

Towards a Heideggerian archaeology?

Some years ago, Tim Murray noted cynically that theoretical archaeologists have been optimally foraging the social theory bookshelves of their local bookstores. After the decline of processualism in the eighties, a whole pantheon of philosophers, social theorists, and literary critics was invoked to substantiate and perhaps even to legitimate the postprocessual agenda. Apart from Giddens, Wittgenstein and Habermas, particularly French intellectuals such as Godelier, Bourdieu, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Kristeva, Althusser, Barthes, Braudel and Ricoeur were given the banner to guide our explorations in the archaeological past and in archaeology's present practice. Their ideas were paraphrased and rephrased by archaeologists. Sometimes this archaeological transformation has resulted in new ways of seeing, yet sometimes it also saddled us with simplistic transplantations and painful mutilations of often much more subtle ways of thinking. It seemed sometimes that a postprocessual career could be built on an intense reading, superficial or subtle, of one single and as yet undiscovered author, followed by a number of publications which underline the archaeological relevance of his oeuvre, in order to have your name associated with the chosen thinker.

Despite these optimal foraging strategies, Martin Heidegger's work was only very recently brought into the theoretical arena. Christopher Gosden's work *Social being and time* (1994) was the first full-length consideration of the implications of Heidegger's thought on archaeological theory. And in the spring or summer of 1996, Julian Thomas will publish *Time, culture and identity*, in which he attempts to sketch out a 'Heideggerian archaeology'. This recent interest for a key figure in continental philosophy by Anglo-Saxon practitioners of archaeology, drew our attention, especially since providing a forum for discussion between the continental and the English-speaking worlds is one of the main objectives of *Archaeological Dialogues*.

How come Heidegger, who belongs together with Wittgenstein to the greatest philosophers of this century, is not *en vogue* in post-processual archaeology? There are several reasons for this. Firstly, since the late 1980s allegations on his political involvement and even intellectual entanglement with Nazi ideology have accumulated tremendously. For a post-processual archaeology, which finds its affiliations with postmodernism, left-wing politics, feminist discourse, and critical theory, this evidence was hard to swallow. Secondly, Heidegger's thought is not a ready-made social theory and is thus hard to apply immediately to archaeological questions. As a matter of fact, it is not even a social theory at all, but a very original form of metaphysics almost certainly influenced by Protestant theology. Heidegger himself was trained as a theologian, and his whole enterprise has been labelled by George Steiner as an 'overcoming of theology'. But from a strictly philosophical point of view, his ideas are by no means easy to 'think through'. The whole Heideggerian project is in its essence

a reaction to modernity, a rejection of all philosophy from Plato to Kant, and a return to the pre-Socratic forms of thinking. This demands a very serious effort from the reader, philosopher and archaeologist alike. But since archaeology is a very neat by-product of modernist thought from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it makes one wonder whether a Heideggerian archaeology is not a contradiction in terms. Thirdly, apart from his rich and ambitious thought, the complexity of Heideggerian language inhibits even the most ardent adept of theoretical jargon in archaeology. Yet Heidegger's language is more than the wrapping paper of his philosophy; his thoughts are intimately interwoven with the words he uses. Because of his anti-modernist stance, he cannot rely any longer on the vocabulary of modernism; and the feeling of estrangement any reader undergoes, was intended by the author to alienate his readership from the taken-for-granted of modernist language and thought. For Heidegger, only Greek and German possessed sufficient flexibility for this task. As his philosophy is so deeply embedded in the structure of German language, the etymology of words, and the crafting of neologisms, it is very surprising indeed to see that Anglo-Saxon archaeologists only rely upon translations of Heidegger and omit the original terminology.

Despite the above difficulties, and despite some of the abuses in the past of social theory and philosophy for archaeological purposes, the editors of *Archaeological Dialogues* found the publication of Thomas's book a good occasion to open the discussion about Heidegger and archaeology. We hope this may stimulate further debate and make a contribution to the development of archaeological theory. The formula we opted for is that of a *précis*, in which the author, in this case Julian Thomas, presents the core themes of his book. This article and the manuscript of the book were given to a number of scholars in order to comment upon it. Finally, Thomas was given the possibility to reply to his critics.

In the leading article, Thomas summarizes his reflections on the nature of time, culture and identity. By criticizing the Cartesian, modernist dichotomies of culture versus nature, mind versus body, environment versus society, and objective time versus subjective time, dichotomies which are all very tenacious in current archaeological thinking, he develops a wealth of ideas about material culture, landscape, gift exchange, body, but also about the archaeological record and the role of archaeological imagination. The empirical case-studies which consist the second half of the book are briefly presented. As the work presents a myriad of ideas, it does not surprise that the critics are equally diverse.

While declaring his 'basic feeling of sympathy' with Thomas' project, Christopher Gosden, who has also been exploring Heidegger's relevance for archaeology, states that there is much more in this book than Heidegger alone, and, more importantly, that there is much more in Heidegger than there is in this book. In particular the notion of discursive versus nondiscursive forms of knowing deserves more attention, Gosden argues.

Drawing from her material culture study on the Malanggan of New Ireland which focused on the relation of material culture strategies, mnemonic systems and landscape, Susanne Küchler regrets Thomas' 'forgetting' of memory and space. How can the notion of time be problematized without questioning the concept of memory?, what is the role of artefacts in the remembering of places? are some of the many questions she raises.

Th.C.W. Oudemans, one of the eminent Heidegger philosophers in the Netherlands, states that 'Heidegger's thought has nothing to do with method or with the foundation of an area of



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investigation like archaeology. The archaeologist had better stay away from it. That is as it should be.' Despite this 'irrelevance', he goes on to rethink in a Heideggerian fashion the nature of archaeology which he sees essentially as an enterprise in gaining 'synchronic familiarity' with the always different past.

The archaeologist Mark Patton, who is working on the Neolithic of French Brittany, qualifies Thomas' case studies as 'a contribution which no student can afford to ignore'. Yet, along with Oudemans, he sees an important conceptual abyss between Thomas's theoretical and his empirical work. He also draws attention to the anthropocentric notion of human unity, which results in a new dualism between human/non-human.

As an anthropologist working on poetic traditions of the Foi of Papua New Guinea, James Weiner has tried to conceptualize Heidegger's usefulness for cultural anthropology. To him, archaeology and anthropology share a Sherlock Holmes-like epistemology in which social life is inferred from its effects, respectively material culture or personal utterances. But whereas the anthropologist-informant relation can become an informant-informant relation by the medium of speech, this possible symmetry is absent in archaeology and might turn the discipline into a mere 'literary exercise'.

We leave it to the reader to see how Thomas replies to these divergent comments. Quite independent of the theme on Heidegger, an article from the other side of the globe reached us. In it, Tim Murray warns against the 'constant movement of the "last week it was Hayden White, this week Heidegger, next week Bergson(?)" type' which might eventually lead up to, what he calls, 'theory fatigue' in archaeology. We hope, however, that the debate on Heidegger and archaeology, as well as Murray's warnings, are inspiring and stimulating. This is, of course, for the reader to decide. (DVR)