Archaeological Dialogues 10 (2) 204–213 © 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S1380203804001254 Printed in the United Kingdom

The past of the present. Archaeological memory and time

Laurent Olivier

Susan E. Alcock*, Archaeologies of the Greek past. Landscape, monuments, and memories, *Cambridge (Cambridge University Press), 2002, xiv, 222 p.

Richard Bradley*, The past in prehistoric societies, *London (Routledge), 2002, 9, xiii, 171 p.

Ruth M. Van Dyke and Susan E. Alcock, eds.*, Archaeologies of memory, *Oxford (Routledge), 2003, xiv, 240 p.

Howard Williams, ed.*, Archaeologies of remembrance. Death and memory in past societies, *New York (Kluwer Academic/Plenum), 2003, xiv, 310 p.

Abstract

Several recent publications on 'the past in the past' raise the issue that remains from older pasts existed in younger pasts, just like the fabric of our present-day world is made up of materials from the past. Archaeology in fact studies material culture that exists in the present; it deals with memory recorded in matter and not with events or moments from the past. This essay explores the consequences of this for archaeology's understanding of time. It argues that historic time should not be viewed as the 'empty and homogeneous' time of historicism – the time of dates, chronologies and periods – but on the contrary as the full and heterogeneous time of the fusion between the present and the past.

Keywords

time in archaeology; past in the present; historicism; Walter Benjamin

A series of recently published volumes deal with 'the past in the past', that is to say the importance attached to their own past or to the remains of civilizations and cultures which had preceded them, by the ancient societies studied within archaeology (Alcock 2002; Bradley 2002; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003; Williams 2003). Indeed we know, through the historians of those ancient times, that the Romans of the high empire would religiously preserve, in the midst of the 'modern' brick and marble buildings of the Roman capital, a wattle and daub hut which supposedly dated back to the legendary days of the foundation of Rome. As Susan Alcock emphasizes in her book, Greeks in the Roman Empire were deeply nostalgic for classic Hellenistic Greece, while archaeology has shown that classical Greece particularly revered places thought to belong to the time of the Homeric wars. Throughout history, human societies have been confronted with the permanence of manifestations of their own past, manifestations which made up the physical framework of their own present. These are the monuments and objects, but also landscapes and places, which make up the materials that make it possible for societies to construct their identity; in this respect, changes made in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the present to the remains of the past (in the form of reconstructions and rearrangements) inform us about the work of reshaping this collective memory which strengthens societies' sense of identity. As Richard Bradley brilliantly shows in his essay on 'The past in prehistoric societies' (Bradley 2002), this relationship with the past is not the prerogative only of historic societies – and, with our archaeology, is this not, deep down, the relationship we have with the past? – but is already an essential part of European prehistoric societies.

The relationship with the past is therefore a key element in forming collective identities (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Lowenthal 1985; Gosden 1994). Limitations of space prevent me from addressing all the extremely exciting aspects which this approach to societies (whether ancient or modern) allows us to develop, especially regarding how collective memory functions (here I refer readers to fundamental work by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1949)) and what makes up cultural identities. These are questions which are essentially of more interest to anthropologists than to archaeologists. I aim, however, to focus on aspects within this question of 'the past in the past' which seem to me to be more fundamental for us as archaeologists, insofar as they challenge the status of the remains of the past and our relationship with them. In fact, our vision of the past is in the process of changing, a past which we see as being more variable and less monolithic, a change which is affecting our conception of history, or more precisely our representation of transformations of the societies of the past over time. What are we dealing with here? First, the following point: it is now increasingly clear that the physical environment of human societies has always been a composite, in that it is mainly made up of elements originating in the past but continuing to exist in the present.

The past does not die: it lasts

Every day we have direct experience of this situation. Our physical universe, at the start of this third millennium, is not what the naive images of 20th-century science fiction predicted it would be: we still live in towns whose urban landscape is essentially that of the 19th century; for the most part, our houses are at least fifty years old; not all our furniture is new (far from it); and as for our cars, few of us can afford a new one every year. Therefore, from the archaeological point of view, the physical environment of the present is essentially made up of the things of the past, of a more or less recent past, whereas creations of the present moment (of 2004, of this very day) occupy only a tiny place in this physical present which is in fact imbued with the past. The present has always been multi-temporal and above all has never been young, never totally of the present. Take a close look at Dürer drawings or Rembrandt engravings which describe in great detail the material universe of the 16th and 17th centuries; in them you can clearly see that most of the buildings are old. The rendering on the walls is flaking off, the weary roof-beams are buckling under the weight of the roofs, the wooden bridges are worn out. As far as material things are concerned (that is to say, the things which constitute the matter of archaeology) the present is nothing more than the sum total of all the past times which physically coexist in the present moment. After all, flint implements from the Palaeolithic era, to take only

