Shorter Notes

Historical Archaeology and the British

Archaeologies of the British: Explorations of Identity in Great Britain and its Colonies 1600–1945, edited by Susan Lawrence, 2003. (One World Archaeology 46.) London: Routledge; ISBN 0-415-21700-8 hardback, £90.00 & US$135, ix + 306 pp., ills.

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The study of 'post-medieval' or 'historical archaeology' (after AD 1500) at British universities has traditionally been seen as a conservative and marginal field of enquiry. Recently, however, a sophisticated body of research into the recent historical and contemporary past has started to emerge (Johnson 1999, 21–2). (See most recently Buchli 1999; 2002; Buchli & Lucas 2000a,b; Casella 2002; Giles 1999; Graves Brown 2003; Green 2003; Jones 1999; Piccini 2003; van Reybrouck in prep.; Tarlow 1999a; Stevenson 2000; Symonds 1999.) With the proliferation of graduate programmes, PhDs and academic appointments in the field, this former backwater is witnessing new currents and a confluence of diverse influences from across the social sciences — including professional and avocational 'post-medievalists' alongside the contextual and interpretative work of prehistorian colleagues. It combines diverse methodological and theoretical perspectives with a distinctively archaeological attitude. International collaborations have multiplied (e.g. Egan & Michael 1999; Funari *et al.* 1999), often leading to stimulating and surprising intersections (Holtorf & van Reybrouck 2003; Pearson & Shanks 2001). Through WAC, TAG, SPMA, CHAT and SHA conferences, new networks and collaborations percolate through the new contemporary and historical archaeology. *Archaeologies of the British: Explorations of Identity in Great Britain and its Colonies, 1600–1945*, is an edited volume which has resulted from two of these conferences (Lawrence 2003a).[1]

This note borrows the volume's title as a route into an exploration of aspects of historical archaeology and the British. I consider a preposition, a bundle of practices, and an ethnicity. First, through the preposition (***'of'***), I recall the British relationship with historical archaeology. I reconsider the plurality of '***(historical) archaeologies***'. And I raise a question: what would an archaeology of ***the British*** look like?

Historical archaeology and the British

The preposition at the centre of the title of Lawrence's volume relates the British to their historical archaeology: a troubled relationship. This is more than the familiar tale of longstanding and perverse neglect of a period with massive quantities of materials, and an overwhelming potential for interdisciplinary interactions. It involves more than the inert British post-medieval archaeology, which has served as a buffer zone between past and present, maintaining (until recently) the apparent integrity of a disciplinary space ('antiquity') sealed off from contemporary matters (Hicks 2003). Instead, here I want to tell two different stories, genealogies of historical archaeology and the British.

The first story concerns the transatlantic interactions between the Annapolis school of historical archaeology and Cambridge-based archaeologists from the early 1980s.[2] Through their interest in themes such as meaning, ideology and structure, in critical theory and structural marxism, and in theorists such as Foucault, Bourdieu and Giddens, Annapolis scholars drew inspiration from the 'post-processualism' of Hodder, Miller and Shanks and Tilley (Shackel 2000, 769). Meanwhile, a reciprocal process occurred, through which work of Annapolis archaeologists came to the attention of a new British audience. For some North American colleagues, the influence of the Annapolis school, especially through the work in the 1990s of Mark Leone and Charles Orser, has become 'so pervasive that many archaeologists and nonarchaeologists alike have come to consider historical archaeology synonymous with the archaeology of capitalism' (Wilkie & Bartoy 2000, 748). Similarly, the Annapolis school has come to be seen by many British archaeologists as coterminous with North American historical archaeology. It is this context which has produced John Moreland's recent *Archaeology and Text* (2001, 98–111), which

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presents a breathless and rather bad-tempered account of the 'failure' of 'American historical archaeologists', yet limits serious discussion to Orser and Leone alone. Here, the diversity of world historical archaeology has been lost in translation.

The second story recalls a less familiar genealogy, glimpses of which appear on those rare occasions when alternative traditions of North American historical archaeology are discussed by British scholars at all. It is about the alternative, contextual, interpretative tradition that has run in parallel with the Annapolis school for 25 years. This tradition is concerned with both the construction of personal social worlds and broader historical and geographical contexts. It combines diverse sources of evidence to produce fine-grained contextualized and nuanced studies of objects, places and people. These have ranged from the changing material worlds of colonial America (Deetz 1977), archaeologies of 'boarding-households' (Beaudry *et al*. 1991) and 'the subversive poetics of housework' (Beaudry forthcoming), to accounts of the manipulation of 'mangled' 'symbols of gentility in the Wild West' (Praetzellis & Praetzellis 2001). The limited contemporary British engagement with this material is such that Sarah Tarlow has recently glossed the 'rather asocial structuralism of James Deetz, Anne Yentsch and others' (Tarlow 1999b, 468). It is not just that these qualities are more characteristic of the Annapolis school. Rather, the surprising part of the story is Tarlow's disengagement from the work of North American scholars who have undertaken precisely those kinds of studies which acknowledge 'more subtle kinds of power, or different kinds of identity for which 'power' may not be the most appropriate way of thinking' (Tarlow 1999b) which Tarlow herself has championed so successfully (e.g. Tarlow 1999a; 2000; see Beaudry 1995; 1996; Mrozowski *et al*. 1996; Yentsch 1994; Deetz & Dethlefsen 1967; Glassie 1999). The twist in this tale concerns common roots. This interpretive, contextual tradition of historical archaeology shares with British interpretive archaeologies of context and material culture common roots in Deetz, Glassie and Hodder (since Hodder 1982, 228–9; see Beaudry 1996, 474). Such translated influences were part of what the Annapolis school took from high postprocessualism. These interactions are the source of Matthew Johnson's historical archaeology (e.g. 1996), and recalling them might lead us to take a second look at the commonalities between the current interests of, say, Sarah Tarlow (1999a) or Victor Buchli (1999) and Mary Beaudry (2003) or Laurie Wilkie (2003).

