# The new antiquarianism?

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## Introduction

Christopher Witmore (2014: 215) recently observed that "things go on perturbing one another when humans cease to be part of the picture. A former house may be transformed through relations with bacteria, hedgehogs, water, compaction"; and if the materials that archaeologists confront are material memories (cf. Olivier 2011) from which a past is to be recalled in the future, then

> *The kind of memory that things hold often tells us little of whether materials strewn across an abandonment level resulted from the reuse of a structure as a sheepfold, a series of exceptional snow storms, the collapse of a roof made of olive wood after many years of exposure to the weather (rapports between microbes, fungi, water and wood), the cumulative labors of generations of badgers, children playing a game in a ruin, or the probing roots of oak trees* (Witmore 2014: 215).

In other words, the things that archaeologists confront bear the memories of their own formation without the necessity of a human presence, and the traditional and often exclusive priority given to a human agency in the making of those things and in giving them meaning is simply misplaced. Things get on "just fine" without the benefit of human intervention and interpretation (Witmore 2014: 217). Should archaeology therefore allow that it is not a discipline concerned with excavating the indications of the various past human labours that once acted upon things, and should it eschew the demand to "look beyond the pot, the awl or a stone enclosure for explanations concerning the reasons for their existence" (Witmore 2014: 204)? Consequently, is archaeology now a matter of following the things themselves to wherever they might lead—what Witmore characterises as the New Materialisms—and if so, are we now to practise archaeology "not as the study of the human past through its material remains, but as the discipline of things" (Witmore 2014: 203)?

## The argument

The argument set out by Witmore and by others (e.g. Webmoor 2007; Olsen 2012) refuses to privilege human-material relationships over those between all other materials when characterising any condition, rendering relations involving humans as merely among the many that occurred between the things that brought each particular historical condition into being. Consequently, the role of an archaeology of a past condition is not, we are assured, to find the "indian behind the artefact" (Braidwood 1958: 734), but rather, I assume, to describe the assemblages of things that have accrued to give a particular period some kind

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of material definition or where such a period might be seen as "the cumulative labors of generations" of things. Thus, if archaeology is now to grapple with the reality of things themselves, and without recourse to the "greener pastures" of interpretation, then what more can archaeology do other than "describe and describe some more" (Witmore 2014: 204, 221)? Indeed, Olsen suggests that we

> *let ourselves be inspired by the descriptive richness the antiquarians aimed at, which also is manifested in the accounts left us by explorers and 'adventurers' such as Fridtjof Nansen, Knud Rasmussen, and Helge Ingstad. The challenge is to produce rich descriptive accounts that also understand, not by heading beyond things and the immediate world, or by leaving out what arises in the momentary presence of encounter, but by allowing them a rightful share* (Olsen 2012: 27).

The turn to description advocated by Witmore and by Olsen must not be confused with Ryle's idea of 'thick description' as developed by Clifford Geertz (1973). For Geertz, the 'thick' ethnographic description of events should reveal, through their interpretation, the generative logic and cultural confusions that gave those events their particular quality, while for Witmore and Olsen, there appears to be nothing beyond the relationships in an assemblage of things that might allow us to understand a particular condition. Things differ certainly, and while there is no disinterest in those different things that are identified as people (Olsen 2012: 29), neither is there an attempt to humanise all things when we recognise that these things have their own agencies as a consequence of their existence: things are simply what they are and, occurring in networks of relationships, they make a difference.

The philosophical origin for the ideas expressed by Witmore, Olsen and those others who claim allegiance to the New Materialisms in archaeology draws upon the idea of a flat ontology (DeLanda 2002; Bryant 2011: 245–70). Ontology concerns that which exists and this must be distinguished from epistemology, where the latter concerns the means of our knowing. What exists and what we know of what exists are not one and the same, although the distinction has not always been recognised (Bhaskar 1997 [1975]; Meillassoux 2008: 8). A flat ontology describes reality as a condition that arises out of the interplay, or network, that exists between entities; an assemblage in other words where no one entity determines the form of the assemblage as a whole. Reality is therefore constituted as the equable interplay of things. In the well-worn example offered by Latour (1999), the question of whether it is the gun or the person that kills is answered simply by asserting that it is the assemblage of the person and the gun that kills, an assemblage to which both person and gun contribute 'symmetrically' to the unfortunate outcome.

