ARCHEOLOGIA MEDIEVALE

CULTURA MATERIALE INSEDIAMENTI TERRITORIO

IX

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### SUMMARIES

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Archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing, to paraphrase Willey and Phillips. This has been the philosophy of the so-called «New Archaeology» and it has inspired some impressive new directions in archaeological method and theory. Archaeology, to define it another way, is the past tense of anthropology: its power lies in its time-depth in which processes in the past can be observed at a number of points. Some anthropologists, however, would accept that archaeology has time-depth but it can never reveal the institutional infra-structures of past societies and thus it can only make a superficial contribution to the documenting of long-run processes. Historians have often made the same criticism of archaeology and so they regard it simply as the study of cultural history divorced from the political elements that were evidently significant in the formation of the historic periods. Yet modern archaeologists have been confronting this issue in a purposeful attempt to employ archaeological methods to reconstruct all aspects of the past. In the end the debate focusses upon whether or not archaeology is a useful and scientific means to determine the nature of social and economic change; and whether it has the means to describe and determine political change. In short, can we talk of «political archaeology»?

Nowhere is the conflict about the purpose and value of archaeology more charged than in the field of medieval archaeology. Archaeological debates with historians have left the subject in a «no man’s land». It is regarded as the illegitimate offspring of Prehistory and History and consequently it receives all the polite but disdainful comments that one might expect for a child of this kind. Prehistorians on one side regard medieval archaeology as a bastardisation of what many see as a subject in which theories are compared and perfected rather than proven. Bruce Trigger cogently defines their views in his essays on Archaeology and History. In effect, these are: everything is written down already why should we need archaeology in the medieval period? and, historians only describe past events they do not attempt to employ any scientific explanatory models. Trigger asserts that these views of History by prehistorians are erroneous but they explain the prehistorian’s rela-

tionship with the medieval archaeologist. On the other side, historians have con-
vinced most archaeologists of the historic periods that they are the lackeys of « His-
tory ». Indeed, the image of the medieval archaeologist as an anthropologist is
beyond the conception of most medieval archaeologists and historians. Conse-
quently, medieval archaeology has scarcely developed as a discipline of intelligent
and scientific enquiry: it has remained on the fringe while its empirical pursuits are
at the heart of almost all state archaeological work in western Europe. To counter-
balance this feeling of isolation medieval archaeologists have divided and sub-
divided their interests to such an extent that the subject resembles a number of
masonic lodges carrying out furtive investigations of mere facets of medieval so-
ciety. The dynamic infusion of the « New Archaeology » as a result has yet to strike
the slumbering strongholds of documentary history. But it will.

In this essay I wish to review the concepts which form the bases of the « New
Archaeology » and to briefly indicate why they are appropriate to medieval ar-
chaeology. The first part of the paper will only be a superficial attempt to present
the range of contemporary research towards a science of material culture. Howev-
er, I shall outline in detail one aspect of this research which I believe to be espe-
cially apposite for medieval archaeology. This is the question of spatial analyses and
their relations to political entities in different economic contexts. In the second part
of the paper I shall outline the methodology needed to investigate regional archaeo-
logy, and I shall focus upon the three levels of aggregation defined by David L.
Clarke: macro, semi-micro and micro. Then, in the last part of the paper I shall at-
tempt to show how systematic analyses using these theoretical frameworks enables
us to take an alternative approach to medieval history, and how it can provide an
explanation for social and economic change in complex societies (either in anthro-
pological or archaeological contexts). In essence, if medieval archaeology was ap-
proached from a systematic anthropological perspective rather than an historical
one it would be much more central to the major debates in archaeology and history
generally. In many cases, as I shall attempt to show, the combination of archaeolo-
gy and history illuminates the dynamics of change in a form that many
prehistorians and historians prefer not to recognise. As a result the important role
of medieval archaeology in medieval studies and archaeological theory cannot be so
lightly dismissed as it has been in the past.

1. The loss of innocence: archaeological theory and method

David Clarke described the transition towards scientific archaeology as a loss
of innocence 5. Unfortunately, the early papers written by the « new archaeolo-

Method and theory

gists» were presented in incomprehensible jargon and consequently their philosophy has diffused rather slowly. Nonetheless, the works of Lewis Binford and David Clarke in the 1960's laid the foundations for a more approachable discussion of archaeological theory and method in the past decade. Just like the historians of the Annales school in Paris thirty years ago, the new archaeologists have made use of models and procedures employed in related disciplines like anthropology, biology, botany, ecology and geography to formulate not only how things happened in the past but why they happened. To achieve objectives of this kind archaeology has had to become a disciplined discipline, and to search for a scheme of systematic and ordered study built on defined models and rules of procedure. But this loss of innocence readily transcends the limited theoretical and methodological innovations of the Annales' historians, while it has led to very few studies of any substance. For these reasons the revolution has been slow to alter what amount to antiquarian attitudes, and these, as Stanley South has recently pointed out, are especially entrenched in historical archaeology.