Academic exchanges must always be partial and forgetful: even those suffused with that grasping nostalgia of the archaeologist or genealogist. Looking back at the difficult British relationship with historical archaeology leads us to consider the influence of the Annapolis school. It also leads to limited engagements with alternative traditions of historical archaeology — not just the interpretive tradition in North America, but also the mature traditions of historical archaeologies across the world, especially in Australia, South and West Africa, India, South America, the Caribbean and elsewhere in Europe.

As British historical archaeology develops, one approach is to adopt, or reject, more developed traditions of thought in other periods or parts of the world. My stories have explored alternative transatlantic genealogies, the permeability of apparent boundaries. They demonstrate the shortcomings of John Moreland's perspectives. They also aim to provide an antidote to alternative tendencies to succumb to the totalizing impulses associated with the Annapolis school through the uncritical transatlantic adoption of the notion that historical archaeology is 'an archaeology of the emergence and development of capitalism' (Leone & Potter 1988, 19, quoted by Dalglish 2001, 2). The challenge for the British is to resist those seductive overarching theories that describe seductive overarching structures. As British historical archaeology starts to rethink itself it may benefit greatly from rediscovering aspects of the Deetzian tradition of interpretive, contextual archaeology: the delicacy of its structures and processes large and small, textures of its intimate, powerful worlds, and, above all, its imaginative qualities (Schrire 1995).

Historical archaeologies

Where does this leave that bundle of attitudes and practices encompassed by the '(historical) archaeologies' of Lawrence's title? Matthew Johnson discusses social historian Stephan Collini's use of the term 'muffling inclusiveness' to describe how, from the nineteenth century, an 'all-encompassing' Britishness has served to subsume local and regional identities. Johnson extends this term to historical archaeologists, who

> have set themselves the task of explaining cultural change. We look for the clash of cultures, the creation and renegotiation of identities, and the way these are mediated and expressed through material culture, architecture and landscape. Yet the theoretical models used by British archaeologists

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> and historians, particularly the implicit ones used by those who pretend they do not use theory, assume rather than explain identities and processes. Specifically they fall victim to an intellectual form of 'muffling inclusiveness'. I suggest that this muffling inclusiveness has impoverished the thinking of British post-medieval archaeologists, and is one of the key reasons why British historical archaeology has until recently been much less exciting than comparable work in colonial situations. (Johnson 2003, 22)

Instead, Johnson proposes 'writ[ing] an archaeology of rupture', 'read[ing] our material against the grain', 'making our archaeology address contemporary political debates', and 'posit[ing] our material is fragmentary, ruptured, disconnected (and Britain is nothing if not a collection of fragments)' (Johnson 2003, 29). Yet Johnson's extension of the notion of 'muffling inclusiveness' holds still more radical potential.

In later historical and contemporary archaeology, industrialized production and mass consumption combine with a relative absence of taphonomic loss, to generate a 'superfluity' of data (Buchli 2002). My discussion of the contextual, interpretive traditions in North American historical archaeology above aimed to highlight a body of thought which can work with this excess of material, without constituting a unified, alternative approach. In historical archaeology it is particularly clear that the impossible diversity of material, its endless textures, voices and experiences, can never be captured in a single methodological, theoretical or thematic scheme in a conventional manner (*pace* Leone 1999), or by limiting our archaeological studies thematically: 'capitalism', 'modernity', 'colonialism', 'material culture', etc. For Johnson:

> the central task of post-medieval archaeology in the new millennium is that we reconsider material culture and identity. Material culture is central to the constitution of society: a familiar point, but it leads down new paths (Johnson 2003, 29).

