

EXPERIENCING THE PAST

On the character of archaeology

Michael Shanks



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INTRODUCTION

This book is less about archaeology the academic subject than it is about aspects of experience which might be termed archaeological. It is a story of what archaeologists and others do and might do, rather than a theory of what archaeology is or should be. I do consider ideas within the discipline about what archaeology is and archaeologists should be doing, summarizing the condition of the discipline, at least in terms of its theory and from my personal viewpoint as a participant in an ongoing debate over the scientific character of archaeology. But I focus more widely on what it means to do archaeological things such as excavating, surveying and collecting the material past, visiting and valuing collections and monuments of the past, asking what it is that might make these attractive to many people. I am also interested in how archaeology is basically about particular experiences of the object world. I emphasize experience because, with others, I try to understand archaeology in materialist terms, that is not so much as a set of ideas or body of knowledge, but as a collection of things people do.

It is often an image which initially takes me to investigate particular aspects of the past. I distinctively remember how it began when I was still at junior school with a photograph in Peter Green's book *Alexander the Great* of the ruins of one of the Alexandrias in Afghanistan: romance and remoteness. Imagery is a significant vehicle of the emotive or the affective in archaeological experience; archaeology abounds in striking, strange and fascinating images. This is one reason why there are many images in this book: I want to consider all dimensions of archaeological experience, not just the intellectual or the cognitive. I see this as part of a project of embodiment, of locating the practices and pleasures of archaeology not just within the mind but within the body: embodied experience.

In exploring such embodied experience I see a way of enabling archaeology to make more of its potential in the present, in productively and critically engaging with cultural experiences within which the archaeological past is a vital reference point – in local historical identity, the heritage industry, the cultural consciousness of groups such as

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Native American Indians as well as nationalist movements. I try to draw together those aspects of the archaeological which I find vital and invigorating, but it is often more of a vision of what archaeology could become rather than what it already is. Much fascinating work of interpreting and presenting the past is being produced, but it is nevertheless correct to write of potential rather than reality.

The book is arranged in four parts which discuss the state of archaeology the discipline (Part 1); images, ideas and the attractions of archaeology (Part 2); artifacts, objects and experience of them – the encounter with the past (Part 3); and a connection or an analogy between archaeology and craft – a sketch of archaeology as an embodied practice of sensuous receptivity (Part 4). The different parts are not at all exclusive. Similar points and particular issues are reviewed or picked out again in different ways and different contexts, building up ideas in layers rather than in strict linear argument or exposition. Interludes present illustrations and impressions of some work and material that has a personal connection – pottery from Archaic Greece, castles in the North East of England, and megalithic tombs: my education was in Classics which I taught for some years in Northumberland where my family belongs, and where I began archaeological fieldwork; at Cambridge I studied prehistoric archaeology and anthropology and am now working on the design of pottery from Corinth. These are not intended as definitive statements (this is not the place), but as narratives, interpretations or constructions which draw on or add to the main discussions in the book; they lie in apposition. In these interludes I am also to a degree trying to make sense of the archaeological experiences I have; this is the relevance of the personal connection.

When asked whether archaeology was a science or an art, Mortimer Wheeler is reported to have replied 'neither, it's a vendetta' (against the past; in the present?). I think a lot of archaeologists would accept how appropriate this judgement is insofar as it applies to the character of archaeological experience within a competitive discipline full of contention and debate. As in many other disciplines, Anglo-American archaeologists have been arguing to what degree their subject is a science and how it may aspire to objective accounts of the past. My previous work with Chris Tilley – the books *Re-Constructing Archaeology* (1987a) and *Social Theory and Archaeology* (1987b) – fits in this context. They were an attempt, for me at least, to make sense of an archaeology which fascinated me but which also frustrated in its attenuation or dismissal of feeling which seemed so important; a scientific and academic archaeology seemed to lose so much of what made the past human and attractive. But my work was produced in the difficult, esoteric and sometimes narrow terms of academic debate. Afterwards I began to explore imagery and what it indicated about the character of popular

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archaeological experiences. (I had worked as draughtsman and photographer on site.) If the project of a scientific and objective archaeology was a faulty one, as we had argued, it seemed right to experiment with what were conventionally held to be the more subjective aspects of archaeological practices, to question the nature of subjective and objective. This was another origin of this book and its title. Images evoke, with connotation and association, and because they cannot be reduced to words. I am keen to explore this poetic.

The idea of archaeology being a vendetta would place it firmly in the present and give it a distinctive cultural politics. That archaeology is as much about the present as the past is one of the main points to have come out of the debates in theory and archaeology in the 1970s and 1980s. But the position I take in this book is not a vendetta against a scientific archaeology. I consider what may be archaeology's cultural politics and decide on a liberal and critical practice of the technical, ethical, and poetic. I try to outline what this means to me in Part 4 through analogy with craft.

In accordance with the expressive and suggestive purpose of the book, I have not aimed to be exhaustive in the references I provide. Given the wide scope, a full bibliography would be quite exhausting, indeed distracting. The citation I give is selective; but it is not random. The references and notes are intended to point directions, to provide routes for an exploration of the ideas, if such is desired. Most point outside the discipline. As I have indicated elsewhere (Shanks 1991), I am concerned with ways of reading (particularly non-archaeological authors) and what these imply about authority and the academy. I am wary of those syntheses and abstracts which package newly fashionable great thinkers for the academy, of citation which aims to provide authority for what is being written, and I am eager to encourage a various reading which would locate what is being read relative to the purpose held in reading, to a political or cultural project. Relating what I read to myself and archaeology, to experience and politics. I think of such a way of reading as involving something of a rescue of meaning. In the gap between a text and myself lies the possibility of a redemption of meaning, a particular meaning born in my creative encounter, a reading which overshoots what I have read. So I make no claim to providing 'correct' readings of Gadamer, Derrida or Hodder; but I conceive of these hopefully as 'true' readings in the sense that a true reading is a new one located in the moment of reading, saturated with prospect, project, questioning. This has meant that some writers whom I have found particularly stimulating hardly appear in this book; theirs is often a presence which cannot easily be referenced. They are John Berger, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Georges Bataille. I happily acknowledge my debt to their writing.¹

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Most of the photographs, illustrations and figures are by myself and Helen Simpson. Acknowledgement is given where they are not. I printed most of the photographs in the Cambridge University Faculty of Classics darkroom. They were taken on Canon T90 and EOS cameras. Canon UK provided help with the equipment. Thanks also to Stefan Rousseau for film.

Many of the ideas of the book have been aired in seminars and talks. I learned much from discussion at Cambridge, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Durham, York, Lampeter, Sienna, Harvard, Binghampton, Minneapolis, Amherst, Tempe, and Las Vegas. Thanks to all who contributed. I would like to make particular mention of talking with and listening to Martin Carver, Randall McGuire, Robert Preucel and Charles Redman. Thanks to Robert Paynter for showing me round Deerfield. At Cambridge Anthony Snodgrass has given great encouragement and support as has Ian Hodder, whose incisive comment always makes me think. Thanks to Mick Casson at Cardiff for talking to me about pottery. And to my Greek friends for spurring me into reflection. I thank my college, Peterhouse, for much more than grant assistance for photography and travel. Philip Pattenden, Senior Tutor, particularly has helped and advised.

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