One consequence of this reasoning is that archaeological things cannot be taken as having gained their significance simply by virtue of human interpretation: they are not objects that once stood for some other value that was recognised or that was imposed upon them by the agency of the human subject. Things are never, first and foremost, 'symbols in action', and we can abandon such archaeological narratives in which "a boat, an elk or a reindeer can be claimed to represent or signify almost everything—ancestors, rites of passage, borders, totems, gender, supernatural powers and so on—apart, it seems, only from themselves" (Olsen 2012: 22). Instead, humans have always lived amongst the things that have worked

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in relation to other things, and where boats, for example, simply floated and carried people on water (Olsen 2010: 129–49).

But is history nothing more than the formation of material assemblages, and is the role of archaeology merely to describe those assemblages and then to describe them some more in the richness of antiquarian accounts? Colin Renfrew has written of the need to go beyond description and to seek the insights that "*explain* how the past came about" (Renfrew 1982: 5), and whatever he means by this I doubt that he is calling for the detailed re-describing and cataloguing of material sequences. Yet this is exactly what Jones and Sibbesson, to take one example, have now offered us as a mark of their return to materials as a way of getting beyond the conflicting archaeological interpretations of how the transition to agriculture in Britain was achieved (Jones & Sibbesson 2013). For Jones and Sibbesson, this transition was simply one moment in an ongoing change in the assemblages of things, a long-term sequence whose historical trajectory, instead of being the manifestation of any underlying process, just seems to have happened. But of course this is the only possible view, given the commitment to a flat ontology: there is nothing more to be revealed generating the relationships between things. The alternative to such a flat and unrewarding description of material sequences must be to reassert the case for a 'depth ontology', a stratification of existences, where assemblages of things are manifestations of, and thus emerge from, the historical processes of material conditions that it is surely the task of archaeology to understand.

## Depth ontology

Sandra Wallace (2011) has recently emphasised the archaeological importance of Roy Bhaskar's (1979, 1997 [1975]) argument for a stratified or depth ontology. To begin, let us accept the reality of past conditions and reject the posture that Witmore's argument "enables us to think of an archaeology without the Past; that is, without a separate realm where lives were lived over yonder" (Witmore 2014: 204). We do not make the past, but we do make our knowledge of a past, and so we can follow Bhaskar and ask what the reality of the human past must have been like to make it possible for us to gain an archaeological knowledge of that reality.

Reality is intrinsically stratified, and Bhaskar (1997: 19) expresses this as a stratification of mechanisms. In this way, chemical mechanisms emerge from the physical structure of atoms, and biological mechanisms emerge from chemistry. This stratification therefore describes a history of emergent properties that has stretched across the longest possible time scale (cf. Smail 2008), and in which the emergent properties at each level must accommodate the regularities or laws of the level from whence they originated, but where, conversely, each level cannot be explained by reduction to the preceding level. It is for this reason that

> *Ontologically emergent features are neither reducible to nor determined by more basic features. Ontologically emergent features are features of systems or wholes that possess causal capacities not reducible to any of the intrinsic causal capacities of the parts nor to any of the (reducible) relations between parts* (Silberstein & McGeever 1999: 186).