How do we respond to a discomfort with totalizing accounts of Britishness and to Johnson's related call for 'an archaeology of rupture'? To the challenge which faces British historical archaeologists (above), engaging with the superfluity of data, avoiding abject relativism while celebrating complexity, messiness and contradiction? One response, similar to the 'critical empiricism' proposed by Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (Buchli 1999, 11; Lucas 2001; Buchli 2002, 133; Buchli & Lucas 2000b, 171–4), but more mobile, is to perform an archaeology that, so to speak, *takes a lead from the material*. It extends material agency to the material we study, chasing 'partial' connections through turbulent material networks similar to previous accounts of the geography of electrification, or the history of a Parisian transportation system (Hughes 1983; Latour 1996; cf. Harding 1998, 39–54; Strathern 1991). In a turn reminiscent of the feminist epistemologies of cyborg studies, such an archaeology would view the debouchement of previous universalising theoretical positions as situated and materially contingent (Hicks 2003, 324–6; cf. Haraway 1991). The critical theory emerging from those neat Chesapeake parterres (Leone 1984), the 'capitalism' from those vernacular houses in western Suffolk (Johnson 1993), that problematic 'socialism' from the Narkomfin Communal House (Buchli 1999). A distinctively archaeological, contextual, yet itinerant situational awareness. A theoretical inclusivity, bringing, perhaps, fewer bad tempers.

The British

What would such archaeologies of the British look like? Two observations recur in the contributions to Lawrence (2003a). Firstly, that acknowledging the diversity of 'the British' makes an important contribution to the study of colonial encounters and exchanges, and of regionalism among the historical British (Green 2003). Secondly, that historical archaeology is uniquely placed to unpick the historical and situational contingencies of this diversity: objects, landscapes, buildings and documents. These observations lead us beyond historical stories of the 'forging' of 'a sense of British national identity' (Colley 1992), like Anderson's (1983) 'imagined communities'. Britishness is more than illusion or forgery: after all, 'if the culture of the nation is only so much wool, then the eyes over which it is pulled must belong to sheep' (Wright 1985, 5).

What can archaeologists bring to studies of the British, across their ruined, lost empire, and their contemporary past 'at home'? Beaudry (2003, 292) suggests the exploration of 'localised manifestations of colonialism's culture in a variety of settings': an approach with still more potential if the comparative framework is rejected for one which theorizes the connectedness, mobility and materiality of colonial and postcolonial worlds (Hicks in prep.). This leads us to an archaeological vision of Britishness that is both contextual and itinerant. It highlights those diverse people, objects and places through which many mobile, nuanced British identities were imagined and brought about. Archaeologies of Britishness necessitate a geographical imagination

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and an archaeological methodology at once multi-scalar and multi-sited, fluid, moving, outward-looking (Hicks 2003, cf. Marcus 1995; Urry 2000). Material geographies of people and things moving through 'nation states . . . made by telephone systems, paperwork, and geographical triangulation points' (Law 1999, 7); between scales of analysis; across sweet and powerful networks built with tea or sugar, or the bric-a-brac aesthetics of a Georgian merchant (Mintz 1985; Bunn 1980, 305).

After historical archaeology

The papers in Lawrence's volume make a significant contribution to interdisciplinary studies of British identity, and form an important collection for archaeologists interested in ethnicity or colonialism. Perhaps most importantly, they are diverse responses to a mobile concept — Britishness. In the pages of this journal, Mark Leone has recently expressed deep concerns about current shifts in historical and contemporary archaeology, which lead away from structure, coherence and political purpose towards messiness, undecidability and absence (Leone 2002, 136). This note has aimed to demonstrate that such new directions constitute important responses to the complexity and messiness of the recent and contemporary past. Rather than opposing 'those who are afraid of totalizing theories', the opportunity for British archaeology is to start to work with fluidity, disregard conventional disciplinary boundaries — including historical/prehistoric; European/North American — and, perhaps, move beyond the notion of 'historical' archaeology itself. To be sensitive to the possibilities of 'partiality' to encompass political engagement in the contemporary world as well as fragmentation. Embracing diversity, creativity, imagination . . . and good humour.

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Notes

1. Sessions relating to historical and contemporary archaeology have been organized at every Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) conference since 1997, and were also strong at the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) conferences in Cape Town (1999) and Washington DC (2003). Complementing the annual meetings of the Society for Post Medieval Archaeology (SPMA), the Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT) international conference group was established in February 2003 and, following the first meeting at Bristol University in November 2003, will meet at the University of Leicester in November 2004. The North American Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) will hold its annual conference in Britain for the first time in January 2005 at the University of York. The papers in Lawrence (2003) are derived from sessions at WAC 1999 (Cape Town, South Africa) and SHA 2000 (Quebec City, Canada).
2. There has been a lively, sometimes acrimonious, debate over the description of archaeologists associated with, and influenced by, Mark Leone's *Archaeology in Annapolis* project as the 'Annapolis School' (see Wilkie & Bartoy 2000 and comments, compare Leone *et al.* 1987; Shackel *et al.* 1998). Some of those involved in this work have claimed that this notion is 'illusory' and 'fictitious' (Delle 2000, 762). Following Johnson (1999) and Wilkie and Bartoy (2000, 771), and above the range of alternative appellations (e.g. 'critical materialism' (Orser & Fagan 1995, 194–8), 'critical archaeologists' (Beaudry 1996, 473) or 'Annapolis approach' (Tarlow 1999b, 468)), I favour the use of the term 'Annapolis school' (small 's'). For me, this term usefully locates the significant influence of a number of collaborative North American colleagues (whose work favours a particular blend of structural Marxism and critical theory) not just in a disciplinary landscape, but importantly in the particular historical landscapes of the Chesapeake as well.

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