Special Section

Time and Change in Archaeological Interpretation

edited by John Robb & Timothy Pauketat

Introduction

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Time and change have been among the most widely discussed themes in archaeological theory, though they have varying fortunes in the vicissitudes of academic life. British and American anthropology, it has been observed, have long oscillated between history and evolution, between studying culture in its local context and in a long-term narrative. Following Steward and White rather than Kroeber and Boas, the New Archaeology's banner was evolution, and many of its theoretical goals were explicitly reductionist, for example, in viewing human actions as a local response to large-scale environmental conditions. Yet, at the same time, from its inception the New Archaeology also contained the seeds of a humanistic, historical approach (for instance, in tracing social stratification to chiefly power strategies to local, short-term political contexts).

The post-processual critique, ironically, problematized time at the cost of neglecting change. The initial, devastating critique of scientific, chronometric time (Shanks & Tilley 1987) was rapidly followed by several eloquent theorizations of experiential time (Gosden 1994; Thomas 1996; Tilley 1994). Yet in these phenomenological accounts, the scale of time remains firmly rooted in the ethnographic scale of analysis; even works which explicitly considered scales of time (Bradley 1991; Harding 2005) have treated temporal scale as an aspect of human cosmological understanding rather than as an archaeological framework for explanation. Moreover, post-processual archaeology was often explicitly hostile to 'grand narratives' of the spread of the Neolithic, the secondary products revolution, and other changes, preferring local interpretations. This persuasive critique was based upon the clear historical links between many large-scale narratives and contemporary social orders (for instance, between evolutionism and colonialism), on a rejection of the simple functionalism which characterizes many big-picture approaches, and upon an insistence that material culture and identity are locally created.

Discussions of time and change in recent archaeological work have focused principally upon four themes. Writers such as Lucas (2005) have highlighted the concept of time as an archaeological construction, a structure of archaeological thought used in creating a specific view of the past. Secondly, Bradley (1998) and others have asked how people in past societies understood their place within cosmological and social histories, often through the concepts of ancestors and identity.

Two further themes address questions of historical reproduction of societies and scale. Claiming origin from Marx & Engels's (1963) dictum that 'men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing', and based upon practice theorists such as Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1984), and Sahlins (1981), theorists such as Pauketat (2001) read history as the long-term working out of cultural structures in changing, partly human-created circumstances. Studies of historical practice have been highly successful in spans of time up to several centuries. However, perhaps because they are haunted by the spectre of determinism, such studies tend to be under-developed theoretically on topics such as environment and demography, and because they derive from theorists interested principally in human action in the short term, there is a tendency to reduce interpretation simply to the moment of action, without consideration of long-term factors.

Finally, multi-scalar approaches have been inspired by Braudel's argument that historians should trace change at distinct scales ranging from events to the '*longue durée*' (Bintliff 1991; Knapp 1992). In Bailey's (1983) formulation of 'time perspectivism', human history is viewed as an ensemble of processes unfolding at different time scales — some humanly short and rapid, others geologically slow. Time perspectivism is often proposed in terms of a human–environment opposition, for instance in seeing short-term human actions as a cause or effect of long-term environmental conditions, but time perspectivism is also inherent in purely cultural models of human

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action themselves. The familiar concept of the unintended consequences of action, for instance, implies an intersection between different kinds of cultural process, some immediate and foreseen, some hidden from sight and slower-paced. Similarly, habitus (Bourdieu 1977) is thought of as an ensemble of entrenched dispositions which generate but do not rigidly dictate behaviour; conversely, habitus evolves over historical time through accumulated changes in the actions which reformulate it. Hence both structure and action change, but in different ways, in response to different circumstances, and at different historical paces; moreover, the interplay between the historical process of habitus and the historical process of action forms a fundamental dynamic generating history (Sahlins 1981). The same is true for other cultural process, for instance memory and forgetting (Huff 2005). It remains to be seen, however, how well this approach can be freed from the latent nature–culture divide that often underpins it and how closely it can be combined with a historical practice or 'genealogical' (Harding 2005) approach.

In this Special Section

This section presents a sample of recent work on these themes, taking several quite different approaches. In line with the first theme noted above, Lucas weaves a philosophical argument which rejects the concept of multi-scalar time and instead focuses upon events, which he defines archaeologically rather than historically or sociologically according to properties such as sequence, residuality and reversibility. Whittle, Bayliss & Healy also problematize archaeological views of time, and also argue in favour of the short-term. In their example, more precise dating allows us to see British Neolithic monuments not as a generic, long-term, free-floating manifestation of quintessential 'Neolithicness' but as a specific form of practice anchored in often surprisingly short-term local histories. In line with the second theme, Clark & Colman show how the notion of time forms part of a widespread, long-term regional tradition in Mesoamerica, marked by a cyclical nature and elaborate calendricity, and how this provided an important political resource: control of history was an important element in controlling claims to leadership.

The question of historical practice and scales of time is raised by three papers. Pauketat & Emerson, pointing out the importance of celestial bodies in Native American belief, question how the emergence of Cahokia — an abrupt, qualitative change which created a new and startling form of society — may have been understood as related to a highly visible supernova in AD 1054. Cobb and Drake trace a long-term dialectic between an entrenched, structural opposition — the semantics of colour in the prehistoric Midwest — and the specific practices of pottery, ritual and warfare which drew upon it and reconstituted it. Similarly, Van Dyke deconstructs the monolithic 'Chaco phenomenon' to show how small, context-dependent adjustments in political behaviour would have resulted in a large, qualitative change — the emergence of a striking and different form of Pueblo societies over an unprecedented area. While the three papers strike different balances between emphasizing long-term conditions or structures versus ascribing qualitative change to short-term historical practices, all three suggest that a complete account of the past must relate both.

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