D'Arcy Thompson (1942) recognised that the designs of biology must conform to the mechanical limitations imposed by the laws of physics; biological processes cannot, however,

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be understood by reduction to either chemistry or, ultimately, to physics. The emergence of each level therefore represents a major transformation in mechanisms, spanning from the birth of the universe to the emergence of life on earth (Morowitz 2002). The additional implication is that history has directionality, and a significant transformation in this trajectory obviously occurred when the mechanisms of biology emerged from those of chemistry. Although we might specify the chemical conditions necessary for life, our understanding of how life originated remains speculative at best; as Stuart Kauffman put it: "Anyone who tells you that he or she knows how life started on the earth some 3.45 billion years ago is a fool or a knave" (Kauffman 1995: 31). Living things are distinct from non-living things in virtue of the mechanism of their development: non-living things tend towards their lowest possible energy state (water flows downhill, radioactive particles decay), whereas living organisms dissipate energy as a means of sustaining their own growth and development through the process of metabolism. Biological evolution thus describes a stratified trajectory traced out by the major steps in an evolving complexity that emerged with simple cells and culminated with complex multi-cellular organisms (Maynard Smith & Szathmáry 1997).

Living and non-living matter are therefore ontologically distinct, and the historical conditions that are the object of archaeological enquiry were those that emerged out of the co-existence of both from the time that human life-forms first evolved. The degree, and the basis, upon which humanity, in its various forms of humanness, might be regarded as a distinct and emergent form of life should surely be one very difficult issue that archaeology might be expected to address (cf. Barrett 2014a). These emergent historical conditions arose in the interplay between the physical stability and decay of things and the colonisation of niche environments by forms of life whose appropriation of available sources of free energy ensured their own continuity and development. Humanness has evolved by reworking the architectures and technologies of particularly complex and diverse niche environments, and by widening the range of energy sources it has been prepared to degrade (Ryan & McKevitt 2013). It is the residues of these environments that form the basic data that are available for archaeological investigation. The diversity in this human project has arisen out of the different ways that humans have found the contexts of their existence to be of significance for them, not because they convert the material world into symbols, but because things have been recognised in terms of their qualities, and it has been by the practical engagement with those qualities and by embodied references to the qualities of existence itself that life has been found to be both possible and meaningful. The archaeology of the interdependence of human life forms and the architectures of their existence is an issue that has recently been explored by Ian Hodder (2012: 64–87).

## Conclusion

The social world is indeed formed in the enmeshing of humans, plants, animals and things (Latour 2005), but how that enmeshing is achieved, and the consequent forms of life and of materialities that emerge from it, is surely the object of historical enquiry. This requires that we confront questions concerning the depth of existence, and it is these questions that are abandoned by the recent archaeological 'turn' to a new materialism. In its place we are

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offered little but the description of material assemblages. The beginnings of agricultural systems certainly did not lie with the inventiveness of some insightful human communities (cf. Rindos 1984), but neither were they merely a perturbation in a shifting sequence of things as Jones and Sibbesson (2013) imply. The major transition from hunter-gatherers to agricultural systems evolved as a restructuring of the flows and storage of energy by which particular populations of humans, plants and animals were sustained while political structures emerged that enabled human populations to legitimate their claims upon resources (Barrett 2014b, 2016). The long-term evolution of agricultural systems, marked (as ever) by the disproportionate appropriation and control of resources by increasingly smaller portions of the human community, found one expression in the slave economies of the classical world. It was slaves who built the Hadrianic aqueduct that served Corinth, a 'raw physicality' that seems to be forgotten when we read that: "The Hadrianic Aqueduct would be non-existent without the raw physicality of mortar, brick, and stone, combined with geometry, survey labor, and craft experience" (Olsen *et al.* 2012: 120).

If antiquarianism is the attention paid to ancient artefacts, then the recent expressions of the 'New Materialisms' in archaeology can seem to be little more than a new antiquarianism. The so called 'return to things' is more significant, and more worrying, than yet another shift in the fashions of archaeological theory for the simple reason that it has nothing to say about the dynamics of the historical processes. I doubt that archaeology should ever claim to have explained the past, for the simple reason that the conditions of the past emerged from complex open systems, the trajectories of which were never caused, and can never be explained, by reference to any number of prime movers. But surely archaeology should aim to understand the complexity of past conditions whose histories emerged from the evolving interplay of living and non-living things? The new materialist turn appears to see no need to provide for such an understanding.

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