British empire. It may even be the case that if we follow the line taken by Hunter-Mann (chapter 7) the very notion of a 'Roman period' in a 'Roman Britain' may come under scrutiny. Perhaps even the appellation 'Roman' is not 'politically correct' and we should more properly focus on the challenges provided to those living in Britain under imperial rule. The term 'Roman' would have had different meanings to different groups involved. The term should not automatically imply subordination to a greater 'civilising' power.

But perhaps the clearest message from the papers in this volume is that we need not fight shy of specific historical interpretation. An adequate account is one that uses generalisation, but creatively in the understanding of a particular case. To use Eleanor Scott's terminology (chapter 2) we should not simply 'download' the general theory of prehistoric archaeology onto Roman archaeology. The papers in this volume show ample evidence of a sensitivity to the specific nature of 'Roman' historical problems. Even van Dommelen (chapter 14) who uses a processualist method to characterise Roman rural settlement in Italy, accepts the need to conduct detailed contextual study in order to understand the specific socio-economic organisation involving slaves and peasants. Clarke (chapter 6) uses general theory about types of of urbanism to make a specific interpretation of the difference between *civitas* capitals and the more commercial walled small towns. Poulton and Scott (chapter 10) use a contextual approach to argue that the specific meanings associated with the use and deposition of pewter were ritual in nature. Dark (chapter 11) attempts to understand Romano-British re-use of prehistoric monuments in specifically Romano-British terms, although he uses general theory well in arguing that the continuity of use does not imply a continuity in religion but rather a superstition linked to burial.

In summary, I would argue that these papers, invigorating in their freshness of approach and in their thirst for new ideas and perspectives, are also mature in that they accept the need to go beyond explanation to interpretation. They are not afraid to link the study of the general to an understanding of the specific. They are not afraid to use the contextual richness and the historical specifity of their data to contribute to wider debates. They accept that material culture is actively and meaningfully constituted and that our interpretations in the present are open for critical evaluation and re-interpretation by different interest groups.

Indeed, a theoretically informed debate in Roman archaeology can only contribute to an understanding of how to interpret in other branches of archaeology, and in particular in prehistoric archaeology. Within anthropological archaeology it became common practice to 'test' theories in ethnographic contexts. Ethnoarchaeology was the handmaiden of processual archaeology. But the timeless 'snap-shot' provided by most ethnography seems less relevant in an archaeology committed to historical and contextual depth. Within the current debate in archaeology it is history and historical archaeology which become more appropriate handmaidens. It is only an historical context which can contribute to prehistoric archaeology's demand for the 'testing' of theories about agency, the negotiation of contested meanings, the relationship between the general and the historically specific.

I have so far painted a rosy picture in which Roman archaeology is opened up by vigorous theoretical discussion and begins to be a source for interpretive solutions for other parts of the discipline which deal with less complete information. As all of archaeology becomes more accepting of history and of the critique of positivism, the divide between prehistoric and historic archaeology can begin to be bridged. The papers in this volume contribute to this bridging process as they debate theory which transcends parochial interests and provides a common currency within archaeological and social theory discussion.

But there may need to be some caution in the slide towards extensive theoretical debate. While theoretical debate may help the bridging of the divide, its very generality takes us away from the data. This is in many ways a productive move, leading to broader perspectives. But there is a danger that so much emphasis is placed on theory, and the theory is so cut free from data, that theory becomes dogma. We would be back then with entrenched and blinkered scholarship tied to a politics of the present. Indeed recent formulations of archaeological theory see the data only as 'networks of resistances' (Shanks and Tilley 1987). The data simply resist while all the action comes from theory. Within this view, archaeological data cannot play an active role in the present. The data simply resist our vested interests and we do not come to a new understanding of ourselves in the interpretation of data.

I would argue, on the other hand, that the objectively patterned archaeological remains, as uncovered by archaeologists, provide an experience of the world from which we can learn and in which we transform our expectations. But this learning process is only possible in the contextualising of

theory in data – that is in the process of interpreting the general in relation to the particular. Pure theoretical discussion or the imposition of preformed theory on a scarcely resisting data may initially appear to open horizons for Roman archaeology. But in the longer run, theoretical discussion can itself become closed, leading to entrenched positions and narrow vistas. The potential dogmatism of theory needs to be confronted with the experience of other worlds, theory needs to be sensitive to particularity and to practice, explanation needs to be extended to include interpretation, scientific anthropology to be allied with the understanding of history.

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