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this example, for all they were originally produced some 20,000 years ago, are being found now, in the present, here and now, in our present. And it will in fact be possible to say more or less about them depending on the way in which they are embedded in the present: are they in place, in the earth, or have they on the other hand been moved; are they intact or in fragments? Because material things – including, amongst other things, archaeological remains – have one essential property, unlike historical events: they remain and last for as long as the material of which they are made lasts. Material things embed themselves in all subsequent presents; long after they have ceased to be of use or to exist, they continue to be. Thus, even though the Roman Empire collapsed for good in times which are completely over and done with, its material remains nonetheless continue to occupy our present, as they will continue to do so for those who come after us. People will continue to excavate Roman sites in centuries to come.

Time too is a human construct

However, the acknowledgement of the existence of remains from ancient times or of 'the other' in our physical universe cannot be taken for granted, insofar as it engages with our representation of the past. As Lewis Binford quite rightly points out in *In pursuit of the past*, 'The archaeological record is here with us in the present . . . it is very much part of our contemporary world and the observations we make about it are in the here and now, contemporary with ourselves' (Binford 1983, 19). This means, he continues, that 'archaeology is not a field that can study the past *directly*, . . . On the contrary, it is a field wholly dependent upon inference to the past from things found in the contemporary world' (Binford 1983, 23; original emphasis). What Binford means is this: the perception of the past is dependent on the interpretation given to things which are recognized as ancient and which are observed in the physical environment of the present. But what leads us to recognize a thing as ancient, as belonging to a human era different from ours? Archaeology, or in a more general way the act of collecting and identifying the physical remains of the past, is possible only under certain conditions, conditions which have existed at very precise moments in human history: in Graeco-Roman antiquity, in the days of the great Chinese empires, in ancient Japan, or even in Europe from the Renaissance onwards. These conditions are linked with the idea that such a thing as human history exists, that is to say an awareness that men have not always lived and thought as we do. The development of archaeology is therefore intrinsically linked with that of the discovery of otherness, of the recognition of differences within what is similar. Archaeology in Europe therefore takes off as a discipline from the moment in the first half of the 18th century when people recognize that the remains of the past are different and unusual and that this distinctive strangeness is proof of their age. What the researchers of the Enlightenment showed, by proving that the 'lightning stones' found by peasants had not fallen from the sky but were very ancient axe-heads, was that before them there were 'savage' peoples similar to the 'cannibals' of the New World, who still used the same type of tools.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Why was this presence of the ancient past not discovered sooner? Because this recognition of the existence of ancient things is, in Europe, part of a wider movement engaged in since the 16th century by voyages of discovery on land and sea and by astronomical exploration of the sky, a movement which concerns the representation of the world. To be able to recognize what makes ancient remains different and singular, it was necessary to have a conception of the world as open, that is to say largely unknown, unexplored and heterogeneous. It was necessary to have accepted, whether people liked it or not, to what extent a world in which we are no longer the central and unique reference point could be strange and alarming. Time itself needed to have lost its apparent familiarity to appear from then on, as Buffon put it, as a 'dark abyss', a bottomless pit capable of having swallowed up whole worlds, a whole succession of civilizations of which all memory had been lost. In the closed world of the medieval tradition time was, on the contrary, turned in on itself; it was totally filled by a history in which all had been said, in which everything which would happen had been foretold. And yet the remains of the past nonetheless persisted in existing in the fabric of reality, existing as foreign bodies in the premodern physical universe. There were megaliths and burial mounds, there were Roman ruins everywhere. They could be explained away only as miracles; 15th-century representations, such as those of the magnificent *Book of the properties of objects* of Barthélémy de Glanville, therefore show us vases spontaneously emerging from the earth, like wild animals emerging from their lairs or burrows, or like fish in the sea. In the featureless time inherited from the Middle Ages there was no place for people to imagine that the pots which sometimes came to the surface could have been made by other men of other times. At least until the beginning of the 18th century, fossils posed the same kind of problem (Rossi 1984). For most writers remains of seashells encountered set in rock could be nothing other than the manifestation of an extraordinary property of the stone – a *virtus lapidifica*, a *vis plastica* – which produced within it petrified animal shapes, just as the sea produced living shellfish or fish.