These innovations take three forms, two of which concern us in this context. First, there is what has been termed « general theory » — essentially the question of explaining human behaviour. General theory inevitably determines any perspective of the past, but it can not be the monopoly of Archaeology. Indeed, the theories that are of concern to Archaeology have also been under scrutiny in allied disciplines where it is possible to test the concepts more satisfactorily. Archaeology, in other words, has not « invented » any new theory or theories about the past. Its principle problem, however, has been the translation of material remains into processes that in turn can be used to test general theories. Often, in the early years of the New Archaeology, data without any systematic character was employed to test major theories, when the same data might have been used to test any number of concepts. As a result, Lewis Binford has promoted the study of « middle-range theory ». At the same time Michael Schiffer has promoted the need to study formation processes in the archaeological record so that we might understand the data base more scientifically. These steps, as I see it, are the first ones in the direction of a science of material culture. Thus, in the following sections very little attention will be paid to general theory, while more attention will be given to middle-range theory. Finally, the methodology of archaeology has been scrutinised so that there exists the systematic means of investigating material remains. This has involved the

7 CLARKE (1978), XV.
construction of research designs, the formulation of regional, intrasite strategies and the standardising of retrieval practises. New excavation procedures including systematic recording techniques are only a facet, or should be, of the new methodology. I shall, therefore, examine each of these innovations in more detail, although this section can be regarded as little more than a sketch in view of the immense literature concerned with archaeological theory and method.

**General theory.** The general theories adopted by archaeologists relate to all the disciplines involved with studying human behaviour. Their use in prehistory and the use of archaeological data as opposed to anthropological data, for example, are the only factors giving these theories an archaeological dimension. In some cases, however, human behaviour can only be studied using archaeological evidence, either because the aspects in question have not occurred in modern times or because a long period of time is needed to investigate the particular theoretical issue. Colin Renfrew has recently summarised the general theories to which modern archaeologists subscribe 10. These are as follows:

1. The historical paradigm with its inclination to particularise rather than to generalise.
2. The hypothetico-deductive paradigm with its emphasis upon seeking explanations for classes of events, while its aim is to seek laws of human behaviour 11.
3. The systemic model of societies drawn from cybernetics which emphasises the importance of processes and the occurrence of internally as well as externally instigated transformation 12.
5. The structuralist paradigm which attempts to demonstrate correspondences within frameworks of thought 14.

Each is a matter of enormous debate and several of these intersect so that we find a Marxist historical paradigm such as that espoused by Andrea Carandini 15, or

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15 Carandini, *op. cit.* (n. 13).
a Marxist structuralist paradigm as suggested by members of Cambridge University in the past few years. For our purposes these are separate from the formulations of a science of material culture although these theories determine the approach we take to the information arising from the archaeological record.

**Middle-range theory.** Binford formally introduced the term middle-range theory to archaeology from sociology. He regards this kind of theory as a way of understanding the determinants of the archaeological record to learn about the past. He has written that « what we are seeking through middle-range research are accurate means of identification, and good instruments for measuring specified properties of past cultural systems... We are seeking to build a paradigmatic frame of reference for giving meaning to selected characteristics of the archaeological record through a theoretically grounded body of research... » But while Binford believes that middle-range theory must be tested primarily with documented or living systems, Michael Schiffer has made a plea for the study of the classes of archaeological formation processes as well as the study of analogous systems. Both have become sensitive to anthropological criticism which maintains that archaeologists are merely trying to match notional units with those which contemporary ethnographers tell us exist. Binford, however, limits his definition of what might be termed operational theory to the following: « middle-range theory must be conducted with documented living systems (ethnoarchaeology) or ones in which the relevant dynamics have been recorded (historical archaeology), or where the relevant dynamics may be replicated (experimental archaeology). Schiffer's stance on this matter is not so restricted and this may reflect Binford's primary interest in hunter-gatherer societies while Schiffer has taken a broader perspective. Even so the behavioural analysis revealed by Schiffer's study of formation processes common to archaeological data often comes close to being obvious. His research so far marks a positive step in the direction of using classes of archaeological information to understand the processes determining the evidence we excavate or discover. This is not to disparage Binford's definition. He has carried out some highly original and imaginative ethnoarchaeological research pertaining to hunter-gatherer societies. He has also encouraged historical archaeology but here one feels the absence of any understanding of complex societies. In particular, Binford's protege, Stanley South, has concentrated