In a world ignorant of the notion of deep time introduced in the mid-19th century by Lyell and Darwin, miracles were the only possible explanation which could account for the singularity of the remains of the past. Megaliths could only be giants' tables, burial mounds could only be fairy graves, or ancient ruins Sleeping Beauty's castles. Essentially, to discover the past is to become aware of how various the present is. To reconstruct the past is to observe the present. Time constructs us (it is time which ages us and transforms the world around us) but we also construct time; we do so for the past has definitively gone and because all that is left of it, what makes up the past, is a memory existing in the present. This physical memory of the present is what archaeology studies.

The archaeology of the present: time turned upside down

Perhaps so, some will say, but none of this is new and it does not involve any change in the situation of archaeology. On the contrary, I believe that it does, and that the recognition of 'the past in the present' is part of a more

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

general upheaval of traditional conceptions of the identity of the past and the nature of time. This upheaval, which has barely started, is a continuation of a conceptual revolution introduced just before the Second World War by the reflections of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin on time and on history (Benjamin 2003). Misunderstood for a long time, these reflections are directly applicable to archaeology; that is to say, as we have just seen, in the study of the physical remains which give depth to the present. The first consequence of this 'archaeology of the present' is to explode the conventional view of historical time, this unilinear time which forms the basis of all approaches to the past, including those which are superficially the most radical.

Allow me to explain. In our conventional representation of historical time, we stand aside from time, like spectators watching the procession of human history go by. The first to go by are prehistoric men in an endless procession, with their mammoths, reindeer and bison; then it is the turn of the people of the Neolithic era, with their stone axe-heads and their cloaks of grass, before the arrival of Bronze Age warriors, with their shining weapons, then the Celts, then, later still, the Romans etc., up to today. For we who watch them go by, each period has its distinctive colouration and each one can be told apart from the others due to a temporal identity which is unique to it: temporal specificity. In this sense, our representation of time is profoundly cinematic, as the philosopher Henri Bergson (1941) emphasized: for us, historical time goes in only one direction at a time and every change over time (like every movement on the screen) is something which can be taken apart in a sequence of moments following each other, one by one, like the succession of 24 frames a second which makes it possible to recreate the movements of reality when projected in the cinema. In other words, it is because time, historical time, can be chopped up into a sequence of precise moments (or of homogeneous sequences) that the processes can be made visible for us; more precisely, it is because the order in which the scenes appear is subject to a rule of strict succession that phenomena happening over time can be interpreted by us. For us, historic time – time flowing through the evolution of past societies – is at the same time basically unilinear and intrinsically cumulative. But historic time is now nothing more than that; in fact, time is emptied of its substance, of its possibility to act, by this quaintly old-fashioned perception of the past, which sees history as a succession of scenes or contexts. This idea of time being under control is at the heart of the historicist approach to the past, which is, strictly speaking, an anti-historic conception of the past. As Benjamin emphasizes, in this conventional approach to the past, 'Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous empty time' (Benjamin 2003, 396 (xvii)). And yet time cannot be contained. Just like dreams in which a situation gradually acquires a different meaning, the more incongruous details accumulate, the characters in the conventional march of time appear to be walking past with elements which are not of their time; the Romans are not really Roman, and the people of the Middle Ages look like those of the Bronze and Iron Ages, unless it is the other way round – who knows? Acknowledgement of the 'past in the past' destroys the preconceived idea that moments in time are bearers of temporal specificity, since they are situated at singular (and therefore unique) moments in time.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Time now escapes from the little box in which people had thought to contain it. It is a storm gathering its strength and which will cause an upheaval as it sweeps past. Say that fragments of the past are embedded in the physical reality of the present, and you open up the possibility of a radical re-evaluation of the notion of history and, to be more exact, you question the basis of our understanding of the mechanisms of historical change. Why? Because if historical time is no longer a time which links, little by little, events which strictly follow on from each other – in a word, if time is now released – it can then create a correlation between events which are very distant from each other. If the past remains embedded in the present, it can therefore reawake and reactivate in the present processes which were thought to be over for good, because they belonged to a past which was over and done with. We must never forget that archaeology is not a standard historical discipline; it deals with memory recorded in matter and not with events or moments from the past. Geoff Bailey's research thus allows him to show that in Epirus, in Greece, present-day damage to the soil is linked to the reactivating, caused by intensive agriculture, of environmental disturbances which originally started in the Palaeolithic era (Bailey 2003). For if the past is returning, it is because in reality it had never gone away; it was lying low, lying in wait in the folds of present time, forgotten but in reality ready to leap out, like a cat lying in wait; this dazzling encounter between the past and the present is, as Benjamin put it in his celebrated expression, like 'the tiger's leap into the past', which can with one bound cross millennia (Benjamin 2003, 395 (xiv)). As Benjamin said in his theories 'On the concept of history',

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, *through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years*. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events. He groups the constellation into which his era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as 'now-time' [*Jetztzeit*] shot through with splinters of messianic time (Benjamin 2003, 397 (A); emphasis added).

The present in the past

The past exists in the present, as a present memory, but the opposite also is true: if the present contains splinters of the past, the past too contains elements of the present day, of the 'now-time'. It is indeed this fusion between the present day and the ancient which is fascinating in images of the past, for example as in the very first photographs of the 1840s and 1850s, which are in front of me as I write. Signs of a bygone age (such as the tall black tube-shaped hats which the men wear, or the women's voluminous clothes which, in retrospect, look as though they were inherited from the 18th century) are lumped together with a mass of details which do not date from the past but belong to an 'ever-present' with no precise place in time: the shadows cast on the house-fronts by the trees, the distinctive light of rain-soaked

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

paving-stones, or again the attitudes of the men posing, or the look in the workers' eyes. In fact, it is this predominance of the never-changing within the ancient which guarantees the veracity of the past, in that it is proof of the permanent presence of time at work. In other words, what we recognize in pictures of the past as a sign of the authenticity of the ancient is basically the presence of physical and human behaviour seen in the present, in this present which is in fact always analogous to itself (in computer reconstructions of extinct prehistoric animals, it is for example the representation of movements which look like real animal movements which give this depiction of the past an air of reality, and not the fact that these animals look unlike anything which now exists, not the fact that they date back to geological times). Within this configuration, which is specifically that of archaeology, historic time is no longer this 'empty and homogeneous' time of historicism – the time of dates, chronologies and periods – but on the contrary the full and heterogeneous time of the fusion between the present and the past, this 'time saturated with here-and-now' of archaeological materials. This time and no other is what we archaeologists deal with.

This notion of the present embedded in the past has very profound implications for the understanding of archaeological materials, implications which I can only outline here. In particular it means that the present, the here-and-now, is not what is uniquely happening at this very moment, but on the contrary what has always been happening: the ageing of materials, the wearing-down of places, the growth and movement of bodies in space; to be brief, what the present of today expresses is the effect of time as expressed by the life of beings and things, just as all other presents, both past and to come, have expressed and will express it. It follows from this that the present, rather than bearing the mark of constant change (as we see it) in fact bears rather the mark of the endless recurrence dear to Schopenhauer and Nietszche, of an endless new beginning of the world, always the same in its diversity and its uniqueness. Like memory, archaeological material bears the mark of repetition, as exemplified by the specifically archaeological form of the palimpsest. In the superimposing of archaeological occupation which towns and cemeteries in particular give examples of, it is essentially the same site which is reproduced, similar and yet different every time, because unique at each moment in time. In the same way, every time a new object is made, it is simultaneously the same shape and type of object being reproduced, and a totally unique artefact being produced.

And yet, if the present is, as Benjamin says, this 'now-time' in which 'time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill' (Benjamin 2003, 396 (xvi)), something is continuously changing due to the effects of time. This is what archaeological materials systematically show us. Each time a physical object is reproduced (an object, building or landscape) the opportunity opens up for a small difference – Darwin would say a small variation – to be introduced. As we know, it is the accumulation of these small differences over time which creates trajectories in time, or what we call evolutionary tendencies. What we can see less clearly, however, is that this type of change, henceforth known by the term evolution, is the specific end result of processes of repetition. Why? Because, as it happens, repetition does not simply consist

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of reproducing what already exists; in a sense, what happens is that what already exists is brought back into play again every time something is created in the here-and-now. As Freud has shown, this is how memory operates. What I mean is this: it is not, strictly speaking, history which is being made up by the impact of the phenomena of repetition and reproduction which archaeological materials provide proof of, it is memory as recorded in materials. This is a key distinction, since memory-time functions in a way which has nothing to do with history-time.

'They don't know that we are bringing them the plague'.

'They don't know that we are bringing them the plague' is what Freud is supposed to have said on the boat bringing him from Europe to the United States. Freud was talking about psychoanalysis, this new discipline which he had founded and which specifically studies mental memory. To recognize how memory operates is in fact to take on board a way of seeing how time operates which appears to be abnormal, and consequently to expose oneself to the risk of being excluded from the community of those who have a normal, that is to say conventional, view of the past. For them, the past occupies a defined area of time and possesses an inherent specific identity; the past cannot therefore 'come back' into the present, and the present cannot change what is in the past. For these traditional historians and archaeologists, anyone who had a different conception of time would be adopting a deviant approach to the past.