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17 Binford (1977) *op. cit.* (n. 9).
19 Schiffer, *op. cit.*, (n. 9).
21 Binford (1981), 32.
upon the discovery of formation patterns within colonial forts while the historical
and broader anthropological dimensions appear to have been relegated from the re-
search 22. Experimental archaeology ranging from William Rathje’s Tucson Gar-
bage Project to the well-developed European work on buildings, pits and kilns, in
particular, has always proved useful. Yet only Rathje’s quasi-anthropology actually
permits us to comprehend social and economic processes; but the case of modern
Tucson is scarcely an incisive analogy for most archaeological contexts 23. Middle-
range theory requires a further dimension to give life to the particular archaeologi-
cal contexts so that site formation indices become part of a community formation
process and so on. It is only when we discuss communities that archaeology be-
comes anthropology.

This brings us to the work of the late David Clarke whose book, Analytical
Archaeology, approached the issues of archaeological theory and method from a
different perspective to that offered by Americans in anthropology departments.
Clarke’s analyses emanate from the British interest in spatial patterning and the re-
 regularities and constraints which cause them. In many respects his work echoes a
keen interest in the new geography as well as anthropology, yet his approach to ar-
chaeology was also conditioned by the Cambridge tradition of prehistoric archaeo-
logy 24. Thus, Analytical Archaeology gives a great deal of attention to the patterning
of artifacts and sites. He appreciated that the processes responsible for these pat-
terns were the fundamental theoretical concern for archaeology. His approach to
what has been subsequently termed middle-range theory was described by him as
spatial archaeology. He defines this in inimitable fashion in the posthumously pub-
lished edited essays which were entitled Spatial Archaeology: « the retrieval of infor-
mation from archaeological spatial relationships and the study of the spatial conse-
quences of former hominid activity patterns within and between features and struc-
tures and their articulation within sites, site systems, and their environments: the
study of the flow and integration of activities within and between structures, sites
and resource spaces from micro to the semi-micro and macro scales of aggregation.
Spatial archaeology deals, therefore, with human activities at every scale, the traces
and artifacts left by them, the physical infrastructure which accommodated them, the
environments that they impinged upon and the interaction between all these
aspects. Spatial archaeology deals with a set of elements and relationships 25.

Clarke show that the bases of spatial archaeology lie in geography. There are

22 SOUTH, op. cit. (n. 8).
23 WILLIAM L. RATHJE, Archaeological ethnography... because sometimes it is better to give than to recei-
24 CLARKE (1978); cf. TRIGGER, op. cit., 9, 13-14, (n. 4).
25 DAVID L. CLARKE, Spatial information in Archaeology, in DAVID L. CLARKE (ed.), Spatial Ar-
three models which have been modified by archaeologists for their purposes. First, Von Thunen's model of the relationships between the spatial distribution of activities and land-use around a centre, and the law of diminishing returns with distance. Von Thunen's model was published in 1826 in *Der isolierte Staat* but it has recently been used by many archaeologists when it has been termed «site catchment analysis» 26. The second spatial theory used by archaeologists is Alfred Weber's model postulating that some sites are selected to minimise unnecessary movement; sites represent minimum energy and least-cost locations. This has been employed to explain hunter-gatherer strategies 27. Thirdly, there is Walter Christaller's central-place theory which attempts to define an optimal, least-cost organisational structure within a network of related sites. Christaller showed that the sites in the network are likely to adopt a hexagonal territorial tessellation of space which may be altered by shifting the orientation of the hexagonal net, the size of each territory, and the number and variety of sites served by each central place. This model has found great favour amongst the new archaeologists but, like Von Thunen's and Weber's, Christaller's theory is primarily concerned with analysing spatial relationships in industrial societies 28. There are certain assumptions common to these models which may or may not be appropriate to pre-industrial agrarian societies. Hence, I would contend that we need spatial models concerned with articulating the relationship between the micro, semi-micro and macro levels of aggregation. These models must be based on assumptions appropriate to the contexts most archaeologists are presently concerned with, and we must be able to use them as a form of mid-range theory to test general theories of human behaviour. Clarke acknowledges that the optimum solution is to construct such models from anthropology or from within archaeology itself.

**Carol A. Smith's typology of exchange systems.** In a seminal essay entitled «Exchange systems and the spatial distribution of elites: The organisation of stratification in agrarian societies» Carol A. Smith has proposed an alternative approach to the study of peasant societies. The approach might be termed anthropological geography and as such it is extremely relevant to archaeologists. Its weakness, as I shall indicate, is that the five models presented by Smith are static and there is an absence of explanatory hypotheses proposing the evolution from one model to the next. Here, I believe, historical archaeology can prove of great significance. Thus, I shall begin by outlining Smith's typology, then I shall explain its importance for the

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27 Described by Clarke (1977), 22-23.