And yet we have no other option but to have a conception of material memory in precisely those terms, terms which are unacceptable to the conventional perception of the past. It is the question of the present which occupies a key role, no matter how we tackle it. The present as a moment in time does not have the same meaning for conventional history and archaeology as it does for archaeology seen as the study of material memory. First, the present seen as 'now' is meaningless for material memory because with archaeological materials the present has temporal significance only insofar as something has been inscribed upon it. If nothing has been recorded in material, in the shape of archaeological objects or structures, then the present (as a moment in time) does not exist. As Binford (1981) remarked, archaeological recording of time is basically discontinuous and random. Consequently, if archaeological time, time as recorded in archaeological materials, is interrupted, how could it function like the 'real' time of conventional history which is on the contrary perfectly continuous and gradual? And if it does not operate in the same way as time does in conventional history, on what basis is it then structured?

Archaeological time does not operate as conventional time does, because in the former the future does not get formulated in a unilinear way on the basis of pure innovation introduced in each successive moment of the present, as the historicist view of time implies, which makes the trajectory of historic time dependent on the impact of progress. This is not how things happen, if only because the present is imbued with the past. In all cases, the future is built in a way shaped by the past of the present. We could in any case say that it is the structures of the past's capacity to be ever-present which allows

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

them to continue to exist and to change; this is in particular the situation of archaeological entities. In reality it is of little importance whether this past embedded in the present is recognized as such or not; what matters is that it does exist. It is of no importance whether or not we know that the line of some Parisian boulevard follows what was originally the Roman *decumanus* of *Lutetia*. What matters is that the ancient urban fabric still continues to function, even if it is buried and mutilated, within the modern urban fabric. This particular configuration of material memory has two main consequences: the first is that since every period of time is extremely heterogeneous (that is to say, made up of fragments of different pasts) it connects moments in time which may be very distant from each other. History as inscribed in archaeological materials is neither unilinear nor unidirectional. The second consequence is that memory of the past systematically operates masked, because, by flowing into the mould of the present day, it adopts the form of the present: in modern Paris, the Roman *decumanus* survives, as a memory of the ancient urban fabric, in the shape of a boulevard which is apparently no different from any other, on the surface.

The urgent question raised by taking into consideration 'the past in the past' is that of determining what implications the particular situation of material memory has for our approach to the past. From the moment that the existence of this phenomenon is noticed, event-based and unilinear history becomes meaningless; the task of the historian or archaeologist becomes that of bringing to light these connections which have developed throughout time. This is in my opinion where the specific meaning of the archaeological approach lies, an approach which studies not the history of material objects, but their memory. As Benjamin stresses (2003, 396 (xvii)), the traditional historicist approach proceeds by adding: it accumulates 'facts', or descriptive details, in order to fill up with narrative the yawning gap opened up by deep time. This task was specifically that of Prehistory. Conversely, the approach which attends to material memory made up of archaeological materials has to proceed by building: it connects material facts themselves and not what they supposedly represent. In this capacity, archaeological remains are no longer the necessary links in a huge chain of events, but on the contrary they (again) become a place offering every possibility; they therefore offer archaeologists the opportunity, as Benjamin put it, 'to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history' (2003, 396 (xvii)).

References

Alcock, S.E., 2002: *Archaeologies of the Greek past. Landscape, monuments and memories*, Cambridge.

Bailey, G.N., 2003: Palimpsests, time-scales and the durational present. Origins and consequences of a time-perspective research agenda, unpublished manuscript, University of Newcastle.

Benjamin, W., 2003: On the concept of history, in H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin. Selected writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940* (tr. Edmund Jephcott and others), Cambridge, MA and London, 389–400.

Bergson, H., 1941: *L'Évolution créatrice* Paris.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Binford, L.R., 1981: Behavioral archaeology and the 'Pompeii premise', *Journal of anthropological research* 37, 195–208.
Binford, L.R., 1983: *In pursuit of the past. Decoding the archaeological record*, London and New York.
Bradley, R., 2002: *The past in prehistoric societies*, London and New York.
Gosden, C., 1994: *Social being and time*, Oxford.
Halbwachs, M., 1949: *La Mémoire collective*, Paris.
Hobsbawm, E.J. and T. Ranger, 1983: *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge.
Karlsson, H., 1998: *Re-thinking archaeology*, Göteborg.
Lowenthal, D., 1985: *The past is a foreign country*, Cambridge.
Rossi, P., 1984: *The dark abyss of time. The history of the earth and the history of nations from Hooke to Vico*, Chicago.
Van Dyke, R.M. and S.E. Alcock (eds), 2003: *Archaeologies of memory*, Oxford.
Williams, H. (ed.), 2003: *Archaeologies of remembrance. Death and memory in past societies*, New York.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203804001254 Published online by Cambridge University Press